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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Tuesday 26 February 2013

Session 4

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Scottish Parliament

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection, for which our leader is Pastor David Fraser from Alva baptist church.

Pastor David Fraser (Alva Baptist Church): Thank you, Presiding Officer and members, for inviting me to speak today. Your obvious challenge as elected representatives of our country is to discern the way forward for our nation on any number of issues. Thank you that my being here is a testimony to your commitment to tolerance in the truest sense of the word: in the sense of openness to ideas and a hearing of others' ideas—even ideas with which we might not agree.

In the eighth century BC, the writer Isaiah stated:

"Woe to those who call evil good
and good evil,
who put darkness for light
and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet
and sweet for bitter!"

Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes,
and shrewd in their own sight!"

I recognise that many do not accept the assertion that we all answer to God for our decisions. Intelligent and competent people have concluded that they disagree with that world view. I think that we all agree that it does not matter what one believes if it is not true. If I do not believe in buses, but I step off the kerb in front of a bus, reality will be proven.

Paul of Tarsus wrote to his protégé Timothy:

"the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths."

I make claims based on the historicity of the biblical witness as a testimony to God's interaction with humanity. I accept that, unless a convincing case for faith has been made to each of you, you might not share the confidence that I have in the truth of this message. I can make a case for any of you who care to pursue the matter further. I commit here to answering at length any questions on any subject pertaining to the biblical world view.

Jesus Christ said:

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

We will answer to God for our every decision, and Jesus, may his name be praised, is the righteous judge whom we will face. That is a thought worth reflecting on. You read the details of legislation and you analyse the implications of proposed decisions. You project the consequences of actions that are taken in this gallery. Please consider your lives today in the light of what I have shared, for your own good as well as the good of our nation. Thank you for your time.

Topical Question Time

14:03

Horsemeat

1. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Government what progress it has made on addressing concerns regarding horsemeat in the food chain. (S4T-00260)

The Minister for Public Health (Michael Matheson): We are making very good progress. As of Monday, 96 per cent of the additional inspections of meat processing plants in Scotland that were requested on 24 January have been completed. Meanwhile, across the United Kingdom, over 99 per cent of the 3,634 industry tests that have been completed have been negative, with the Food Standards Agency reporting that the 35 positive tests relate to 13 products, all of which have been withdrawn. A further 428 industry tests have to be completed and are expected to be reported on on Friday.

The third strand of testing, which is being carried out by 28 local authorities across the UK, is due to provide a progress report early in March and, on Thursday, I will provide further details to Parliament about the consultation on a new food safety body for Scotland and the expert groups that Mr Lochhead outlined in last Tuesday's statement.

Claire Baker: Despite the fact that the cabinet secretary said in his statement last week,

"food and drink contracts are awarded in a way that balances price and quality before they are awarded. It is not necessarily the lowest price that wins; quality is vital in the public sector",—[*Official Report*, 19 February 2013; c 16658.]

horsemeat has in the past week been identified in school burgers and frozen beef products have been withdrawn from schools across Scotland. In preparing the statement, did the Scottish Government know that school contracts are awarded on a weighting of 65 per cent price and 20 per cent quality, meaning that, in the national contract, cost is weighted three times more than quality? Why was that not made clear to Parliament and Scotland's parents in last week's statement?

Michael Matheson: Mr Lochhead's statement was very clear. Additional advice has also been provided to local authorities through "Catering for Change: Buying food sustainably in the public sector", which was published in 2011 and advises, for example, that seasonal and fresh produce be specified in procurement by public bodies. It is important that public bodies consider the range of options available to them in the contracts that they

take forward through public procurement bodies such as Scotland Excel.

The positive DNA test in Lanarkshire gives us an opportunity to look at how we might further improve the standard of food provided to children in schools. That is why the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning and the Cabinet Secretary for the Environment and Rural Affairs have invited local authorities to meet them to discuss the matter further.

We should also bear in mind that, since 2007 and with the introduction in 2008 of the statutory food and nutrition standards for schools, the quality of food provided in schools has significantly improved. Those standards are regulated in part through Education Scotland's use of nutritionists to evaluate the quality of that food to ensure that it complies with those higher standards. However, I, like everyone else, want even better standards where we can get them, which is why the cabinet secretaries have invited local authorities to discuss opportunities for improving them further.

Claire Baker: Of course, the people who check food safety in local authorities are the environmental health officers. Today, Unison has published a damning survey of environmental health officers, 56 per cent of whom say that their team has seen "major" cuts, with a further 10 per cent describing the cuts as "severe". One member has even said:

"We have not submitted any samples for food for ten months!"

Was the minister's department aware of those cuts? Was the minister also aware of FSA Scotland's underspend, which amounted to 10 per cent of its budget? Were any questions asked about why the organisation was returning such a significant underspend?

Michael Matheson: I am sure that the member will recognise that local authorities are responsible for resourcing environmental health departments and ensuring that they maintain food testing standards in their areas. However, in recent years and as a result of changes at European level, there has been a move towards more of a risk-based assessment in the undertaking of these tests.

As for the member's reference to FSA Scotland's budget, I point out that, unlike the UK Government, we have maintained the agency's budget in Scotland. Its underspend has arisen by and large as a result of a number of initiatives that did not materialise in the timeframe that was set for them. Those were largely research projects, some of which took longer than intended to come through the system. However, that money will be retained by the agency, whose budget next year is

being maintained yet again to allow it to continue its important work in Scotland.

I should add that, over the past couple of weeks, our staff in the Food Standards Agency in Scotland have worked tremendously hard to do everything they can to address the issue. I am sure that all members recognise that the issue has not just affected us, here in the UK. Some 14 countries in Europe have been affected by this food fraud, which is completely unacceptable. Staff in the Food Standards Agency in Scotland have worked extremely hard and I thank them for the tremendous amount of work that they have put in over recent weeks.

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): The minister will be aware that Cumbernauld high school, in my constituency, is the school in which frozen meat was found to be contaminated with horsemeat. Although parents should be reassured by the higher standards that are set for school meals, will the minister say what steps will be taken to work with North Lanarkshire Council to ensure that it is meeting the standards?

Michael Matheson: It is entirely unacceptable that a company provided one of our local authorities with a product that contained horse DNA in the first place. Scotland Excel has taken the right approach by asking all local authorities in Scotland to withhold all frozen meat products until further checks have been undertaken. Of course, we also expect suppliers to undertake further checks on their processes for procuring the ingredients for their products.

Yes, standards have improved over recent years, and yes, there will always be room to make improvements. The Government is more than happy to consider what further action could be taken to do that. However, it is important that we are not distracted from the fact that, every day, children get good-quality, nutritious meals from our schools.

North Lanarkshire Council's results give us an opportunity to reflect on what further action could be taken, and the meeting to which local authorities have been invited, which is being taken forward by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning and the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment, will allow councils such as North Lanarkshire Council to explore with them what measures could be taken to continue to improve the standard of food in the meals that are provided in our schools.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): Can the minister tell us from where Brakes, which is a £2.5 billion, Kent-based company, buys the mince that ends up in Scottish school dinners, given that 28 out of 32 Scottish local authorities are compelled to use the company, through the Scottish

Government's centralised procurement system, instead of supporting local butchers and allowing local food to be served in local schools, hospitals and care homes?

Michael Matheson: Local authorities are not compelled to use Scotland Excel. Four local authorities do not use Scotland Excel and procure in a different way, so that they have a choice about how to procure goods locally. A key aspect of the regulations on improving nutritional standards in school meals is traceability of products. A company cannot bid for a contract if it cannot provide traceability. The contract process makes the quality and traceability of the product a requirement, and that is a key part of the ability to get on to the Scotland Excel programme to take forward contracts that come through it.

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): Last week in the Parliament I highlighted the benefits of the Soil Association's food for life catering mark, which currently offers peace of mind for one in 10 Scottish schools. The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment said that he would consider how the Government could support such schemes—indeed, at the weekend he was quoted praising their work and impact. What target and timescale for roll-out will the Government commit to, to reassure parents, staff and pupils?

Michael Matheson: The member will be aware that, since 2009, the Scottish Government has been funding work with the Soil Association on its food for life catering mark. The three-year programme promotes unprocessed food, local sourcing and provenance and food education. We have renewed the programme and we are looking to enhance the work and consider how we take the programme forward over a further three years.

Something that we can do as a result of the horsemeat scandal is consider whether there is a greater opportunity to expand the programme and accelerate the process. The meeting on school meals that the two cabinet secretaries will have will give us an opportunity to explore the issue with local authorities and see whether we can accelerate the programme, given the good progress that has been made since 2009.

Care of Older People (Healthcare Improvement Scotland Inspection Reports)

2. Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what role it has in the production of Healthcare Improvement Scotland's inspection reports into the care of older people.(S4T-00263)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil): Healthcare Improvement Scotland reports its inspection findings independently. It would be inappropriate for the

Scottish Government to interfere with its processes.

We asked for the programme of inspections to be carried out in order to drive up standards of care for older people in acute hospitals. Of the 23 acute hospitals in the inspection programme, 12 hospitals across seven national health service boards have been inspected and reported on to date. The last published report was on the inspection at Ninewells hospital in NHS Tayside. The inspection programme continues.

Mark McDonald: The cabinet secretary will be aware of the recent press coverage relating specifically to the Ninewells hospital report. Will he confirm whether that was the first time that Healthcare Improvement Scotland has produced a single combined report from an announced inspection and its unannounced follow-up?

Alex Neil: As the First Minister advised Parliament on 31 January, Healthcare Improvement Scotland had previously produced a combined report for Wishaw general hospital. That report was published on 19 July 2012. It included the announced inspection that was carried out at Wishaw general hospital on 28 to 30 May, and the unannounced follow-up inspection on 19 June.

Mark McDonald: The report at the weekend pointed to changes that had been made prior to the draft report being finalised following feedback received from NHS Tayside. Is it normal practice for Healthcare Improvement Scotland to consult health boards with draft reports?

Alex Neil: It is part of the usual procedure for chief executives of NHS boards, following an inspection, to receive a copy of the draft report and have the opportunity to comment on matters of factual accuracy. Healthcare Improvement Scotland looks into the comments and either accepts the inaccuracy and amends the text, or concludes that the original text is an accurate reflection of its findings on the day—or days—of the inspection and retains the original content.

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Alex Neil was told by fellow minister Roseanna Cunningham—during the procedure of checking factual accuracy to which he has just referred—that allegations at Healthcare Improvement Scotland were grave.

Alex Neil can try to distance himself from the issue, but the Public Services Reform Act (Scotland) 2010 clearly states that Healthcare Improvement Scotland

“is to act subject to and in accordance with such directions as may be given by the Scottish Ministers.”

Given the grave allegations that the cabinet secretary was told about by a fellow member of

the Government and that he had called for full transparency when the report on chronic pain was also buried, did he not think that it was appropriate to exercise that power to sort out the mess and cover-up at Healthcare Improvement Scotland?

Alex Neil: First, my powers are of a general nature. I make it absolutely clear to the member that I cannot direct how an individual inquiry is carried out.

It is correct that Ms Cunningham wrote to me in her capacity as a local MSP on behalf of a constituent. That was after the Scottish Government was informed by Healthcare Improvement Scotland that it was working through quality assurance issues raised following the initial inspection. I sought assurances at that time from Healthcare Improvement Scotland that it was following the appropriate due process in its then current inspections and reporting. I got such an assurance.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): The cabinet secretary is aware that when matters of investigation for Healthcare Improvement Scotland are considered in relation to, for example, the elderly in NHS Tayside or critical incidents in NHS Ayrshire and Arran, Healthcare Improvement Scotland panel members can be—and are—drawn from the board areas under investigation. Is there a mechanism for members of such panels to step down from investigations when their own boards are being investigated, given that conflicts of interest will surely exist? If such a mechanism does not exist, will the cabinet secretary consider introducing a safeguard to avoid what appears to be an obvious conflict of interest?

Alex Neil: I have made it absolutely clear to HIS that there must never be a situation in which there is even a perceived conflict of interest, let alone a real conflict of interest.

Last November, I instructed my officials to abide by a new rule about future appointments to the boards of Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland and Healthcare Improvement Scotland. In future, a serving member of staff or a serving director of a board that could be the subject of investigation would not be appointed to avoid any perceived conflict of interest between their role on the board of Healthcare Improvement Scotland and their role working as a director or a member of staff of a board under investigation.

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): Moving forward, how will the Scottish Government seek to ensure that action is taken to address areas for improvement that are identified in any HIS inspection report?

Alex Neil: It is primarily the responsibility of HIS to ensure that its recommendations are fully

implemented. I am advised by HIS that, in the case of the Ninewells inspection, more than 70 per cent of the recommendations have already been fully implemented or are in the process of being implemented. As the relevant Government minister, I take a general overview of the performance of HIS. By definition, I want to ensure—and do ensure—that the work that it recommends be implemented by individual boards is carried out. I do that through a number of means, including the annual review of HIS, as well as the annual review that we undertake of every one of the 22 health boards in Scotland.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The process by which these inspections are being undertaken is relatively new. We understand from HIS that it is updating its methodology.

The concern about the Ninewells case—which I would like the cabinet secretary to address—relates to the fact that the original report was not simply published alongside the follow-up report. That might have been acceptable. The concern is not about the fact that the original report was amended to make factual corrections, which is entirely appropriate. The original report was not published alongside the follow-up report—does the cabinet secretary agree that that is what destroys public confidence?

In his discussions with HIS, will the cabinet secretary ensure that the process is such that the original report is published, alongside any final caveats from the board, the implementation plan and, if appropriate, a follow-up report, because otherwise public confidence will be undermined?

Alex Neil: Richard Simpson raises a very fair point, which is one that I have made to the chair and the board of HIS.

In the case of Ninewells, the original report was not published because, once it had reviewed the comments from the clinicians at Tayside and the error report from Tayside NHS Board, the view of HIS's senior management team at the time was that its procedures had been shown not to be sufficiently robust and, therefore, it did not have full confidence in the draft report.

However, it would appear—according to the *Sunday Herald* story—that the draft report is now in the public domain. My view, as I have made clear to HIS, is that if that report is in the public domain, for the sake of balance it would be only fair for the letter from the clinicians at Tayside NHS Board and the error report to be in the public domain as well, so that people can get a balanced view of why that report was not published when, normally, it would have been.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab): Why does the cabinet secretary, along with the First Minister, keep saying that

there is a parallel with the Wishaw situation, in which there was a few days' gap between the first and second inspections? Surely it is totally unprecedented for there to be a gap of four months between inspections. Why did the minister and his colleagues not listen to the whistleblowers who approached him to tell him the truth about the matter, rather than the version from HIS, which, unfortunately, he is still giving to the Parliament today?

Alex Neil: With all due respect to Malcolm Chisholm, he has got his facts slightly wrong. First, other than Roseanna Cunningham, only one person contacted me to express concern about what was happening with the Ninewells inspection. On receiving that call, I took immediate action with my officials and asked a series of questions about the procedure, the processes and the robustness of the report. I made it absolutely clear that, in my view, people on all sides should be frank, open and honest. There was clearly a dispute between the inspectors' view of matters and Tayside NHS Board's view of matters. Normally, that would have been resolved by the senior management of HIS accepting or rejecting the errors and publishing the report. It did not do so in this case, and I have made it abundantly clear to the chair of HIS that I am not impressed by the way in which the matter has been handled, and that I expect it to ensure that any issues that arise from the way in which the Ninewells report has been handled are rectified timeously.

European Union Priorities

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-05699, in the name of Hanzala Malik, on the European and External Relations Committee's report on the European Union priorities of the committees of the Scottish Parliament. I remind members that time is extremely tight because I let the previous item of business run over a wee bit. I call on Christina McKelvie to speak to and move the motion in the name of Hanzala Malik, on behalf of the European and External Relations Committee.

14:25

Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): This is the second time that I have stood here as convener of the European and External Relations Committee to present to members the issues that are likely to dominate the work programme of the Parliament's committees for 2013. Before I go into the substantive areas of the committee's work, I offer an apology to my colleagues on the Local Government and Regeneration Committee, which because of an administrative error was not consulted in time for its EU priorities to be included in our report. I understand that the Local Government and Regeneration Committee is due to consider its priorities at its meeting tomorrow morning. Once they are agreed, the European and External Relations Committee will consider them separately. I have asked the clerks to review their procedures to ensure that the administrative error never happens again.

Before I look at some of the priorities in more detail, I thought that it might be useful to cast our eyes back over the previous year. At almost all the meetings of the European and External Relations Committee, we have surveyed and discussed the unfolding crisis in the euro zone. We have watched as banks and, indeed, countries have been bailed out, Governments have fallen and the people of Europe have taken to the streets to protest. It is a chilling reminder of the situation that, in parts of Europe, particularly in countries such as Spain, youth unemployment has risen to 58 per cent. I bring that to members' attention because it is a reminder of the stakes at play in Europe and the challenges facing us as the year goes on. My committee will continue to engage with the issues and to keep a close eye on what is happening and the impact on Scotland.

My committee has also taken an active interest in the machinations surrounding the settlement of the European Union budget—the so-called multi-annual financial framework. As members will know, the European Council has already secured

agreement among its members for a cut in overall funding for the years 2014 to 2020, the first such cut in the European Union's history. The figure now on the table is €960 billion, which is 1 per cent of EU gross national income and a fall of 0.12 per cent from the previous budget. My committee has already raised concerns about the implications of several of the cuts, not least those to the budget for connecting Europe, which covers broadband and which has experienced an 86 per cent cut. That money matters to rural Scotland, which is obviously a huge issue for committee members who represent rural areas.

As we know, the Deputy First Minister has already alerted us to what the overall reductions could mean for Scotland in our European structural funds budget. The only point that I note at this juncture is that although the figure may have been agreed by the Council of Ministers, it has not yet been considered by the European Parliament. As we in this chamber know, Parliaments can make a difference.

The next point to highlight is that, since I last stood here, some issues have made progress under the current Commission mandate. For example, the negotiations around the common fisheries policy, of which I am sure we will hear more, are nearing their end and it looks like discards will soon become a thing of the past; and negotiations on the common agricultural policy are also in their endgame. When I spoke in this role in the chamber last year, I repeated the near truism that we have to get in early to have influence. This year, I remind members that the Barroso Commission has only one year left of its mandate. The declared ambition of President Barroso is to secure agreement on all outstanding dossiers by early 2014, which is a challenging ambition indeed. That will set a higher challenge for members here, since they will have less time in which to exert influence over the content of those dossiers. I urge all members to use their influence as well as they can.

An additional challenge to members is to indulge in some blue-sky thinking on what the priorities should be for the Commission that will take up office in 2014. Scotland has already led the way in so many areas: fisheries management, renewable energy and research and development. How can we ensure that the lessons from those initiatives help to guide the incoming commissioners' determination of their future priorities? We should all ask that question over the next year. My committee will take an active role in ensuring that the ideas and initiatives of this Parliament's committees are heard and heeded in Brussels.

I come to priorities for the year ahead. My committee is already midway into its inquiry into

teaching foreign languages in primary schools. Members of the committee have been visiting schools the length and breadth of the country, speaking to teachers, parents and, most importantly, pupils. I speak for all my committee members when I say that it has been an extraordinary experience. I have no doubt that we have witnessed in action some of our country's future leaders, captains of industry and maybe even members of the European Parliament. We will draw our inquiry to a close in early May with a major event in this Parliament to celebrate Europe day.

I turn to the European and External Relations Committee's engagement across the Parliament. Although the committee may be the Scottish Parliament's lead committee on EU issues, in fact all Scottish Parliament committees are European committees. It is estimated that upwards of two thirds of legislation that passes through this Parliament began its life in Brussels.

The deliberations that have led to this debate are not a one-off. EU issues—Parliament receives notification of up to 20 such issues per week—are on-going. I am just glad that the clerks have a very good system for filtering them, otherwise we would spend a lot more time in committee.

The committee has worked with its sister committees in London—including the House of Lords committee—Belfast and Wales. We have deliberated on issues of subsidiarity and proportionality in relation to upcoming EU legislation, and we always try to ensure that legislation that emanates from Brussels is fit for purpose.

In the past year alone, the Scottish Parliament's committees have dealt with seven issues of subsidiarity that affect Scotland, ranging from alternative fuels infrastructure, which is currently before the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee, to food for deprived people, which was addressed by the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee.

So what happens next? It will be important as we conclude the debate today to continue to prioritise our engagement with the European Union. It would be too easy at this late stage in the Barroso mandate to lay down our tools—I suggest that we do not—having seen so many of the dossiers all but complete their legislative journey. However, as our fishermen will often say, sometimes the greatest challenge is getting the boat into port. We must remain active and vigilant until each of the dossiers that affect the people of Scotland has been safely berthed.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the European and External Relations Committee's 1st Report, 2013 (Session 4): *The*

EU priorities of the Committees of the Scottish Parliament (SP Paper 271).

14:32

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): This is the first time that we have debated Europe since David Cameron's decision to have a referendum on EU membership and to open the exit door from the EU in a bid not to lose home county seats to the UK Independence Party. We recognise that independence goes hand in hand with interdependence, and the announcement two weeks ago that the EU will establish a transatlantic trade and investment partnership with the USA is proof of that. We must ask ourselves whether we want to be part of a progressive union that represents the largest free trade area in the world or cling to the politics of United Kingdom Conservative narrow nationalism. Does Scotland really want to abandon hard-fought-for workers' rights?

We face many of the same challenges as the rest of the EU: promoting economic growth; tackling global warming; improving energy security; and promoting a healthier and fairer society. We are already working with partners in the EU to tackle them. Earlier this month, it was announced that BioCity in Scotland, working with the University of Dundee and the Scottish Universities Life Sciences Alliance, would be the site of a major screening centre for the discovery of new drugs, under the EU's innovative medicines initiative.

Scotland is a world leader in renewable energy. We are active partners in the North Sea offshore grid co-ordination initiative and the Irish-Scottish links on energy study, and we are playing a major role in moves towards a more integrated European energy market.

Our strategy for Scotland complements Europe's flagship 2020 strategy. Both strategies share the same central aim of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

EU initiatives make a real difference for the people of Scotland, which is why we have been and continue to be closely engaged in the multi-annual financial framework for 2014-2020—the EU's long-term budget. The committee is correct to continue to monitor MAFF closely as it moves to the European Parliament for consideration.

With the concern about the possible reduction in structural funds that was relayed to Parliament last week, the Deputy First Minister will undertake negotiations with UK ministers to ensure that structural funds are distributed fairly and to the communities that need them the most. The support of this Parliament will be important and

Nicola Sturgeon is meeting with Scottish MEPs today to secure their support.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

In press reports today, there is some speculation that the structural fund reduction for Scotland will be £260 million. Given that the UK Government has not yet had final negotiations with the Scottish Government to determine the allocation, will the cabinet secretary confirm that that is the actual figure that the Scottish Government expects the reduction to be?

Fiona Hyslop: That is precisely why Nicola Sturgeon will have negotiations with the UK Government. The member may recall that, in 2006, when his party was in power, similar negotiations had to take place to make adjustments to what was at an initial stage a detrimental impact. We will work hard, I hope with colleagues across the chamber and colleagues in the European Parliament, to rectify what we currently face as a problem situation.

The Scottish Government's European action plan sets out our four priority areas: research and creativity; energy and climate change; the marine environment; and justice. Those priorities help to best focus our EU efforts.

The leading role that we play in combating climate change is internationally recognised. In 2012, the Scottish Government continued its engagement in the international climate change negotiations and supported EU and UK efforts to reach a global deal. Scottish ministers have worked to support the United Nations and EU sustainable energy for all initiative for global access to renewable electricity. We have also engaged in discussions surrounding the European Commission's approach to renewable energies in the EU beyond 2020. That issue remains at the top of the European agenda. Negotiations on a renewed 2030 EU climate and energy package will begin in April this year. The Scottish Government will work with industry and other member states and regions to make the case for ambitious, sustainable and long-term renewable energy and energy decarbonisation targets.

Scotland champions the role that small and medium-sized enterprises can play in re-energising the economy. The framework 7 programme has provided grants to universities, industry and small and medium-sized enterprises to co-finance research, technological development and demonstration projects. By the end of October 2012, Scottish organisations had secured €437 million, and 16 per cent of the funds that were secured in Scotland went directly to SMEs. We are working hard directly and actively with stakeholders to promote Scotland's interests, including in the EU's next research programme, horizon 2020. We are seeking opportunities where

we can to support EU funding calls. Again, that is a priority that was identified by the Scottish Parliament's European and External Relations Committee, which I thank again for focusing on that programme.

We are, of course, one of Europe's foremost maritime nations, and we have played a full part in European negotiations on the common fisheries policy. The Irish presidency aims to find agreement on reform of the CFP before the end of June 2013. If it is successful, that will bring to a close over three years of deliberations on fishing.

Scotland's distinctive and independent legal system puts us in a unique position in the EU, with a particular interest in EU justice policies. We need to assess all new EU justice legislation and how it impacts on Scots law. The UK Government's current thinking, of course, is to exercise the option to opt out of all pre-Lisbon treaty third pillar measures. The Scottish Government and many others have serious concerns about that position, and the Justice Committee is right to prioritise that issue.

Beyond the Scottish Government's action plan, there are, of course, other areas of EU policy making that are making an impact on Scotland, and our strategic engagement reflects that.

We remain committed to Europe. We believe that effective collaboration with our European partners can lead to better outcomes for Scotland and a stronger EU. A Scotland that is at the heart of European activity with a direct voice in Europe enables us to benefit from the opportunities that membership of the EU brings.

I began by saying that our future within the European Union is currently the subject of some uncertainty. That is not because of Scotland's referendum in 2014, but is a result of the UK's proposed referendum on EU membership in 2017. We understand that there is a case for reform. In fact, we are, as I said, already contributing to the process of amending the common fisheries policy, we would like to see more ambitious EU targets on carbon emissions, and we are supportive of increased transparency. However, we believe that those reforms are best achieved through constructive dialogue with member states and from within the EU. Our interests and our future lie firmly within the European Union.

We understand that it is essential to respect the legitimacy of existing EU treaties, and we also understand that our continued membership would require negotiations. We would approach those discussions as a nation that would be a net contributor to the EU budget and whose people are already EU citizens. We would do so as a nation that already applies the body of EU law and policy and whose devolved Government has

demonstrated its capacity to transpose and implement EU legislation. We would do so as a nation that is keen to become an equal partner in the EU and that recognises its benefits, participates in dialogue about its future and contributes to its development and growth.

This debate affirms the role and importance of the EU to Scotland, and the Parliament's priorities make it clear that Scotland has a lot to offer and a lot to contribute.

The Presiding Officer: I now call Patricia Ferguson. Ms Ferguson, you have five minutes.

14:39

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab): In the five minutes allotted to me, it may not be possible to do justice to the comprehensive report that the Parliament's European and External Relations Committee has drawn together to reflect both its own priorities and those identified by other parliamentary committees following their reflections on the European Commission's work plan. It was certainly not my intention to go into the whole sorry saga of Scotland's involvement in the European Union post independence—if that sorry day ever comes along—as I did not think that that point was identified either in the committee report or in the motion before us. Therefore, I will continue with my speech, but perhaps I will come back to that point in closing if I feel it necessary to do so.

Clearly, the European Commission's work plan will have more resonance with some of our committees than with others. Before considering the substance of the report, it is worth noting that the system of rapporteurs, which was introduced towards the end of the previous parliamentary session, seems to be working well and has perhaps contributed to a greater involvement of committees in consideration of the European Commission's agenda than was previously the case. That must be a good thing.

That the founding fathers—and mothers—of this Parliament considered the European Union important, and that we continue to consider it to be important, can be seen in the fact that the European and External Relations Committee is a mandatory committee of this Parliament. That shows that we wish these issues to have a certain seriousness of consideration. As Ms McKelvie rightly pointed out, the list of priorities identified by the European Commission can sometimes seem quite daunting, but the committees have identified the areas that are most relevant to their agendas going forward.

The Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee has identified eight key areas in the Commission's work programme that are of relevance to its work.

One issue that particularly interested me is what the committee refers to as proposal 6, which aims

"to address the shortcomings ... and out-dated requirements of the existing EU industrial products legislation, in order to further strengthen and simplify the regulatory framework."

That kind of post-legislative scrutiny is always welcome, so it is good to see that the European Commission is prepared to undertake such work, particularly in an area in which it is often unfairly criticised.

The Equal Opportunities Committee also identified some synchronicity between its own work programme and that of the European Commission. The integration of the Roma is a European Commission priority area, which will complement the work being undertaken by the Equal Opportunities Committee in its inquiry into where Gypsy Travellers live. In the discussions that I have had in Brussels over the years, European officials have always been at pains to stress the importance of Parliaments engaging with the EU and that their input to its work is welcomed. The Equal Opportunities Committee has indicated that it will do exactly that by submitting the report of its inquiry to the Commission's advancing Roma integration unit.

The Health and Sport Committee identified a number of interesting and potentially wide-ranging priority areas in the Commission's work programme. Those include the activities on e-health and on active and healthy ageing, which must be of particular interest to Scotland given our demographics and our ability to make use of e-health initiatives, particularly in rural areas.

For the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee, the scrutiny of the Scottish Government's Water Resources (Scotland) Bill is an area of on-going work that obviously contains some read-across to the Commission's safeguarding Europe's water resources blueprint. Similarly, that committee will have responsibility for scrutinising the Scottish Government's public procurement bill, and the committee plans to consider the directives on public procurement in that context.

Some read-across of action can also be seen in the priorities of the Justice Committee. The Scottish Government's forthcoming criminal justice bill is likely to contain some features that are matters of interest for the EU. I understand that the Justice Committee has written to the Scottish Government to ask what effect the creation of a European public prosecutor's office might have on the Scottish criminal justice system. It will be important to hear what the Cabinet Secretary for Justice's thoughts are on that matter and what engagement he has had on that issue with colleagues in Europe. The Justice Committee is

also correct to identify that any decision by the UK Government to either opt into or out of provisions concerning police and criminal justice matters, as per protocol 36 to the Lisbon treaty, will also have implications for Scotland.

I said at the beginning that I did not think that I would have time to do the report justice. My time is now up, so I apologise to the committees that I have not mentioned so far—I will come to them in my closing speech.

14:45

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank the European and External Relations Committee clerks for their excellent work in producing the report, which sets out the Scottish Parliament's priorities for the European Union for 2013. The report brings together the combined interests of our committee and the Parliament's other committees, the main areas of importance that they have expressed and their assessment of the European Commission's work programme. I pay particular tribute to the Parliament's European officer, Dr Ian Duncan, for his work for the committee, and particularly his analysis of the Commission's work programme on areas of specific devolved relevance and importance to Scotland.

One key element of the report is the engagement with our subject committees through the appointment of specific EU reporters for each committee. A wide range of subjects were considered for scrutiny, and in the time that is available to me I will mention a few of them. The Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee proposes focusing on the proposed environmental, climate and energy assessment framework to enable safe and secure unconventional hydrocarbon extraction, which is sometimes known as fracking. There is a need to respond to the fears and rumours that surround the process and to establish a safe and level playing field across the EU on the production of that energy source.

As too many deaths are still attributed to smoking—the figure is estimated to be about 24 per cent of all deaths in Scotland—I was interested to learn of the Health and Sport Committee's suggestion on raising awareness of tobacco-related mortality. I look forward to that issue coming back before the European and External Relations Committee.

As a representative for the Highlands and Islands, the work that the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee has undertaken on the availability of broadband is of particular interest to me, as that is a huge issue in my vast rural region. I therefore welcome the fact that the

committee submitted its report on the matter to the European Commission. Ultra-fast broadband networks will, I hope, help to achieve the digital agenda objective of delivering very fast connections to half of European households by 2020.

I am, however, concerned that the cut in the EU budget—which incidentally was backed by the Scottish National Party at Westminster—might result in an 86 per cent cut in the telecommunications budget from what was originally proposed. I am concerned that that could affect the roll-out of broadband in remote rural areas. I have already discussed the issue with David Lidington, the Minister of State for Europe, to seek clarification on what it will mean.

On top of the cuts to the telecoms budget are the cuts in the structural funds budget. We need to know what those will mean for Scotland. I understand that, as we speak, the Deputy First Minister is in Brussels lobbying for a fairer share of structural funds for Scotland, and I look forward to hearing what she has to say when she comes back.

The Justice Committee examined the proposal to ensure that special attention is given to suspected or accused persons who cannot understand or follow the meaning of criminal proceedings because of their age or mental or physical condition. That will tie in neatly with Lord Carloway's recommendations on vulnerable suspects, which formed part of his review of criminal law and practice in Scotland.

Obviously, the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee deals with some of the areas in which the EU has the biggest impact in Scotland, and it dedicated a considerable amount of time to exploring its proposals of interest. Of particular relevance to Scotland is the never-ending reform of the CAP and the CFP, but other issues include climate change, animal health law, waste policy and air pollution. I note that the committee referred to the "Brussels Bulletin", which is an invaluable tool in helping members to keep up to date with all EU matters. Once again, I congratulate Ian Duncan on its production.

On fisheries, I note that the disaster of the mackerel affair with Iceland, which might affect our pelagic fishermen in Scotland, was last discussed in committee by the Rural Affairs and Environment Committee in November 2010. Why is that not a major priority now? The EU sanctions have not yet been put in place and the Faroes now wish to extend their catches enormously in the mackerel and Atlantic herring stocks. That should surely be a priority for our rural affairs committee, as it affects the sustainability of our Scottish pelagic fishing fleet. I call on the Rural Affairs, Climate

Change and Environment Committee to put that issue high on its future agenda.

This is a thorough report that clearly demonstrates the role that our committees can play in European matters. I look forward to their further engagement with the European and External Relations Committee and the forthcoming further report, which will be published in the autumn.

The European and External Relations Committee is grateful for the input of the other committees and now knows what their priorities are with regard to EU issues. It will audit the performance of the other committees in achieving their goals on those priorities. We look forward to further reports on progress in the autumn.

The Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. I remind members that speeches are four minutes.

14:50

Aileen McLeod (South Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate as the European Union reporter for the Health and Sport Committee and having previously been the EU reporter for the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee and, before that, for the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee.

The specific EU legislative and policy issues that the Health and Sport Committee is prioritising are: the e-health action plan 2012-13; the European innovation partnership on active and healthy ageing; revision of the tobacco products directive; and the package on innovation in health through medical devices.

Each of those policy areas is of key strategic importance for improving Scotland's health and wellbeing. Moreover, they accord closely to the domestic priorities and associated policy reforms set out by the Scottish Government.

There is no doubt that e-health is radically changing the way in which healthcare is delivered. It has huge untapped further potential and can significantly improve the quality of healthcare by adopting a person-centred delivery system. It provides technologies that will allow patients to be more in control of their own care than at present, which paves the way not only for better healthcare but for a more financially sustainable model of healthcare.

Scotland is already recognised as being at the forefront of developments in that area. Innovations in telehealth and telecare that are taking place in Scotland are seen as being among leading examples of the application of technology to the delivery of healthcare in Europe.

In making those innovations, we are promoting further the economic spin-offs that are available from the approach. For example, Highlands and Islands Enterprise has made digital health and care one of the cornerstones of its strategy for assisting the growth of the life sciences business in its region.

E-health not only is good for patients, but will enhance the sustainability of health delivery and help to develop and support the crucial high-technology segments of our economy.

Active and healthy ageing is another EU priority area in which Scotland has significant potential to contribute to—and, indeed, lead on—EU initiatives.

The Health and Sport Committee will consider the European innovation partnership on active and healthy ageing, which is designed better to allow EU citizens to lead healthy, active and independent lives while ageing. There is already Scottish representation on the partnership, and the committee is interested in considering ways in which Scotland may make further contributions to its work.

A particular example is the proposal to examine opportunities for Scotland to be at the heart of a knowledge innovation community through the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, which is financed from the EU horizon 2020 programme and is specifically considering healthy living and active ageing. The University of Edinburgh is currently developing proposals to participate in the prospective programme as an innovation hub—that is, a centre of excellence that integrates higher education, research and business activities.

The priority actions that are set out in the Commission's work programme offer significant opportunities for Scotland's research and innovation communities. Indeed, those opportunities have the potential to propel Scotland to the forefront of a range of key initiatives in e-health and in active and healthy ageing. Not only will benefits accrue to the general public in the form of a person-focused healthcare system, but we will make healthcare more sustainable and, with appropriate measures introduced to facilitate active and healthy ageing, we will make a significant contribution to reducing the long-term demand for public services in health and social care.

I will take forward the Health and Sport Committee's EU priorities. In doing so, I support the motion that is before us.

However, it would be remiss of me not to remind the Parliament that the greatest threat to Scotland's position in Europe is remaining part of a UK that is sleepwalking out of the EU. Of course,

the only way that we can safeguard Scotland's EU membership is through a yes vote in next year's independence referendum.

14:54

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

I thank the convener and the members of the European and External Relations Committee for their quality report and for identifying the range of committee activity that engages with Europe, from the e-health action plan to public procurement and broadband networks.

In my remarks, I will focus on the future of structural funds, particularly in the Highlands and Islands. I suppose that I will ask the rhetorical question, "How will Scotland be affected by the multi-annual financial framework agreed at the last Council summit?" Taking a wider view, my belief is that the summit was a missed opportunity to fully reform the EU budget, but perhaps that was a bridge too far. There was an overall rise in areas that will help to create jobs and growth, including funding for the youth guarantee, but we have heard about the cuts to the connecting Europe facility, which I believe were a mistake as they will slash information technology infrastructure across Europe.

As we heard, it will be up to the UK Government, in negotiation with the Scottish Government, to allocate structural funds for the new programming period of 2014 to 2020 within the EU budget envelope. The announcement of the death of structural funds might have been a little premature, but the funding for cohesion policy has been cut by about 8 per cent compared with the current MAFF. However, the budget still has to be approved by the European Parliament.

The new MAFF will introduce a new category of structural funding for transition regions, which will provide funding for regions whose per capita gross domestic product is between 75 per cent and 90 per cent of the EU average. The figure for my region, the Highlands and Islands, is still only just over 84 per cent of the average. Members will know that the Highlands and Islands covers a third of Scotland's landmass and an area that is larger than Belgium, but its population is smaller than that of Brussels. It has challenging geography, with a coastline that is longer than Brazil's and more than 100 inhabited islands. As we all know, depopulation has been a running sore in my patch, with huge issues such as the departure of whole communities, the best example of that being St Kilda.

The structural funds programme between 2000 and 2006 created or retained 17,000 jobs, assisted more than 9,000 businesses and supported 11,000 trainees. My overall view is that

European funding is not some paternalistic sop from Eurocrats, but a crucial economic tool to lever up to the EU average the per capita GDP of lagging regions. It provides planning and economic opportunities to exploit emerging markets such as life sciences, renewable energy and the creative industries. I am sure that the minister shares my view that transition region status will be an important economic tool in overcoming natural handicaps and allowing the region to work with the rest of Scotland in contributing towards the EU 2020 goals of promoting smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in the EU economy.

I am sure that the cabinet secretary has picked up the point that, because the Highlands and Islands is the only transition region in Scotland, we have, in effect, two funds, so we are doubling up through the proposal. That is well worth stressing when we look at the reduction in budgets.

My time is short. I ask the cabinet secretary to address the review of state-aid guidelines in the winding-up speech. The financial assistance that public bodies give private companies is vital at a time of economic recession. The European Commission proposals could have a detrimental effect in Scotland by limiting public agencies' ability to pump-prime crucial growth points such as the renewable energy sector.

I also urge the Scottish Government to work with Westminster to review the EU proposals on defining the regional aid map so that regional deprivation and sparsity of population are still key factors. There has to be an underlying fairness in defining the map for the provision of funding to both large enterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises.

I wish the committee well in its future deliberations.

14:58

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP):

I am glad to be speaking in this debate, albeit only as a member of the European and External Relations Committee and not as a reporter on Europe or a member of one of the other committees.

The cabinet secretary mentioned the important relationship that Scotland has with Europe and how key it is to our country moving forward in science and research. The importance of that is evidenced by the visit today of the Deputy First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, to Europe to talk not just about her concerns about the EU structural funds settlement, but about the possibilities for Scotland in Europe following a "yes" vote. We are discussing the committee's report, but we cannot talk about it in isolation from the referendum and

the constitutional issues that face Scotland, or indeed from the wider UK referendum on an exit from Europe, because those are key factors when we are talking about priorities.

The cabinet secretary talked about the importance of science and research, which are also included in the European and External Relations Committee's priorities for Europe, with regard to the horizon 2020 funding for research.

On her appointment as the first adviser on science issues to the President of the European Commission, Anne Glover said:

"It is an enormous pleasure for me to be the first Chief Scientific Adviser to the President of the European Commission and to be in a position to talk about the excellence in science, engineering and technology that is generated across member states. Our big challenge in Europe is translating that knowledge into better environments, better health, more rewarding lifestyles and a sustainable future".

She is also on record talking about the big global scientific challenges being in the areas of

"climate change, food security and water security."

Earlier in the year, Humza Yousaf noted that Scotland has already taken a global lead on climate justice. He said:

"The Scottish Government's 'climate justice fund' is the first of its kind in the world. In December, the Minister for Environment and Climate Change, Paul Wheelhouse, announced that Scotland would host an international conference on the subject. Much of the international development funding is already dedicated to projects relating to sustainability, food security and climate impact."

Therefore, I welcome the fact that the themes of climate change, food security and water security run through the priorities that have been set by some of the committees. The Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee has highlighted energy technology and innovation, and future European energy policy. The Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee has highlighted safeguarding Europe's water resources and the EU water blueprint. The Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee has talked about the common agricultural policy, fisheries policies, the invasion of alien species, the safeguarding of Europe's water resources, the EU strategy on adapting to climate change and the EU strategy on the energy framework. We cannot consider any of those issues in isolation, because everything that we do in Europe affects the wider world, and having those priorities reflected in the committee's work is welcome.

I am also a member of the Education and Culture Committee. Although that committee has not made a submission to the report, the European and External Relations Committee has done a great deal of work on the one-plus-two language model that the Scottish Government is

piloting, which should ensure that we have a healthy future in Europe.

15:02

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): As EU reporter for the Local Government and Regeneration Committee, I thank the convener of the European and External Relations Committee for her acknowledgement of the omission from the report of the Local Government and Regeneration Committee's EU priorities. I am confident that the Local Government and Regeneration Committee will play a key role in supporting the European and External Relations Committee's scrutiny of EU policy, in the areas that are within its remit.

Tomorrow I shall propose several EU priorities that I have identified for 2013 to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee for its consideration and agreement. Although the European Commission's work programme for 2013 does not identify specific priorities for the Local Government and Regeneration Committee, there can be no doubt that many EU initiatives have a direct impact on the functioning of local government, and on delivery of regeneration work in Scotland.

A number of on-going EU policies that are of significant importance to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee will complete their legislative journey throughout 2013: the multi-annual financial framework and the Scottish partnership agreement for 2014 to 2020, the future of European structural funds, and changes to EU public procurement rules.

The Local Government and Regeneration Committee is currently undertaking two inquiries on which those EU policy areas have a direct effect. First, the committee is undertaking an inquiry into delivery of regeneration. The recent agreement by the European Council on the EU's financial framework for 2014 to 2020 signals the first-ever reduction in the EU budget since its establishment. More worryingly, if planned changes to the framework for allocating structural funds take place, the UK could see substantial funding cuts to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, while England could be set for an overall increase. European structural funds play a crucial role in funding delivery of regeneration activity in Scotland, so a significant reduction in those funds could have a direct negative impact on our communities and on Scotland's economic development.

The recent indication from the UK Government suggesting that it has agreed to talks with the Scottish Government on how EU structural funds will be allocated is welcome; it will be helpful,

because it is crucial that a constructive solution to the problem be found.

It is well known that there was a demand by some member states for the overall European budget to be reduced, but a disproportionate cut to Scotland's funding would be unacceptable. Tomorrow, therefore, I shall propose to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee that, as part of our inquiry into regeneration, we examine evidence on the potential impact of loss of European structural funds to successful delivery of the Scottish Government's regeneration strategy.

Secondly, the committee is undertaking the final strand of its inquiry into public services reform, which we will debate this afternoon. The inquiry is looking at shared services and development of new ways of delivering services.

In January this year, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities wrote to all of the Parliament's EU reporters identifying changes to public procurement rules and other EU limitations to shared services, and emphasised that that should be a key focus for local government. Tomorrow I shall propose to the committee that, as part of our public services reform inquiry, we write to COSLA seeking further information on the potential impact on local government of new EU public procurement rules and shared services limitations.

I look forward to discussions with and, I hope, the support of my colleagues on the Local Government and Regeneration Committee on determining our EU priorities for 2013, and to considering important aspects of EU policy throughout the committee's current inquiries. I certainly look forward to working with the European and External Relations Committee in due course.

15:06

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate, as an area of EU work is of particular interest to me in my role as convener of the Equal Opportunities Committee. Part of the EU framework is the national Roma integration strategy, which is relevant because of that committee's work on Gypsy Travellers. I will return to the work of the committee later, but initially I will focus on the Roma people in Europe.

The situation of the Roma has increasingly become the centre of political attention for Europe. The Roma make up Europe's largest minority, of about 10 million to 12 million people. They are often victims of racism, discrimination and social exclusion and live in deep poverty, lacking access to healthcare and decent housing.

Many Roma women and children are the victims of violence, exploitation and trafficking—including within their own communities—and many Roma children are on the streets instead of going to school. Better integration of the Roma is therefore a moral and economic imperative across Europe.

The member states have the primary responsibility and the competence to change the situation for marginalised populations. That is why the European Commission adopted "An EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020" in order to improve Roma people's lives tangibly. The framework identified four key areas, which are mirrored by our committee inquiry on Gypsy Travellers.

The first area is education. The EU goal is to ensure that all Roma children complete at least primary school and have access to quality education. The next area is employment, in which the EU goal is to reduce the employment gap between Roma people and the rest of the population. Healthcare was a huge issue when we were doing our inquiry, and the EU goal is to reduce the gap in health status between the Roma people and the rest of the population. The final area is housing, for which the EU goal is to close the gap between the share of Roma people who have access to housing and to public utilities, and that of the rest of the population. The framework calls on all member states to include in their strategies strong monitoring methods to evaluate the impact of Roma inclusion.

A recent survey highlighted the stark inequalities and discrimination that the Roma people suffer, many of which are mirrored here. Members may be aware that there is a large population of Roma people living in the Glasgow area. The similarities between the Roma and the Gypsy Travellers are stark. Several pieces of work have already been done on Gypsy Travellers. However, there has been little perceptible change. I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to eradicating racial discrimination and its recognition that Gypsy Travellers and Roma communities are among the most disenfranchised and discriminated against in Scotland.

I will briefly return to the work of the Equal Opportunities Committee. We have recently completed our inquiry on Gypsy Travellers and care and we are still working on our inquiry into Gypsy Travellers and where they live. Our inquiries have identified many issues that are similar to issues that have been identified in the work that is being undertaken by the EU: lack of access to housing, health, education and employment are part of the daily lives of Gypsy Travellers in Scotland, and discrimination, victimisation and lack of understanding among the settled community impact on their lives daily.

The Equal Opportunities Committee has agreed to adopt the EU Commission's recommendation on fostering the implementation of the national Roma strategy as a continuing priority, and to continue to take the UK national strategy into account in the context of our inquiry. I welcome the work that is being undertaken to promote equality for the Roma people. We will continue to monitor the success of the strategy to help us in our work here.

15:10

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): As a newcomer to this annual debate, I will stick to the motion and—although I know that she will be disappointed to hear this—I will resist the temptation to respond to the cabinet secretary's opening remarks; they had no bearing whatever on the content of the report, which focuses solely on Parliament's EU priorities for its committees.

To my mind, the one thing that the debate has clarified and highlighted is the absolute necessity for us to keep our eye firmly on the European ball, given the very high percentage of our work that emanates from the EU. Last year—I think the convener reiterated the same figure for this year—the Parliament received notification of up to 20 European issues every week.

The other fact that we must continue to recognise is the cross-cutting nature of the issues. The fact that the European and External Relations Committee's report includes annexed reports from seven different committees—with one absentee, for understandable reasons—highlights the extent of that cross-cutting nature.

As a member of the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee, I am very aware of the impact and importance of European policy to our area. It completely dominates our agenda, as is shown by the fact that while no other committee identified more than nine bullet-pointed priorities in its annex to the report, the RACCE Committee identified 22. In highlighting that, I am not in any way criticising other committees; I am seeking simply to underline the impact of European measures on the RACCE Committee's agenda.

The RACCE Committee's agenda is as wide as it is varied. It includes on-going reform of the common agricultural policy and common fisheries policy—neither of which is easy and both of which require Governments at all levels to engage actively and early with the European Union if we are to get the best possible results for Scotland, which I think everyone in the chamber wants to achieve. These are not words that I ever thought I would hear myself say, but I agree entirely with

our former colleague George Lyon MEP, who stated that our priorities on CAP reform must be to ensure that the needs of Scotland are taken into account in the final package. I particularly agree with the statement in his response to the European and External Relations Committee that we

"need more flexibility on the transition from historic to area-based payments and a fairer distribution of both direct payments and rural development funding."

We must all work together to achieve that aim.

Fiona Hyslop: Will the member give way?

Alex Fergusson: Do I have time, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): It is your choice.

Alex Fergusson: In that case, I cannot. I am sorry, cabinet secretary.

Fiona Hyslop *rose*

Alex Fergusson: Okay. Very quickly.

Fiona Hyslop: When I am at Westminster on Monday, can I count on the Conservative group's support on exactly that point: the transition between pillars 1 and 2 in reform of the budget, which is very important indeed to Scotland?

Alex Fergusson: I give the cabinet secretary one assurance: this Government will have the Scottish Conservative Party's absolute support in trying to achieve in the negotiations the best deal, as we agree it to be, for Scotland.

The responses of all our MEPs to the report highlight a number of areas on which continuous active engagement by the Scottish Government, its civil servants and the Parliament is essential. Ian Hudghton warns of dangers in negotiation in the European maritime and fisheries fund. Alyn Smith highlights the potential for Scotland's involvement in the €80 billion research and innovation programme. Others give similar examples.

The message is absolutely clear: if we are to ensure the best possible outcome for Scotland in all policy areas, the Government and its agencies and Parliament have to be in there early, lobbying from the word go and ensuring that we get the best possible deal. I hope that the European and External Relations Committee continues to scrutinise all that activity as closely as possible.

I commend Stuart McMillan for his measured speech. I absolutely agree that it would be wrong if Scotland had to take a disproportionate reduction in structural funding. We must all work together; we must continue, through devolution, to work with the UK Government and the EU to ensure that we achieve the best results for Scotland.

15:14

Patricia Ferguson: I will follow Jamie McGrigor's example and thank very much the clerks to the European and External Relations Committee, who have provided a comprehensive document for us and whose work throughout the year provides us with the interesting "Brussels Bulletin", which anyone who has an interest in Europe must make a point of reading and considering.

Alex Fergusson comprehensively covered the work that the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee is undertaking as a result of its having identified its European priorities. An interesting point that that committee made is perhaps a frustration for all of us—the fact that progress can be slow. Like other committees, that committee wishes to carry forward from last year work that it considers to be still relevant, while keeping its eye on the ball of new work that is coming forward. That is absolutely right.

The Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee's work to monitor progress—if I can call it that—on reform of the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy is important to Scotland, as are the issues that relate to our climate change commitments. Alex Fergusson identified the long list of issues that that committee must consider. He was right to say that Europe is relevant to the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee, because much of its work—and our work in general—emanates from the European Commission.

I was interested in issues that the European and External Relations Committee identified. We entrust it to bring together the work of all the rapporteurs and subject committees, but it is important to remember that that committee has its own agenda, too. I was especially interested in its work on the horizon 2020 agenda, particularly in relation to research and innovation. That is interesting for Scotland, given the proliferation of SMEs and research and development based companies here.

I was intrigued by the project that could be part of the fight against poverty-related diseases in sub-Saharan Africa. Such an agenda fits well with Parliament's wider work and with the Government. We owe the European and External Relations Committee a debt of gratitude for highlighting that subject in this round of discussions.

I very much agreed with just about everything that Aileen McLeod said; her exposition of the work that the Health and Sport Committee will undertake was spot on. She happened to identify issues that I have previously identified, but that was not the only reason why I was interested in

her speech. I was interested because such issues are important to Scotland. She will forgive me if I say that she spoiled her speech at the end, but I would say that, wouldn't I?

Dave Stewart was right to focus on issues in the Highlands and Islands, which he represents, given the scale of the issues that the region faces. He was right to comment on the effect of the region's size and the sparsity of its population. The fact that those two aspects come together means that we must focus on the Highlands and Islands, as well as other areas of our islands.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You should draw to a close, please.

Patricia Ferguson: Mary Fee's speech about the Equal Opportunities Committee's work, in connection with the Roma people, was interesting. That subject has challenged us all for many years and we have never yet quite got it right. I very much hope that that committee's work will help us.

In closing, I point out quickly to Stuart McMillan that one reason why structural funding might be an issue is that the mechanism that the Commission has set is not particularly sympathetic to Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You really must close. You are half a minute over your time.

Patricia Ferguson: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

15:19

The Minister for External Affairs and International Development (Humza Yousaf): This has been a very good and measured debate. The Scottish Government welcomes the Commission's work programme for 2013 and its focus on helping to build a Europe that is based on sustainability, sustainable growth, responsibility, solidarity and—of course—stability. I echo members' thanks to the clerks and the rapporteurs of the various committees for their hard work and endeavours in putting together the priorities.

We support our European partners in their efforts, while we focus on the EU proposals that are of greatest importance to Scotland. The debate has highlighted the vast range of the EU's work and, in the short time that they had, members did their committees justice as they went through various elements. Given its focus on energy and climate change, research and creativity, the marine environment and justice, the Scottish Government must ensure that its resources and influence are best deployed in those policy areas in order to promote Scottish interests and ensure that we get the best deal for Scotland from the EU's policies and programmes.

The Scottish Government supports key European dossiers including proposals for reforming state aid, particularly environmental aid, and the crucial EU climate and energy framework. In what I thought was a very good and measured speech, David Stewart made the point very well in relation not just to the Highlands and Islands but nationwide, that the current economic crisis really underlines the need for strong state aid that contributes to economic growth. Aid measures must be well designed and demonstrate an incentive effect, and there is a strong case for interventions that incentivise the private sector to help to promote growth.

With regard to research and development and innovation, the Scottish Government very much agrees that guidelines should support the EU 2020 objectives in key areas. We are actively discussing those and other initiatives with stakeholders at home and partners in Brussels.

In her opening remarks, the cabinet secretary made it clear that the Scottish Government understands the case for reforming the EU as, in fact, do many of the committees that have reported. We are already contributing to the process of amending the CFP, would like more ambitious carbon emissions targets, and are supportive of more streamlined decision making and increased transparency. However, we believe that such reforms will best be achieved through dialogue with member states and, of course, within the EU itself.

That position stands in sharp contrast to that of some of our counterparts on these islands. We are clear that Scotland benefits from our relationship with and membership of the EU. Historically, Scotland has always grasped the importance of internationalism; after all, we have been sharing sovereignty in one form or another for quite some time now.

As I have said, we heard some excellent speeches, so I want to touch on one or two points that members raised. Mary Fee made an excellent speech about equality for the Roma community and the plight that it is facing across Europe. As she quite rightly pointed out, we are not without our challenges in Scotland, but I think that, having faced those difficult challenges, we have a good story to tell and some best practice to employ. However, Europe cannot choose simply to ignore this issue or to bury its head in the sand about it and I think that the Equal Opportunities Committee has been very brave—and very right—to highlight the issue as a priority for the EU.

The same issue was highlighted by Patricia Ferguson, who also mentioned development work and alluded to the ability to work with the European Development Commission to help certain parts of sub-Saharan Africa. I have met the

Development Commission twice in Brussels to discuss how we can help Malawi, and I am happy to keep the member up to date about our work in that respect.

A common theme—highlighted by Aileen McLeod and Jamie McGrigor among others—has been that Scotland has a lot to give as well as a lot to learn from EU partners, particularly in health. We can point not only to the smoking ban and other smoking-cessation initiatives that we have put in place to deal with the impact of smoking on our nation's health, but—I hope—to minimum alcohol unit pricing. Those points were very well made by colleagues and members.

The Scottish Government pursues Scotland's interests in Brussels. We work closely with the UK Government to secure early engagement on key dossiers, to shape initiatives and to secure the best possible outcomes for Scotland.

Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP): Will the minister give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister is in his last minute.

Humza Yousaf: This Government's firm position is that Scotland should lead for the UK as a whole on areas in which Scotland has the primary interest.

The relationship between the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament must continue to be one of close engagement. The Scottish Parliament's EU strategy covers many areas in which the Government's strategy and the committees' priorities coincide. As all members are doing, we are keeping a close watch on discussions and developments in relation to the multi-annual financial framework. I am pleased that there is so much support from members for the Government's call for Scotland not to be disproportionately affected. We are best able to influence the EU when we can speak with a single voice and are united in defending Scotland's interests. Together, we can demonstrate how committed all Scotland is to progress for the EU at this crucial time.

I welcome the Parliament's EU strategy and hope for continued dialogue on important priorities for Scotland. We must continue to collaborate. We must ensure that Scotland contributes to smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in the EU and that the EU contributes to the needs of people and communities in Scotland.

15:25

Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab): Just last week, the European and External Relations Committee considered a report on the latest developments in the EU budget. Depending on the

final settlement, nearly €1 trillion will be available to do good work through investment in infrastructure, energy, small business development, our fishing and farming industries, broadband and research. There are huge opportunities.

We must do all that we can do to ensure that Scotland can draw down as much of the funding as it can. We might not get the full €1 trillion—albeit that it will not be for the want of trying—but we must ensure that everyone knows that funds are available and helps to secure them.

My committee has also been investigating teaching of foreign languages in primary schools. Our convener, Christina McAlpine, touched on that—*[Interruption.]* I beg her pardon, I meant Christina McKelvie. Just the other week we learned that every year there is an underspend in the European budget—funding that would support teacher and pupil exchanges. That will not do. We must redouble our efforts to ensure that we take advantage of money that is available for good work. The people of Scotland must know that members of their Parliament are on the ball and up to date. They must have confidence that we know that money is available and, more important, how to help people to get it.

The people of Scotland must also know that we can bring about change. That is an important element. When a European law is not working, the people of Scotland must have confidence that we will do everything that we can to fix the problem. That is our job.

During the debate I got the impression that each committee member is dedicated to ensuring that the EU works for us in the best possible way. I am encouraged by that positive sign.

Let us not forget that Scotland has much to offer the European Union, whether through our colleges and universities, our primary schools or the can-do attitude of our businesses, which are at the forefront of the renewable energy sector and are pushing the boundaries in that regard. Scotland has a lot to give to the European Union family.

We heard from committee representatives about the initiatives and action that their committees are taking. We heard about the seven-year European Union budget and the future of the common agricultural policy and what it means for our farming industry, our landscape and even our dietary needs.

We should not forget our equality duties. My committee is the first—if not the only—committee to undertake equality training. I encourage other committees to do that.

The Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee has stressed the need for

change. There are opportunities and challenges to Scotland that are afforded by developments in the energy sector, including a North Sea grid to connect Scotland's energy generation to Europe, or the various proposals in renewable energy. EU infrastructure policies, whether on broadband or ferry links, will have a significant impact on peoples' daily lives.

What happens next? The committee's work is on-going. The debate has offered only a snapshot of what is possible. I, too, am passionate about what we can achieve and the differences that we can make by being in the European Union. Let us see how much of that €1 trillion budget can be brought home to Scotland.

Why am I keen to see that happen? Many of our small and medium-sized companies are hungry for investment. We need to encourage and support not only small and medium-sized companies, but community groups that bring so much to, and do so much valuable work for, our communities. That support may come from agencies, and Humza Yousaf referred to two organisations that support minority communities. I am also keen to see what other organisations can provide support not only in identifying funding, but in supporting people in acquiring it. The bottom line is that we need to ask where the funding is going and why we are not getting the most benefit from it. Our committee is working hard to ensure that we not only identify means of bringing the funding home, but that we ensure that the funding delivers on the ground. I hope that other committees will support our work—as we support their work—in ensuring that that happens.

Public Services Reform (Developing New Ways of Delivering Services)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-05612, in the name of Kevin Stewart, on the inquiry into public services reform.

I remind members that we are extraordinarily tight for time and ask that you speak within your time limits, please.

15:32

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to open the debate on behalf of the Local Government and Regeneration Committee, and I thank the Parliament for allowing the debate to take place. I also thank all members of the committee, past and present, the committee clerks, the advisers and those who gave evidence in the various strands of the inquiry.

We looked at partnerships and outcomes in strand 1, and we focused on benchmarking and performance measurement in strand 2. We are now looking at progress in the development of shared services, innovative ways of achieving economies of scale, and how to harness the strengths and skills of all relevant public sector partners, led by councils, to deliver the best possible quality services. Strand 3 will build on our earlier inquiry reports.

The committee is keen to hear the views of a wide cross-section of members during the inquiry, rather than after the work has concluded. That debate will inform the committee consideration and give members a chance to hear emerging views and set out key issues.

We have a background of budget reductions, an economic downturn and growing demands and expectations from the public on public services. We have looked at the Finance Committee inquiry into preventative spend, and the shared services agenda, including the Arbutnott inquiry in Clyde valley; we have taken cognisance of the Christie commission and the Scottish Government's response to it; we have looked assiduously at the statement of ambition and its focus on partners acting collectively to deliver outcomes for the community; and we have studied the community planning review and the development of single outcome agreements.

Strand 1 of the inquiry focused on community planning partnerships. In our strand 1 report, we noted that they are expected

“to promote a strong focus on outcomes, on partnership working, on the use of total resources and on the co-ordination of other activity.”

At the tail end of strand 1, the committee's then convener, Joe FitzPatrick MSP, said:

“Community planning partnerships can effect genuine change in our communities. Our committee experienced first-hand the positive impact that effective community planning partnerships can play in delivering public services in Scotland. Community planning partnerships can only do so, however, when all those involved in the partnership are prepared to work together and are working to shared goals. To do this there needs to be a cultural change within parts of the public sector and a recognition of the benefits true partnership working can bring.”

When the committee asked whether that ambition had been met, it found that it had not been fully met and that barriers still existed. We stated that CPPs had been “a qualified success”, but further evidence that we have taken in strands 2 and 3, as well as evidence from other inquiries, suggests that we would not now support even that limited endorsement. I will return to that issue later.

In strand 1, we found that cultural and behavioural challenges existed, and that bodies had a silo mentality and an inability to work collaboratively to deliver shared outcomes through the sharing of resources and information. Our strand 1 report highlighted that leadership and vision were critical to effective partnership working, that a shared vision with all partners was required and that there should be shared accountability and responsibility. We said that budget sharing would go a long way to assist with that.

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP):

In Aberdeen City Council, Kevin Stewart and I had experience of a move to priority-based budgeting. Would he recommend that approach as one that public authorities should look at as part of the on-going process of public sector reform?

Kevin Stewart: The committee has not looked at that in any depth, but Mr McDonald will know that I favour priority-based budgeting. It has been successful in Aberdeen, and I am sure that it could be successful elsewhere.

The committee stated that third sector involvement was crucial and that community engagement was essential. In the briefing that the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has sent us for the debate, it says:

“community engagement and empowerment is at the heart of the community planning process. Recognising that the third sector is particularly close to communities, that is also one of the reasons we are working to realign our relationship with them.”

However, on our recent visits to Cumbernauld, Aberdeen and Glasgow, the committee found that

communities are not being engaged with to the level that I think that they should be. In a number of places, the third sector feels that it has been pushed out of the process. I think that we need to delve further into that issue in strand 3 of our inquiry. I agree with COSLA that such engagement is vital. That is the view that the committee took in strand 1.

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): Last week, when I visited Glasgow as part of the inquiry, a key point that was raised time and again was that folk felt that there was a top-down rather than a bottom-up approach to consultation. Does Kevin Stewart agree that, as we move forward with our inquiry, we need to probe that issue a lot further?

Kevin Stewart: I agree with Mr McMillan. Exactly the same message came across in Aberdeen as did in Glasgow. Folk were keen to talk about the proposed community empowerment bill. Perhaps ministers could give us an indication of how that will help to allow bottom-up consultation to take place, instead of folk receiving the top-down diktats that were mentioned in both cities the other week.

We should be moving towards the outcome-based approach, but it seems to be extremely challenging. There seemed to be more of a focus on inputs and outputs than on outcomes. Again, engagement with partners and local communities is required to ensure that we can measure outcomes properly. Such engagement is central to the future development of single outcome agreements.

Strand 2 of the inquiry looked at benchmarking, which was a bit of a dream for an anorak like me. It may have been hard going for some committee members, but they considered assiduously the benchmarking work that was going on. We had a lot of engagement with people on the issue and held a seminar on benchmarking that I think was extremely useful for all those who attended. It was a short, sharp inquiry, which considered the work on benchmarking that local government officials who are members of the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers in Scotland carried out for almost three years. Progress was slow, but eventually all 32 councils bought into the work.

It is critical that the Parliament recognises the significance of that benchmarking project, because it represents the first time that all 32 local authorities in Scotland have co-operated to produce consistent data on key indicators for benchmarking. It is equally critical to recognise that the data will still be influenced by local circumstances and priorities and that that context remains important. The Parliament should welcome that benchmarking initiative and

encourage councils and community planning partnership partners to use it to drive forward public sector reform.

Benchmarking allows organisations to compare their services, costs and outcomes against those of others who are undertaking similar activities and to do so over a period of time. All local authorities can therefore compare their results and costs against one another's; in each case, it will be possible to identify which is the cheapest and which has the highest outcomes. The comparison also allows local factors to be taken into account and, crucially, it can reflect local priorities. That means that instead of the previous situation in which authorities often compared apples with pears, they will now compare apples with apples.

The committee was told that it was critical for SOLACE that benchmarking

"should drive improvement in council service delivery."

We also took evidence from Scottish Water, which has been doing benchmarking for a number of years and which told the committee that it had contributed to annual cost efficiency savings of £100 million between 2002 and 2006. Scottish Water sees absolutely no downside to the benchmarking process. COSLA has bought into benchmarking completely and utterly, and it agreed that it was desirable to collect indicators on a comparative basis across all councils and that comparative analysis seems to be the key management tool of the approach for the future.

That of course links into the Christie commission, which recognised that

"well designed external challenge can be 'a catalyst for improvement where it influences behaviour and culture of providers, leading to improvements in the way that services are delivered.'"

The committee will continue to monitor the benchmarking indicators as they are brought into play. I think that some are very surprised at how much interest the committee took in that matter.

I move on to strand 3 and what still needs to be done. We will continue to look at our findings from strands 1 and 2, and we will involve communities and third sector providers. It was therefore a little galling to see from the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations today a little briefing that is critical of strand 3. SCVO seems to think that we will not involve communities and third sector partners, which could not be further from the truth. The committee has already committed to go on further outings throughout the country to take evidence.

So, is PSR happening in Scotland? We think that, yes, the green shoots are there, but it is not happening as fast as is needed or desired. It can be haphazard in certain places and is a bit pick

and mix. It can often be driven by external rather than internal factors. There are many reasons, we are told, for the slow pace of change: legal constraints, political will, finance, different rates of development across public sector bodies, data, partnerships, CPPs, outcomes, attitudes, and long lead-in times.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: And time.

Kevin Stewart: Presiding Officer, I move,

That the Parliament recognises the importance of the work of the Local Government and Regeneration Committee in its inquiry into public services reform; welcomes its examination, at strand 3 of the inquiry, of progress being made in relation to the development of shared services, other innovative ways of achieving economies of scale and harnessing the strengths and skills of key public sector partners to deliver the best possible quality services in local areas, and notes that the committee's work is designed to build on its earlier inquiry reports, at strand 1, into partnerships and outcomes and, at strand 2, into progress on benchmarking and performance measurement.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Excellent. Thank you very much.

15:45

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): I welcome this opportunity to consider the early conclusions of the Local Government and Regeneration Committee on the issue of public service reform, which directly relate to issues that ministers take forward in pursuing this agenda. I assure the committee that the Government attaches the highest priority to the issues around public service reform. We think that some of the points that the committee has raised in its written output to date are fair and considered observations about the issues with which we wrestle.

In his remarks on behalf of the committee, Kevin Stewart said that he could see the "green shoots" of public service reform. I encourage Mr Stewart and the committee to look openly and comprehensively across Scotland's public services and be open in their view as to what constitutes public service reform. I do not want us to fall into the trap of believing that we can measure public service reform only by the degree and nature of structural change that we undertake in the organisation of public bodies around the country. Much more significant is our focus on the achievement of outcomes, the necessity of encouraging public bodies to work together and ensuring that we have a vigorous agenda of reforming public services in every part of the country.

Mr Stewart raised legal, political and financial impediments, and impediments concerning data,

partnership working, the role of CPPs and the focus on outcomes. I say clearly to Parliament that the Government does not consider any of those issues to be in any way an impediment to the realisation of our objectives, nor will we tolerate their being perceived as obstacles and obstructions to the way in which we pursue this agenda.

Kevin Stewart: Sometimes the impediments seem to be perceptions rather than realities. How will the cabinet secretary inform various bodies that what they see often as a legal constraint actually does not exist?

John Swinney: The Government makes available information and guidance to support partners in this process. It also gives very clear political leadership for the process. For example, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing and I jointly attended a meeting last Monday with the chairs of all health boards in Scotland—territorial and specialist—to reinforce the work that Derek Mackay has presided over on the review of CPPs. We made sure that it was known in that forum that the Government views every single element of the public sector as having a role in undertaking the process of reform. I reiterate those messages when I attend the national public bodies conference, which I will do later this year, and when I discuss these issues with local government. None of the issues that Mr Stewart raised in his speech is a credible or reasonable obstacle to undertaking much of that activity.

To be frank, people who want to find obstacles often talk endlessly about governance and the need for more guidance. If anyone ever again asks me for more guidance on the subject in the public sector, they will get the shortest answer possible, because the guidance is very clear as a consequence of the community planning review that Mr Mackay took forward with COSLA in support of the work of Pat Watters, who took forward that area of activity.

The Government's public service reform agenda is structured around the four pillars of our response to the Christie commission, which were: a decisive shift towards preventative interventions; partnership between public services at the local level; investment in the skills capacity and knowledge of our staff; and a sharp focus on performance. That in-principle approach has been reflected through all our public service reform agenda. In my dialogue with the various partners—I have referred to the comprehensive nature of that dialogue—I have concentrated on the importance of intensifying the pace of the delivery of change over the past nine months. I am becoming more confident that the pace of change is beginning to reach the level that I would consider to be appropriate in facing up to the

financial and demand challenges that we face as a country.

A whole range of different approaches is being taken across the spectrum of policy interventions to deliver the public service reform agenda. One of the best examples—it sums up most effectively the way in which we have brought together all the relevant partners in a collaborative space—has been the early years collaborative. That is the world's first national multi-agency quality improvement collaborative, which now works across Scotland under the direction of the early years task force to give our children the best start in life. Its objective is to accelerate the conversion of the high-level principles that are set out in the getting it right for every child strategy and the early years framework into practical and sustained action that will deliver a transformation in the quality of life of our youngest citizens in Scotland. We have also seen that approach being taken forward in specific areas of public service policy relating to the health service, through the patient safety programme, and the drive to increase quality in public services.

The integration of adult health and social care is another much-needed reform. That integration will improve care for older people by placing the individual at the centre of services, extending democratic accountability and reducing bureaucracy.

There are, of course, some structural changes that we will take forward. We have legislated for police and fire service reform, and the new police force and fire service will be in place for operation on 1 April 2013.

On the community planning agenda, we have laid heavy emphasis on the necessity of all partners in the public sector and the third sector working in effective community planning partnerships at the local level. We have put in place guidance that supports those individuals, and they are now focused on the formulation of single outcome agreements that will capture the focus of activity on reform. One of the essential elements of each of those single outcome agreements will be the requirement for the formulation of a prevention plan.

It is important that that collaborative activity at the local level, which must be genuinely based on the involvement of all partners across the public sector and must involve the third sector, is tested with full and effective scrutiny. That is why I welcome the progress that the Accounts Commission has made in developing an audit model that supports community planning partnerships in improving their effectiveness. The Accounts Commission has collaborated with other scrutiny bodies and undertaken three early audits, in Aberdeen city, the Scottish Borders and North

Ayrshire. The reports will be published next month, and I expect that the commission will also report on the key national messages that emerge from that work.

The Government is absolutely determined, for the reason of addressing the demand and financial challenges that we face, that a vigorous process of public service reform be undertaken. It has been undertaken through our approach in responding to the Christie commission, with a heavy emphasis on prevention and the importance of partnership at the local level, through investing in our workforce, and through ensuring that we have a strong focus on the improvement of performance in every part of the country. That is the focus of the Government's agenda, and we will be delighted to engage with the committee on that subject.

15:49

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I thank the committee for the work that it has done so far and, in particular, I thank the witnesses who have given evidence. It is particularly interesting and extremely useful to read some of the analysis that has been produced by people from the academic community and from those who are involved on the front line in delivering services. In my opening remarks, I want to concentrate on the context in which this whole debate takes place, highlight some of the partnerships that exist and perhaps talk a bit about some of the challenges. In my closing remarks, I will focus on how the benchmarking strand leads into strand 3, which is on service delivery and reorganisation.

It is important to understand what is currently happening to service delivery in our communities and how things might be delivered in future. From reading the report, it seems to me that we need to test the ambition against the reality, which means testing the ambition of changing the way in which public services are delivered with the actual experience on the ground. That feeds into the issue of outcomes. It is absolutely crucial to think about what the actual outcomes are for individuals and communities from the changes that are taking place through public sector reform.

I very much agree with Kevin Stewart's opening comment that the context is that we have less resource available, both financially and in terms of staff, at a time when we face ever-greater challenges on a scale that we perhaps cannot really imagine. If we stand back and think about the timing, we can see that public expenditure pretty much doubled during the first eight years of the Scottish Parliament, whereas over the next six years there will be significant reductions in expenditure at the same time as huge increases in demand. Therefore, there is no question about the need to think about how our public services are

delivered. However, that pressure on public services will itself bring challenges, because delivering the same outcomes or greater while putting less into the system will be a huge challenge.

I may comment further in my closing remarks on what John Swinney said, but his comment that the obstacles are neither credible nor real needs to be challenged. Some of the obstacles that public sector organisations face are incredibly real and they are credible. For example, given the budget settlement for local government over the past couple of years, it is true that local authorities are now getting less money, while the operation of the council tax freeze acts to ratchet down the amount of funding available. Local authorities have been put in a straitjacket, because any agreement to protect certain services within the budget will always mean that there is a disproportionate impact on other services—

Mark McDonald: Will the member take an intervention?

Sarah Boyack: No, I must get on. I will take comments later, but I have only six minutes.

That reduced level of resources is compounded by the impact of United Kingdom Government cuts. As the SCVO commented—I can see why the Local Government and Regeneration Committee members might be sensitive about this, but the SCVO made an essential point—the combination of less resources going into local authorities with the impact of welfare reform could prove to be a tipping point for local government services.

Kevin Stewart: The Local Government and Regeneration Committee is well aware of the impact of welfare reform. That is one reason why we have chosen to go round the country and why we are ensuring that third sector partners are extremely well represented in our evidence-taking sessions. In our Aberdeen and Glasgow sessions, I ensured that we had representatives of the citizens advice bureau because I thought that their input was vital.

Sarah Boyack: I very much welcome that. I have read through all the paperwork that has come into the committee.

I think that the SCVO is flagging up the need for a reality check. At one level, people are happy to see the third sector involved in delivery, but on the other hand the third sector is not included at the table when services are being designed or commissioned. That is a key issue for strand 3, so I very much hope that the committee will be able to explore that in depth.

The issue is that services will have less, not just in terms of cash resources but in terms of staff

resources. There were 14,000 fewer local authority staff last year and there will be another 14,000 fewer this year. It is crucial for local authorities to balance their books, but that reduction in staff numbers matters because it will mean that local authorities cannot simply deal with business as usual.

When local authorities are changing services, renegotiating and staffing community planning partnerships, the same people are not necessarily involved from year to year. One key point that comes through in the committee's report on partnerships is about strategic leadership being provided by people in all organisations. The issue applies not just to local government, because people are being lost from the public sector generally. The people who set up partnerships need to be able to follow them through in the long run. That needs to be thought through.

Kevin Stewart: Will Ms Boyack give way?

Sarah Boyack: No. I took an intervention a moment ago, and I have only 40 seconds left.

Building relationships is crucial. As Robert Black has pointed out, the issue is about not just the current pressures that our public sector is under, but the future demands. The Christie commission majored on that. To give an example, last week I had a visit from a group of people from a third sector organisation that looks after older ethnic minority people. Their question to me was, "Where are the public sector organisations to look after and support our parents?" At present, that organisation provides day-care services, but there is no capacity locally for long-term care to be delivered specifically for ethnic minority communities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I regret to say that you must close, please.

Sarah Boyack: I want to finish on that point, because it is about the new challenges that are coming on top of the challenges that we already have. That must define the debate for the future.

16:01

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): I apologise for not being here at the very beginning of the debate, Presiding Officer.

I welcome this debate on public sector reform. It is hard to believe that it has been more than a year since the Local Government and Regeneration Committee began its inquiry into public sector reform in Scotland, or that, despite that, there is still a lot more to do.

As the committee convener said, the committee has focused on three separate strands of inquiry: partnerships and outcomes, with a focus on single

outcome agreements and community planning partnerships; benchmarking and performance measurement in the public sector; and the contentious issue of developing new ways of delivering public services.

The committee's reports on the first two strands have been completed. I thank the committee clerks for their sage advice and assistance with those reports. I also thank the approximately 100 individuals and organisations that, to date, have given oral or written evidence to assist the committee in its endeavours.

To put the inquiry in context, it is important to stress that, from the outset, it was evident that, given the cost pressures and budget reductions, coupled with increasing demands on public services, public sector reform is necessary and inevitable.

From the evidence that was presented during strand 1 of the inquiry and the subsequent report, it was clear that community planning partnerships have been at best a "qualified success" and that their

"ambitions ... have not been fully realised",

despite the fact that they have been on a statutory footing for almost 10 years.

For instance, the committee heard from SOLACE that partners in the process are not sufficiently integrated and that community planning and actual policy making are being carried out separately, rather than collectively. Local authorities such as Falkirk Council were adamant that integrated community planning should not be seen as an end in itself or merely another box to be ticked.

The committee heard repeatedly that the greatest barrier to successful partnership working is cultural and that, as has been referred to, local government departments, organisations and individuals are unwilling to break out of their silo mentality to work together to deliver outcomes through the sharing of information, resources and ideas. Having listened to the cabinet secretary, I merely say to him that he should not underestimate the challenge that is involved in trying to address that issue.

John Swinney: I largely accept Margaret Mitchell's point that the challenges are mostly cultural and that we need to get people to work together effectively. However, I can assure her that the Government invests a tremendous amount of time, and has done so for a considerable time, in motivating and encouraging all public sector partners to live up to that way of working.

Margaret Mitchell: I am encouraged by that, but I must say that our experience to date is that the approach is not working.

The compelling evidence that community planning partnerships are not working came during three committee fact-finding visits—to Cumbernauld, Aberdeen and Govan—as part of the on-going third strand. During those visits, committee members heard from individuals in the community, some of whom are involved in the voluntary sector, that, despite the overwhelming evidence that it makes sense for those individuals and organisations to have a significant role in community planning and service delivery, they are more often than not dismissed from the process as merely "well-meaning amateurs".

Kevin Stewart: Will Margaret Mitchell give way?

Margaret Mitchell: No. I am sorry, but I say to the committee convener that I really must make some progress.

The reality is that the voluntary and third sectors have a wealth of skills and experience that they have gained from work in local communities and which would assist in improving service planning and delivery.

It was also pointed out that, unless their representatives learned the jargon when submitting applications for funding for tried and tested projects, voluntary and third sector organisations would have no prospect of being successful with their bids.

That brings me to the Auditor General for Scotland's comment to the effect that financial pressures, demographic changes and increased demand on public services mean that

"there is a growing consensus that significant change is needed in the design and delivery of public services".

Benchmarking, which the public sector must fully embrace for its benefits to be realised, is key to achieving the change and reform that are required. It is essential that not only sufficient but appropriate data be collected and compiled to allow for meaningful analysis and like-for-like comparisons.

The inquiry is important. It already recognises the relevance of the warning from Graeme Downie of the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts that we

"should beware of thinking that passing a bit of legislation that requires everyone to do community planning would be a magic bullet."—[*Official Report, Local Government and Regeneration Committee*, 28 March 2012; c 811.]

Instead, from the evidence gathered so far, it is evident that any future focus for service and policy designers must be on challenging and changing

the culture that surrounds partnership working and, crucially, on seeking to introduce a bottom-up, as opposed to top-down, approach to community empowerment and service delivery.

16:06

Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): The Scottish Government opened its submission to the Christie commission by stating:

"Effective and efficient public services are essential to our economic development and to our continuing prosperity."

Against a backdrop of Westminster cuts to Scotland's budget, public sector reform is critical, particularly where it applies to the vulnerable, the young, the elderly and the sick.

The moves towards reform are made against a backdrop of the austerity policies of the Westminster coalition Government. Those policies have been condemned from all angles and, most recently, have earned the first downgrade of the UK's credit rating since the 1970s. That might mean higher borrowing costs for the UK public service, which would have yet another impact on local government finance through external material funding and service procurement.

We are talking of all parts of the public service. One of the key objectives for which the Christie commission called was the establishment of better local delivery of public services and consultation on preventative spend—getting the biggest bang for our buck. However, there appear to be worrying examples of that not occurring.

South Ayrshire Council recently rejected a motion to discuss the huge cost implications of welfare reform in favour of laudable reviews of, for example, music tuition fees and the cost of libraries. In addition, last year, the council had an underspend of £3.5 million after provisions had been made, and it has been projected that, this year, it will have an underspend of £4 million in the revenue budget and £3 million in the capital budget.

When budgets are already under so much pressure, it is essential that available moneys be used effectively and efficiently. When so many people face draconian welfare cuts through the Westminster Government's policies, Scottish councils should be marshalling their resources and doing all that they can to abate the effects of those cuts.

In the face of squeezed budgets, the Scottish Government continues to introduce a more efficient public service across the service spectrum. Reducing duplication through effective shared services is a critical means of achieving that. Examples include the single police force, the

single fire service and reviews of information and communication technology systems capabilities.

The integration of health and social care is designed to continue to improve care services, making them much more customer sensitive and efficient and, thereby, challenging the cost base.

East Ayrshire Council, in its submission to the third strand of the Local Government and Regeneration Committee's inquiry, highlighted the need for

"a partnership approach to outcomes based planning and a move from reactive to preventative services."

Central to achieving a partnership approach will be effective links with training agencies, cohesive development of performance management systems and, above all, increased involvement of the innovative third sector, which is critical to the delivery of many preventative spend measures.

Local development plans should be part of a joined-up effort across the public sector to deliver local economic planning in terms of not just geography but best practice and efficiency. One way in which we can make a fundamental change is to ensure that there is consistency in the agreed targets and outcomes for not just local authority chief executives and senior officers but those in similar positions in the health service, the police, the fire service and so on. We need to move towards a system in which senior management pay is much more closely linked to responsibility and performance and the outcomes that are used to measure performance are much more transparent.

In a new Scotland, we should consider the continuation of reform. Change is a constant and we will need to continue to look at reforms. In Ayrshire, the three councils already co-operate on tourism, for example, and other sectors might benefit from a much more joined-up approach. To ensure that we deliver public services as efficiently as possible, we must not be afraid to look constructively at the service provision and structure of our local authorities and other sectors, and to consider further community empowerment. We should identify where changes can be made to ensure optimisation of economies of scale.

By reducing duplication across sectors and between the Scottish Government, non-governmental bodies, local authorities and communities, we can, notwithstanding budget constraints, continue to improve public services and protect the sick, the elderly, the young and the vulnerable. South Ayrshire Council's motto is "Ne'er forget the people." Presiding Officer, we will not.

16:12

Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab): As a member of the Local Government and Regeneration Committee, I have been involved in discussions about both the pace and the quality of public service reform in local authorities for some time. Our discussions and evidence-taking sessions illustrated some of the key issues that local authorities, stakeholders and communities face in seeking to achieve reform that makes way for a cost-efficient and, crucially, more effective way of providing key public services.

Now more than ever, it is clear that the reform and evolution of our public services are high on the political agenda as a means of achieving budget reductions and ensuring that efficiency savings are made. Although that may be an unavoidable reality for local authorities across Scotland, pursuing reform on the basis of cost savings alone is not a route to the delivery of high-quality services and will only lead to compromised decision making that fails to put communities and service users at the heart of the process.

Community involvement in the delivery of communities' own public services is vital, and I believe that it represents a co-operative model of decision making that should be replicated across Scotland's 32 local authorities. Those who are most affected by changes to service delivery should be at the heart of discussions about reform. That approach will lead to a better informed model of decision making that has the priorities of service users at its heart.

Community planning partnerships can prove to be an invaluable resource for local authorities in the development of public services and they often highlight the key challenges that are likely to be faced in periods of restructuring and re-evaluation of working practices. However, we learned from the evidence that the committee took and the communities that we visited that, too often, representatives on community planning partnerships illustrate only the perspective of the service that they represent. It is crucial that we open up the policy-making process to include a broader representation of our communities—particularly those that rely on services.

Of course, reform to achieve savings and reform to increase the quality of service are not always mutually exclusive. Evidence gathered from a number of local authorities, including North Lanarkshire Council and Orkney Islands Council, cites the emerging emphasis on partnership and shared working practices. In many cases, partnership working enables local authorities to provide services more efficiently while increasing collaboration and the avoidance of duplication. However, we must ensure that partnership working does not erode the rights of communities

to hold local authorities to account in relation to the services that they provide

Kevin Stewart: One of the early visits that the committee undertook was to West Lothian, where there was a huge amount of partnership between the council and other public bodies, including co-location and teams from various sectors working together. It seemed that the community was well represented in that partnership. Does Anne McTaggart agree that, although there are bad examples, there are also some extremely good examples?

Anne McTaggart: The example that Mr Stewart mentions was excellent.

The recent report by the Finance Committee on Scotland's changing demographics, which showed an increase in the number of people of pensionable age, illustrates the challenges that we face and highlights our responsibility to evolve our public services in a way that provides high-quality and efficient resourcing into the future.

The population of those aged 75 and over is projected to increase by 82 per cent between 2010 and 2035. That represents a set of obstacles that will demand new ways of working and a renewed commitment to engaging with service users in the development of local resources.

We know that local authorities have been hit hard by the Scottish Government, absorbing 50 per cent of all cuts in the recent budget. If we are to address the growing challenges that our population will face in the future, it is time to invest in local government and acknowledge the vital role that each of our 32 authorities plays in delivering services, protecting resources and ensuring a higher standard of living for some of the most vulnerable people in our communities.

16:17

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I want to focus on achieving efficiency in local government. For me, efficiency means delivering the best, most wide-reaching outcomes for the least use of available resources of all kinds. It is not simply a financial measure; it is about what the customers—the people in the area concerned—get from their council. Of course, efficiency has to be qualified by circumstance. Each council has a different circumstance. For example, the fact that school transport costs more per pupil in the Highlands than in Glasgow is not a measure of the relative efficiencies of the respective councils; clearly, it is an indication of the very different circumstances in which those councils find themselves.

During the committee's inquiry—I joined the committee, with others, in September—it has been

clear that councils are picking up on the greater freedom that they have been given since the Government, in 2007, removed almost all the ring fencing from the finance that they get. Previously, around 25 per cent of their finance was in nearly 200 separate streams of spending, in relation to which they had almost no discretion. The situation is quite different now, and different councils have responded in different ways. Councils also welcome the fact that their share of the overall budget that we in this Parliament get has risen under this Government. It is not as much money as we would wish to provide—there are ways in which we could provide more by changing the environment in which this Parliament operates, but that is not the core of today's debate.

One key point is that the committee has engaged with communities across Scotland, which I found interesting and challenging. We have had excellent examples of what councils could be doing and excellent examples of what they are doing. There are plenty of good ideas out there. However, there is perhaps one area—service sharing—in which we have seen less movement than we might like.

I will illustrate that deficit with reference to one of the two councils in my constituency. I represent part of Moray Council's area. Over a number of years, that Independent and Tory-led council has resisted the demands of SNP councillors to look at service sharing. The result is that the Independents and Tories are closing seven out of eight libraries in Moray, which is quite astonishing; they are removing all the arts funding, which is absolutely flabbergasting; and they are looking to remove headteachers from a significant number of posts, which really is avoidable. Let us cut overheads by looking at sharing; let us not cut front-line services that are valued by the people in Moray.

I have no particular evidence that there is such an egregious example anywhere else—there may or may not be. However, that leads me neatly to benchmarking, which gives us an opportunity to identify areas for improvement by looking at the achievements of others. I am delighted that COSLA has taken the initiative and established a cross-cutting benchmarking framework for our councils.

The evidence that the committee has received has highlighted to me and to others a degree of confusion and a number of fears about what that benchmarking might mean. Some elected members appear to see benchmarking simply as another way for external commentators and councillors to knock lumps out of councils. That is not an unreasonable fear for people to have. However, if that proves to be the key focus of benchmarking and the use of the data that are

made available as a result of its introduction, it will be a failed initiative.

Good benchmarking starts with normalisation—basically, standardising how the data come into the models—so that we can start to make valid comparisons between quite different circumstances. A council that feels that it has an opportunity for improvement in one policy area can then use the benchmarking model to find out which council it should be copying, and it will probably be copied in turn in some other policy area in which it is doing well.

We do not need to have all the data about every council's every bit of activity. In the benchmarking model, we need information about the best examples and we need to have enough information to be confident that they really are the best so that copying them is relevant and of value.

By the way, benchmarking is not just about comparing the councils in Scotland. We should be comparing ourselves with anywhere in the world—let us benchmark and see if we can copy good examples, because that is one key way to make progress. We can deliver a great deal to the public sector by benchmarking; business can learn from the public sector, but the public sector can also learn from business. We should make the approach as broad as possible.

16:24

Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate. Like Kevin Stewart, I quite enjoy getting into the guts of public service reform and how the systems work. Often in politics we deal with the top level and do not consider in detail how things work in practice, so I share his enthusiasm—my wife does not, but I certainly do.

Sarah Boyack made a very pertinent point at the beginning of the debate about the huge demographic and financial pressures that we face, all at the same time. Even if the spending levels that her party secured in its time in government were to be maintained, there would still be a massive gap between demand and the available finance. I know that many members in the chamber oppose the cuts at Westminster, but even if those cuts had not happened, there would still be an enormous challenge to overcome. If we want to maintain the standards of services to which we have become accustomed, we are going to have to change the way that we supply those services.

That is why the Carnegie Trust's report "The Enabling State" was welcome. It looked at a different way for the state to conduct itself, by not always looking just to provide services but enabling others to provide services too, so that we

can build community capacity for the future and maintain high standards.

One of the biggest critics of the current Government's approach—and of previous Governments' approaches, too—is Vanguard Consulting. John Seddon—quite a controversial character whom I am sure many members have met—is very critical of the top-down approach of guidance, command and control, targets and the auditing regime, which stifles local innovation. I would like the committee to look at some of the work that Vanguard has done, because I would like to see it tested with some of the practitioners on the ground.

I have seen some of the evidence from Vanguard's videos and from the people who have followed its advice. There is quite compelling evidence on removing barriers between the back office and the front office; making sure that we have experts, no matter where the public come into contact with them; and driving out inefficiencies not on the basis of unit cost or a belief that only scale provides efficiency but by ensuring that the structure of the service is based on the user's needs. I have been quite attracted to some of Vanguard's work, so I would like the committee to look at it. If members can put up with John Seddon's criticisms, it is worth listening to what he has to say.

I am concerned about how far we are going to go with shared services. I accept that we need to deal with bed blocking and the integration of social care services and health services. However, how far do we go with dealing with the problems at the interface? Bed blocking is the issue just now, but if we get problems in community transport or housing in the future, will the answer be simply to enlarge the organisation to include them? We need to be careful about how much we believe that straightforward structural reorganisation to create bigger structures will necessarily deal with the problems. At some point, somebody from outside the organisation will have to interface with it.

Stewart Stevenson: There are many models. I just want to make the point that I do not see reform as being about creating bigger organisations; I see it as being about taking services from an outside organisation. If we do that, we are in with a chance.

Willie Rennie: With police and fire service reform, we have seen the belief that bigger organisations are somehow the way to get efficiency. To a certain extent, college regionalisation is part of that. Scale is not necessarily the answer. I think that Stewart Stevenson is making the point that we do not necessarily have to create bigger organisations in order to secure efficiency.

Simply focusing on unit cost, rather than the whole service, does not necessarily deliver the efficiencies and the improvements to service that we are trying to achieve.

I return to the central point that I made at the beginning of my speech. If community planning partnerships are the way to make sure that parts of the public sector or the voluntary sector exchange information, there have to be proper and equal partnerships between all the organisations involved. Voluntary organisations need to play a full part in CPPs. There will be good evidence of that in some parts of the country. Sometimes we have an obsession with how organisations should be structured, but a lot of this comes down to good local management and leadership. We should cherish and encourage such leadership, spread best practice and foster that approach to make sure that we value the quality of the training and the personnel involved in the delivery of services.

My plea is that we should look again at what Vanguard Consulting says and look again to ensure that we are not adopting a top-down, heavy approach and that we have a bottom-up, engaging approach that uses the talents of front-line staff. In that way, we can achieve efficiencies in services.

16:30

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): As I joined the Local Government and Regeneration Committee last September, when strand 2—on benchmarking and performance management—started, I will focus on benchmarking. I will then look at how we should keep an open mind on developing new ways of delivering public services. Finally, I will look at actions that the Scottish Government has taken. If I have time, I will touch on a couple of points that were raised last week, when the committee went to Glasgow.

I thank past and present committee members and the clerks, who have helped me—as a new committee member and one of the few not to have a background in local government—to understand a bit more the processes that go on in local government.

All parliamentarians and all politicians need to remember the purpose of public service delivery. The issue is not the structure but what our constituents require. Structures have been discussed today, but our constituents do not really care where services come from—they just want to know that the services will be delivered.

The inquiry highlighted the fact that benchmarking has many definitions. We need a standard definition on which everyone can agree and buy-in from the organisations—and their staff—that provide public services. If we do not

have that, no one will agree on what is to be measured or on what the measures mean, and the value of the process will be lost.

We have heard about the buy-in from COSLA, which is welcome. Like my committee colleagues, I look forward to the publication of the benchmarking report in the next few weeks.

The use of benchmarking should not result in identikit services; there should still be room for legitimate variations between councils that are based on their needs and preferences—Councillor Cook touched on that point in his evidence to the committee. We must balance the fear of the postcode lottery of services with the need to allow local democracy still to develop.

We must remember that benchmarking is not by itself the sole solution to improving public services, as Dr Grace pointed out in relation to strand 2. He said:

“Benchmarking is an arrow in the quiver of public services improvement”.

It is a tool among others to help to identify and improve public services.

We must keep an open mind in reforming public services. I was pleased that some initial responses for strand 3 came up with alternatives. It is too easy to develop a top-down model—I hope to touch on that later—that outlines key performance indicators, targets and even benchmarks, with the result that politicians, managers and organisations are chasing targets rather than meeting our service users’ needs.

One respondent to strand 3 highlighted the approach of systems thinking—of putting service users’ needs at the centre of any reform—which has appeared to succeed in a variety of Scottish organisations, including the City of Edinburgh Council and Glasgow Housing Association. That might be something that we should investigate further.

Reform should focus on delivering better public services for all and not simply on attempting to impose a one-size-fits-all approach. However, I do not suggest that benchmarking will impose such an approach; I do not believe that it will. I think that benchmarking will provide the opportunity for councils of similar sizes and with similar backgrounds to examine what is going on across the country and—I hope—to implement best practice.

The SNP Scottish Government has already taken significant steps in the reform of Scottish public services. Following the Christie commission, the Scottish Government moved towards a decisive shift to prevention; greater integration of public services locally, driven by better partnership, collaboration and effective local

delivery; greater investment in the people who deliver services, through enhanced workforce development and effective leadership; and a sharp focus on improving performance.

The Scottish Government is also committed to preventative spending in early years and for the elderly. Although a difficult choice, it represents a new approach to the delivery of some services. It is not only a better approach for Government that ensures that more people living in Scotland can achieve their full potential in life; it also offers better value for money for the taxpayer in the long term.

The use of change funds has supported public services in their decisive shift towards prevention. For instance, the short-term savings from investing in early years services and support from pre-birth to age five could be up to £37,400 a year per child in the most severe cases.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): You are in your last minute, Mr McMillan.

Stuart McMillan: We must judge the importance of services by the difference that they make to people’s lives. In delivering public service reform, we should be bold enough to allow room for innovation but have processes in place to clearly indicate successes or, at least, the direction of travel.

Kevin Stewart mentioned the SCVO submission that we received today, and I certainly agree with his comments on what the committee has heard about community engagement both in the past and going forward. I can assure the chamber that such engagement was one of the main issues that arose during last week’s Glasgow visit. Many community representatives felt that they are not listened to and that they are wasting their time. Our committee will continue to focus on that key issue in the strand 3 inquiry.

The Parliament and all public services must focus on the wider issue of public service reform. I believe that that is happening and I look forward to the continuation of the strand 3 inquiry.

16:36

John Pentland (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab): Although the Scottish Labour Party has always been committed to ensuring that we have

“the best obtainable system of popular administration and control”,

we do not back reform for the sake of it. Reform should be systematic, strategic and proactive; however, it seems that what we have is haphazard, strategy-light and reactive. I have noticed that people with local government backgrounds often have bright ideas about making

things better but, unfortunately, they are generally off the payroll before their ideas emerge.

Two years ago, the spending review outlined the public sector reform themes of partnership, prevention and performance that the Local Government and Regeneration Committee is now looking at. Although the cabinet secretary—who, unfortunately, is not in the chamber at the moment—gave a robust defence of the progress being made, the evidence that we have heard suggests that progress is slow. Is that because of the difficulties of maintaining tried and tested services in an era of austerity? If so, what capacity does that leave for improving accountability and participation, fulfilling social and environmental goals, and switching the emphasis of service provision to prevention?

The committee also heard about numerous problems. Initiatives are isolated and often occur as a reaction to events and circumstances such as budgetary pressures or legislative changes. Although in some cases the spur is better value, the pressure on budgets is clearly an obstacle to progress. Because the transition to preventative spending often requires short and medium-term funding and resources in order to make long-term gains, change is happening slowly and lacks consistency and coherence.

That is not entirely the fault of public sector bodies. The Scottish Government seems to prefer arm's-length arrangements, but that should not free it of responsibility when things are not happening or when cuts are making it hard for reforms to happen. If we are serious about promoting reform, it must be properly supported by a framework of resources, transitional funding and guidance.

Stuart McMillan: I am keen to hear Mr Pentland's proposals for the right model to take forward. Does he propose a top-down approach from the Scottish Government or does he advocate the current arrangements, in which local authorities, not the Scottish Government, have the power to decide on the issues of importance to them?

John Pentland: Reform should be collective. I will probably touch on that later.

We also need to address the long list of obstacles. For example, in benchmarking and monitoring, consistency is difficult, outcomes are hard to define and indicators can become objectives.

Reform is a long-term project, which needs a long lead-in time and long-term commitments, for example on workforce planning. It takes time to get partnership buy-in and build trust among central Government, local government and stakeholders. Because the timescale extends

beyond the electoral cycle, effective reform needs political consensus if it is to be implemented and embedded.

That is all the more reason for having a well-thought-out strategy that has been developed in partnership with and applied consistently throughout the public sector, by which I mean not just local government but the national health service and other public bodies. The strategy must work across the Scottish Government, too.

Community planning partnerships should be part of the solution but they appear to be part of the problem. We heard that there is a lack of clarity about the roles, responsibilities and accountability of the people who are involved. There have been complaints about top-down, tokenistic and tick-box approaches, a lack of transparency and a silo mentality.

Kevin Stewart: Mr Pentland is being a bit inconsistent. He said that he wanted systematic change, which I think would stymie the innovation that Mr Rennie talked about. A key point is that there must be freedom to allow best practice to be developed. Will Mr Pentland go into more depth about what he means by a systematic approach?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You are in your last minute, Mr Pentland.

John Pentland: I am in my last minute, but I will say that best practice must be shared among everyone and not just the people who are in a position to take a top-down approach.

Few examples and little data were provided to the committee. What was provided contained only limited reference to the Christie commission. It is difficult to say whether that was because the examples are not there or because examples are not being reported.

Good examples included community-based housing associations, the West Lothian CPP hub and projects in which £1 spent through a CPP could save a community £14 down the line. We heard about a community organisation that received £1,000 to create an allotment, which provided a year-long supply of vegetables for the community. We heard about a craft cafe, for which the social return was £8 for every £1 of investment.

It was suggested that empty public properties should be made available to community groups. As one of my committee colleagues asked, what contribution to regeneration is made by building new offices that lie empty?

Since I started writing this speech I have received an interesting document from COSLA that promotes its route map to reform, which is based on statutory duties, accountability, national

co-ordination and locally-integrated services. COSLA talks about using

“all the levers of reform—from public policy to legislation, from public finance to governance, in order to optimise the benefits that can be felt by our communities.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Pentland, you need to finish.

John Pentland: If COSLA thinks that Government needs statutory duties and legislation, to strengthen the approach, who are we to argue?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must close.

John Pentland: The Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government must deliver that, through a properly-resourced strategic approach.

16:43

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP): It is a well-known fact that 74 per cent of statistics are made up on the spot. Anne McTaggart said that 50 per cent of the Scottish Government's cuts are impacting on local authorities, which I am sure was news to her front-bench colleague Sarah Boyack, who has been telling us that the proportion is 83 per cent. That is perhaps proof positive that Labour's figures on local government funding are a wee bit made up.

I congratulate the committee on the work that it has done on the area, which is a key challenge for us. Public sector reform should be regarded as not just a challenge but an opportunity to revitalise the delivery of our public services.

On community engagement, I was struck that Graeme Downie from NESTA said:

“Communities can be seen simply as those to whom services are done. Ironically, if you engage them at the earliest possible stage of policy development, you always end up with the best outcome.”—[*Official Report, Local Government and Regeneration Committee*, 28 March 2012; c 814.]

That is certainly something that my colleague Kevin Stewart and I learned when we became part of the Aberdeen City Council administration. The way in which the council carried out its budget process did not take that engagement into account. In essence, figures were publicly available for two to three weeks in which there was a rush to find savings in order to make the budgets balance.

Kevin Stewart, who was the finance convener at the time, took the decision to move back the process and engage with communities at a much earlier stage. As such, communities felt that they were involved in the budget process rather than it simply being something that happened to them. The resulting benefits were not only that

communities felt more involved but that their suggestions often found their way into the council's budgets.

Community engagement is laudable, but it must also be tinged with realism. Communities will obviously want to have certain things, but those things cannot always be delivered. There must be a realism that communities cannot always get everything that they want out of a process. Most communities are realistic about that and they genuinely appreciate being consulted and having their views taken on board. Often, those views shape the policies and approaches that are taken.

Partnership working and the shared service agenda are not only about spending less money. A lot of the work has been driven by the financial constraints that are being felt across the public sector, but the agenda is pushing something that could realise greater opportunities for much more efficient working and better outcomes for communities. A reluctance—a silo or protectionist mentality—exists in some services that is acting as a barrier; there is also a lack of genuine discussion on some of the approaches that are being taken.

We have seen that happen in advance of the forthcoming health and social care agenda in Aberdeen. The local council proceeded with a local authority trading company for the provision of social care services. NHS Grampian has raised concerns about that and the impact that it could have on extracting the best possible outcome from the health and social care partnerships. The response from Labour Councillor Willie Young, Aberdeen City Council's finance chair, to NHS Grampian to “Get off our lawn” does not strike me as the most mature way to carry out discussions between public bodies about how they realise the best possible outcome for public sector reform.

I note that the committee unanimously supported the shift towards a preventative spending approach. Preventative spending, by definition, is about a transfer of resource. However, the transfer of resource in and of itself is not enough; we need a change of mindset and culture in our local authorities and public services about how they translate the shift in budget to a difference in how they deliver services on the front line.

It is depressing when we see local councils turning down opportunities. For example, the administration in Aberdeen rejected the opportunity offered by the SNP group as part of the budget process to invest significant sums in education and early intervention within regeneration communities in favour of proceeding with the pedestrianisation of Union Street, which is something that, frankly, nobody in Aberdeen has been calling for.

A lot of good work is being done. The committee certainly cannot be accused of not going out and looking for best practice and, when it finds it, reporting on it. We should build on that work where we can, but we also need to look at areas where there are blockages and work out what those blockages are. Far too often those blockages are about the mentality of the individuals involved, whether they are at the elected member or the senior officer level. Something needs to be done to instigate a culture shift in organisations to ensure that the people who need to take the decisions to move towards a much more cohesive agenda on public service integration are able to do so.

Money is often the driver for decisions but the fact that finances are tight and we are moving towards a preventative spend approach does not mean that that is a bad thing. There is a lot of opportunity as a result of the public sector reform agenda, and we must ensure that we capture it all.

16:49

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind):

The purpose of public services might be self-evident but, in case it is not, I note that their purpose is to serve the public, to discharge the statutory obligations of the local authority, and not to generate profit. Any reform should follow those principles.

I have seen at first hand the development of shared services in the Highlands, where Highland Council and NHS Highland have been involved in the integration of adult health and social care services and children's services. The benefits are clear. Willie Rennie mentioned delayed discharge, in which there has been a significant turnaround as a result of the development of shared services.

Some simple measures can help with that. Co-location is one of them. Golspie police station is a fine example—just about every badge is on the front door, and why not? We do not need to replicate support services. What people want are the services.

The cabinet secretary talked about the GIRFEC approach, which has certainly helped. More and more elements of the public sector are working together, although there is some way to go. We lose sight of the needs of citizens at our peril. An outcomes-based approach is a good way of addressing things.

Seeking economies of scale must not mean disregard for public sector workers' terms and conditions. It is important that we have a level playing field, whereby training, quality of work and sustainability are valued. Of course, best value does not mean the cheapest tender or the highest bid. I would be grateful if the minister could

confirm that in his summing up, not least for the benefit of the crofters of Raasay.

Many politicians in local government have welcomed job evaluation, equal pay and the living wage. Therefore, I consider it rank hypocrisy for the same politicians to outsource public sector work to people on the minimum wage and poor terms and conditions. We know that, when the profits in the care sector went, some care sector providers went, too. What did not go was the statutory obligation of local authorities, along with the NHS, to meet the assessed needs of the people concerned.

Benchmarking has been touched on. There are complications with benchmarking when it comes to some of the work that is undertaken by the private sector, particularly in rural areas.

There is a procurement bill coming. I hope that due regard will be paid to the work that is undertaken on behalf of the public, particularly in the context of things such as equality policies, health and safety policies, and apprenticeships, which others have mentioned.

When it comes to the delivery of public services, I am unequivocal. I like them to be delivered first and foremost by public servants and secondly by the voluntary sector or social enterprises. They come well ahead of the private sector, because of their link to democratic accountability.

We must learn from elsewhere—I am thinking, in particular, of the NHS in England. With the previous UK Government's foundation hospitals and the big spread of privatisation that is taking place at the moment, issues are arising to do with democratic accountability and freedom of information. Access to health board minutes is limited as they are being described as commercially confidential.

I suggest that we have a similar issue in Scotland with the arm's-length organisations. I am sorry that the recent Freedom of Information (Amendment) (Scotland) Bill did not go far enough. If ALEOs are about rates savings, where does the wider public sector financial perspective come in? How does that relate to the "benchmarking and performance measurement" that the motion refers to?

There has not been much discussion of funding. A number of people feel that the council tax should be reviewed. I favour a local income tax; I do not favour the corporation tax approach. There needs to be continuing discussion between local government and the Scottish Government. The concordat has given us the framework for that to happen.

I mention funding against the background of growing demands and demographic change, to

which a number of members have referred. If we want the same level of service from a reducing pot, that suggests that the revenue will have to come from somewhere.

Kevin Stewart: Does Mr Finnie agree that the change funds that have been put in place have often helped with the sharing of services, which reduces costs but maintains quality of service?

John Finnie: I think that they provide an opportunity for that. Today, I heard about the £10 million reducing reoffending fund. That offers an opportunity for the public sector to get things right—local authorities with housing, the UK Government with employment issues, and the health service with addiction issues. If I noted what Kevin Stewart said earlier correctly, the use of total resources and co-ordination are key to that.

Not all communities are the same, even if they have similar needs. As I understand it, the evidence that the committee received from three councils in my area highlighted the significant impact that cuts to public service can have on rural communities. That does not mean that there are not innovative ways of addressing that.

I ask that rurality and supersparsity constantly be taken account of. The Scottish Government and NHS Highland are doing important work with the community in West Ardnamurchan, looking at ways of delivering healthcare in remote and rural communities. Supersparsity is a challenging issue in the delivery of social care in north-west Sutherland, which cannot be done on the same per capita basis.

I commend shared services and the involvement of trade unions and staff associations in discussing them, because it is important that we take people with us along the way. I think that the public value public service and public servants, and we should reflect that in all decisions that we take on public service reform.

16:55

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I welcome the debate and say at the outset that I agree with John Pentland that we should not have reform for reform's sake. However, ensuring that public services work effectively and achieve their purpose for the people that they serve will always be important. Mark McDonald's point that public services reform can be seen as an opportunity was well made. When the public purse is being tightened, as the UK Government is doing now, it is even more important to ensure that services work effectively. In that regard, it is essential to consider how public services can be reformed.

I congratulate the Local Government and Regeneration Committee on its work on public services reform. I confess that I have not been following it intimately, but I was delighted that the committee visited Cumbernauld, which is always to be encouraged—everyone should come to Cumbernauld. The visit was more about regeneration than public services reform per se, but I was at the event that the committee held in Cumbernauld. The local organisations that attended gave good feedback on it and I believe that some of what was said can inform the committee's work on public services reform.

The committee has been working on public services reform on a comprehensive basis over a significant period of time, which means that it has considered the issue in depth, which is welcome. It is also welcome to hear the convener say that communities and the third sector will be involved in the committee's on-going work on the issue, which is as it should be, because they are of course the people who use public services. Indeed, third-sector organisations sometimes deliver public services.

We should reflect that work to reform public services is already under way. The Christie commission, which was established by the Government in 2010, has been referred to in that regard, and its report had a number of key objectives for public sector reform. It will be interesting to see how the Local Government and Regeneration Committee can play a role in assessing how those priorities are taken forward. However, as the cabinet secretary said, the Scottish Government has responded to the Christie commission recommendations. It is therefore clear that public services reform is being looked at across the board, which is the way to do it.

We have also seen some focus on preventative spend, an important aspect of public service reform as set out by the Christie commission. As a member of the Finance Committee, I think that that is an important area to focus on, given that the Christie commission recommended a shift to preventative spend. We have seen the Scottish Government do that to a degree. It is important to move towards preventative spend for two reasons: first, as was said earlier, we are in straitened financial times; and, secondly, it is far better for any individual who has a public service delivered to them to have an earlier intervention, which might lead to a better outcome for them and allow them to lead a happier and more productive life without needing a more serious intervention further down the line that might cost the public purse rather more.

We have seen the creation of the three change funds, which have been referred to. I very much

welcome the establishment of those important steps towards preventative spend. The Finance Committee will continue to scrutinise preventative spend, as it did in the recent budget scrutiny, reflecting the importance being placed on the matter. The Finance Committee's inquiry into demographic change and the ageing population also placed a priority on preventative spend.

The public sector has to face up to the challenge of preventative spend; it is a social and fiscal priority. Indeed, we are seeing the Scottish Government respond to that challenge. It will be interesting to see how the Local Government and Regeneration Committee continues to look at that area. Mark McDonald referred to the committee's acceptance of the need for preventative spend.

The public sector set out the challenge of the cut to the Scottish block grant, but that is not the only challenge that is out there. I am the deputy convener of the Parliament's Welfare Reform Committee, on which I serve with Kevin Stewart. We regularly see evidence of the effect of welfare changes on not only the individual, but public services. It is little wonder that SCVO said:

"Welfare changes and reform may well prove to be a tipping point for current public services."

The bedroom tax and the change to the payment of benefits to individuals rather than landlords pose a huge challenge to registered social landlords. The duress that work capability assessments cause individuals can add to the pressure on our NHS. The confusion that has been caused by the litany of changes to the welfare system will inevitably lead to increased demand for local advice services.

Welfare reform is making a huge impact on the public sector. It will be interesting to see how public services reform can step up to that challenge, which I am sure is not beyond it. I look forward to the committee reflecting on that as it takes its work forward.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now turn to closing speeches. I am afraid that we are tight for time.

17:01

Gavin Brown (Lothian) (Con): The Local Government and Regeneration Committee should be given credit for launching this necessary inquiry. It is necessary for the reasons that the cabinet secretary outlined in his speech. We face financial challenges, particularly in the short to medium term and, far bigger than that, we have demand challenges currently and demand challenges that, due to demographics, will last for decades.

It is worth pointing out that the committee has taken the correct approach thus far—I think so, anyway. It has taken its time to examine the issues deeply. For the first time, I have seen a committee, over the course of what will ultimately be a year and a half, examine three specific strands to try to reach conclusions that might be long lasting.

It is also worth mentioning that the committee's approach of trying to look at communities' experience on the ground is wise. Sarah Boyack said that the experience on the ground matters most and my colleague Margaret Mitchell spoke about visits to Cumbernauld, Glasgow and Aberdeen. The committee has taken the correct approach and no doubt there will be other meetings as strand 3 continues.

I have looked through the summary of written submissions to strand 3 and it is worth teasing out a number of them. The first question, which appeared to get the greatest number of responses, was on alternative delivery methods. In the summary of submissions there appears to be something of a shopping list of examples where "it worked" and a list of examples where "it did not work".

With that information and the evidence from future meetings, the committee must look at what the precise outcomes were in each of those cases. What were the identifiable savings if, indeed, there were any? Can those outcomes and savings clearly be linked to the new delivery method that was implemented?

Stewart Stevenson: Will the member take a short intervention?

Gavin Brown: In a moment.

It is what Willie Rennie described as "getting into the guts of public service reform."

Stewart Stevenson: Does Gavin Brown agree that we should be bold enough to try some things that ultimately do not work and be prepared to learn from them, and not be afraid of that?

Gavin Brown: I agree with Stewart Stevenson.

A similar comment was well made by Robert Black when he gave evidence to the committee a few weeks ago. He said that we must pilot more frequently and look at the evidence that comes from those pilots, even if it takes time before we gather any evidence. There is, of course, always pressure on all parties and Governments to get results quickly—to get them yesterday—but, particularly in some of the areas that we are looking at, results simply do not come quickly. Mr Black made that point far more eloquently than I just did. I concur with Stewart Stevenson in that regard.

As I was saying, the committee must get to the guts of the issue. Having worked out whether or not there were savings, it must try to ascertain why some initiatives worked as planned and others did not, and whether there are lessons of wider value that we can get from the committee's analysis, as opposed to merely a commentary on the position on the ground.

The second question that is covered in the summary of written submissions is:

"How are opportunities for sharing services being identified?"

The analysis was that there were "limited" responses to that question, which tells its own story. I was taken by a quote in that section from Scott-Moncrieff, which stated:

"Opportunities for sharing services are being identified on an ad-hoc basis. A co-ordinated approach is not always taking place within a local authority or health board."

An ad hoc approach is not likely to get the results that we all want. Once it has looked through all the evidence, the committee must draw conclusions on how we can improve on that. It is far better to consider the sharing of services and rule it out than simply to say, "We haven't looked at it at all."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You are in your final minute.

Gavin Brown: The third sector probably merits a mention. I read the SCVO's response, and I probably would not be as harsh on it as Mr Stewart was. It raised important points about single-year funding—that issue comes up regularly—and about looking at organisations as partners in the design and commissioning of services instead of being merely a part of the supply chain.

Kevin Stewart: Will the member give way?

Gavin Brown: I have only 28 seconds, so I am afraid that I am unable to do so on this occasion.

I would like to see bold recommendations from the committee. From listening to the opening salvos this afternoon, I think that, as members of all parties have said, the situation on the ground is not quite as rosy as the Government might think it is. Looking at that might be a good starting point.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that there are strict guidelines on the use of electronic equipment in the chamber.

17:08

Sarah Boyack: In evidence to the committee it was said that the key things that are needed to help to deliver change, given the huge obstacles that we have all talked about and danced around—the figures that I have used are from the

Scottish Parliament information centre and the Scottish Government—are shared vision, strategic leadership and sharing best practice and expertise in a transparent way. Those things probably strike a chord with us all, across the parties, but the issue is delivering on those things. They sound self-evident, but different parts of the public sector will have different priorities and may not share a vision. Local authorities will have not just different political leaderships, but different types of areas to serve, and that will of necessity give a different flavour.

Stewart Stevenson and John Finnie made points about extreme rurality. It must be acknowledged at the outset that the perspective in such areas is very different from an inner-city perspective. That does not mean that we cannot have shared overall ambitions, but it will obviously lead to different types of service delivery.

Strategic leadership is key. John Pentland used a striking phrase. He talked about haphazard strategy that is light and reactive. I can think of quite a few circumstances in different organisations in which that would be true. How can strategic leadership be built when there are reasonably regular changes in political leadership and also different leaderships as a result of senior members of staff moving on? There has been quite a significant churn in leadership. Building a shared vision and strategic leadership that is not short term is therefore not as straightforward as we might think.

Sharing best practice and expertise is an issue that the committee could usefully look at in strand 3, given that quite a few of the witnesses highlighted the need to ensure that benchmarking compares similar circumstances or like with like. That does not mean that there might not be wider lessons from different circumstances that might also be worth exploring.

One reason why the shared services agenda is so difficult when it comes to doing things in a transparent way is that there are different reporting mechanisms, political demands and desires about timetabling. That point needs to be factored in. The perspective of local government is different from—

Kevin Stewart: Will Ms Boyack give way?

Sarah Boyack: No, let me develop this point.

The perspective of local government is bound to be different from that of central Government agencies, but it is also different from that of the third sector. Different agendas are brought to the table, and that just needs to be factored in when thinking about transparency.

As a few members have mentioned, the key issue is what our services are for, so a focus on

why we have collective service provision must be what drives change. The Christie commission principles are extremely useful in identifying the pursuit of social justice as a key goal of government, regardless of which party is in charge or what level of government we are talking about. Preventative spend is justified where it challenges deep-rooted inequalities and poverty and the crushing of ambition that scars far too many of our communities.

We also need to focus on the long-term intergenerational challenges. To address those, many of the policy solutions need to be in place now—tackling the long-term intergenerational stuff is about the decisions that we make now. To draw an analogy with tackling climate change, we could focus on 2020, but it is what we do now that will help us to deliver in 2020.

Willie Rennie chastised me for focusing on cuts, although they are the reality. However, the point that I was making is that the cuts make things harder. When I talk to local government staff members who are not at the top level, they tell me that the reality is one of chasing the agendas in a context of transitional funding in which they are trying to deal with things from year to year. There are real challenges in terms of getting the right outcomes. We need service delivery that not only provides the service now but is potentially transformational in the process of providing that service. That needs people to buy in at different levels.

A key point that I want to emphasise for strand 3 is the need to think about how we build social capacity in communities, whether that is through training, economic activity or using the debate around community planning partnerships to deliver wider community benefits from the investment that goes into services. That is a really important area.

We need to take a really hard look at the different options for new ways to deliver services, including the whole issue of putting services out to tender. We need to compare that with co-ops, with service-level agreements and with the commissioning of services. That is the issue that I think the SCVO was trying to tease out, but it is as big an issue for local authorities and other public sector organisations as it is for the third sector. We need to try to pin down the mix of benefits to individuals and community benefit—those two things need to be discussed in parallel.

Finally, I think that North Lanarkshire Council made a really good statement of principle:

“Services should be built around people and not the agencies responsible for delivering them. A thorough understanding of residents and service users, needs and expectations is essential in designing cost-effective services.”

That is a very good starting point for strand 3—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Sorry, I must ask you to finish.

Sarah Boyack: That would let the committee pick up issues to do with co-location, the trade-off between efficiency and effectiveness and the use of different service providers. That would be a good point to look at in strand 3.

17:14

The Minister for Local Government and Planning (Derek Mackay): This has been a very helpful debate on public sector reform. Of course, the debate is characterised by the Government's response to the Christie commission, which was very informative and has led to the four pillars of reform—prevention, integration, workforce or people and improved performance—in the challenging environment that many members have mentioned.

I will focus immediately on community planning partnerships. The theory is that they bring together all the public sector partners and in some cases the private sector. I believe that the third sector is involved in every community planning partnership, and it certainly should be at every one. The partners should focus jointly on the needs of a community, with a focus on place. They should look at the data, build the evidence, consider which joint approaches will work in the community, listen to local aspirations and then deliver jointly on the ground. That is the way that it works in theory. Our guidance, which was issued as recently as last December, makes abundantly clear that that is what community planning partnerships should do. It is based on a statement of ambition about how public sector partners will bring their resources and input to the table.

I will not deal with the issue just as a paper exercise. The cabinet secretary has tasked me with ensuring that things are happening on the ground. Since my appointment, I have been visiting local community planning partnerships across the country. Kevin Stewart is right that there is a range of performance in the partnerships and that the situation is variable, but a great deal of good work is going on, and I could list many examples.

For a number of reasons, I am convinced that further progress will be made on public sector reform and community planning partnerships. The Government has succeeded in decluttering the public sector by way of streamlining and simplification. We have reduced the number of public bodies from 199 to 144, with a trajectory that will take us to 112. However, the issue is not just about structures.

Stewart Stevenson: I absolutely share the aspirations and I hear what the minister says about community planning partnerships. The committee's difficulty is that we meet community activists who are on the front line and few of them even know of the existence of the partnerships. I am sure that the partnerships are doing good work, but there are opportunities for further connections that would be of mutual benefit.

Derek Mackay: I agree with the member, but that point was adequately answered by Stuart McMillan, who said that what matters is that the outcomes are robust and that people receive quality services. I do not want to be patronising, but the public do not necessarily need to understand the wiring board of public services—that is our job—as long as they get the outcomes that they deserve, resources are used efficiently and effectively and the decisions that community planning partnerships make involve proper engagement.

Margaret Mitchell: Will the minister give way?

Derek Mackay: I will continue, because I am halfway through my time and I have not made nearly enough progress.

There is an expectation that local communities will be part of the community planning process. We were asked what the proposed community empowerment and renewal bill will bring to the table. That bill will be an exciting, radical and bold opportunity to ensure that communities can take ownership of local facilities and assets and have greater participation in and engagement with decisions. Of course, we do not need a bill for public authorities to act in that spirit right now and to harness the untapped potential.

The SOA guidance has been issued. The cabinet secretary is right that any barriers that have been identified might be a figment of some people's imagination. People assume that there are bureaucratic barriers to joint working but, when exposed, they are not barriers at all. We have provided clarity to our key agencies on working together through community planning partnerships.

There are three reasons why I think that we will make further progress. First, the duty on community planning partnerships will be extended beyond local government to all public sector partners. Secondly, the national group will deliver much of the evidence on what we know works and share that knowledge between and within community planning partnerships. We will not take a complacent approach to community planning partnerships, which is why the Accounts Commission for Scotland has been charged with inspecting them. That raises the bar and the expectations of what they can deliver.

Structural change is on-going through health and social care partnerships to ensure that the resources follow the person in need. Police and fire restructuring will ensure that the resources stay at the front line. Personalised care will give more control to individuals. Digital services will ensure that our public service is responsive to need.

The Auditor General has made it clear that public sector partners can work across boundaries to meet the aspirations. It is easy, I suppose, to provide a critique of some of the less well performing community planning partnerships and I am interested in the committee's deliberations on the measures that the Government can continue to take to support the partnerships. However, there is some excellent work, such as the early years collaborative, which focuses on preventative spend. For the first time, we will ask—demand, if you will—of community planning partnerships what the local challenges and solutions for prevention plans are and what public sector partners are doing locally to tackle demand pressures on the system.

That, of course, is helped by the change funds, which have delivered more than £500 million over the spending review period to ensure that they act as a catalyst for integration, joint working and prevention.

Sarah Boyack's and John Pentland's speeches exhibited a lack of understanding of outcome-focused public services, because they immediately focused on the inputs and had the audacity to criticise the Government's budget settlement, which has protected health proportionately, protected local government and delivered £500 million towards preventative spending, which will ensure change throughout the country. If the Labour Party had had its way, there would not even have been new money from the public health supplement.

Across a range of areas, those interventions will make a difference. There are many great examples that we will want to mainstream: for example, integrated services in Highland, diversionary youth schemes in Renfrewshire and homelessness projects in North Ayrshire. I could go on with the great examples.

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): But your time is up.

Derek Mackay: We will mainstream that good work and build it into community planning throughout the country.

The Presiding Officer: I call John Wilson to wind up the debate. Mr Wilson, it would be helpful if you could go till 5.30.

17:21

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I thank all the members who contributed to the debate. For the committee, it is useful to hear from others who are not engaged in its week-to-week discussion or the investigations that it carries out.

The committee is in a fortunate position in that, as was mentioned earlier, five of its seven members have served as local councillors and so bring collective experience not only of how local government works but of how community planning partnerships work at a local level. We have heard examples of that from members who have participated in the debate.

We must ensure that the committee brings to the inquiry the experiences not only of people who have sat on local authorities but of the others who have contributed to the debate either through the committee's fact-finding visits or the submissions that a number of people have made as we have considered the issues through all three strands of the inquiry.

Unfortunately, like two other members of the committee, I joined the committee only last September, so I missed the strand 1 deliberations, but I am sure that I have helped by contributing to the strand 3 discussions.

In his opening speech, the convener tried to set out what strands 1 and 2 tried to achieve. In strand 2, we considered benchmarking and related issues.

Benchmarking is clearly important. A number of members mentioned it in their speeches. Local authorities have accepted that it is needed. The committee has heard evidence that local authorities will set out 48 strands and that—by the end of next month, we hope—they will report on the reporting mechanisms that they have worked out for them.

We hope that, for the first time, that will give us a consistent approach to the gathering and delivery of information. Too often in the past, local authorities delivered figures that did not compare with those of other local authorities. This time, we will have a set of figures and data that we will be able to compare across local authorities.

That data will also take on board the issues that John Swinney and others mentioned about the delivery of services in rural authorities versus in urban authorities. COSLA and others are considering how we set the families of local authorities so that we can measure performance accurately across the services that each local authority provides.

The committee was also fortunate to take evidence from Sir John Arbuthnott and Robert Black. That was quite enlightening, because we

heard Sir John Arbuthnott's deliberations on the Clyde valley review that he carried out. We saw the local authorities in that area being brought together to try to get some joint service delivery. However, we have heard—I have made this point in committee—that the eight local authorities have developed a pick-and-mix approach to joint service delivery, with some authorities taking issues on board and others leaving them to one side.

North Lanarkshire Council's submission mentions social care services, social transport and other initiatives that it is looking at with other local authorities in the Clyde valley. It also mentions national schemes such as Scotland Excel and myjobscotland. Those initiatives are taking place across the board and they are part of the public sector reform that is taking place.

Given that John Pentland knows North Lanarkshire quite well, I was surprised by his comments about the Scottish Government setting up all these arm's-length external organisations. We know that North Lanarkshire Council is about to set up another ALEO and transfer out services against the wishes of the public in many respects. As politicians, we have to be wary about what we pick on, because there are areas in which local elected members are involved in transferring services because they see that as the best way forward.

The feedback from communities on community planning partnerships has not always been good. Agencies and local authorities say that the process is working, but to many people it is a tick-box exercise, or a rubber-stamping exercise. We have heard about that from communities. I am talking about people at the grass roots, not the third sector or what are in many respects the senior voluntary sector organisations. We have had views fed to us from local community activists who are delivering services on the ground, such as the tea in the pot project in Govan, which we heard from when we visited Glasgow last week. For a small amount—less than £10,000—it is delivering key services to women in the Govan area. We need to consider how local voluntary organisations that deliver key services to local communities are being treated within the community planning process and how they engage in the delivery of services.

The minister is right. The issue is about engaging with communities and about communities understanding the budgetary constraints, but the reality is that many of the community activists who are delivering key services are excluded from the discussions and the debate about how the bigger budget is divided up. I am sure that the committee will welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to ensure that

the public sector agencies work more closely together to ensure that delivery is consistent across the board.

As I said, the committee heard Sir John Arbuthnott and Robert Black set the scene in the lead-up to strand 3 of the inquiry. However, we must remember that public sector reform is not only being discussed in the Parliament. We read various academics' views on public sector reform in the Sunday newspapers, and that adds to the debate on where as a country we are going on the delivery of services by local government and on tying in all the other agencies that are out there. We heard examples today of joint healthcare projects and joint procurement by local authorities and health boards. We need to examine such services and consider whether they are delivering on behalf of communities, as they claim to be.

As I said earlier, it is unfortunate that although some of the agencies and senior staff who are involved think that they are delivering the best possible service, the reality is different. As many MSPs will know from their surgeries, questions are being asked about how such services are delivered on the ground and how communities can engage in delivering better services.

The committee heard a lot of evidence from organisations about where they are going. There is still a lot of work to be done by the committee, but I hope that it will report before the end of June. We will bring that report to the chamber and I hope that the Parliament will accept the work that has been done by the committee and the clerks and the people who have provided written and oral evidence. I hope that we will pull together something that the Scottish Government can take on board and that will address the concerns and issues that have been raised by the general public. I look forward to the Scottish Government engaging openly with the committee to ensure that we get it right for everybody in Scotland.

Decision Time

17:30

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that motion S4M-05699, in the name of Hanzala Malik, on the European and External Relations Committee's report on the European Union priorities of the committees of the Scottish Parliament, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the European and External Relations Committee's 1st Report, 2013 (Session 4): *The EU priorities of the Committees of the Scottish Parliament* (SP Paper 271).

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-05612, in the name of Kevin Stewart, on the Local Government and Regeneration Committee's inquiry into public services reform and developing new ways of delivering services, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the importance of the work of the Local Government and Regeneration Committee in its inquiry into public services reform; welcomes its examination, at strand 3 of the inquiry, of progress being made in relation to the development of shared services, other innovative ways of achieving economies of scale and harnessing the strengths and skills of key public sector partners to deliver the best possible quality services in local areas, and notes that the committee's work is designed to build on its earlier inquiry reports, at strand 1, into partnerships and outcomes and, at strand 2, into progress on benchmarking and performance measurement.

Fife Gingerbread (Support for Lone Parents)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):

The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S4M-04590, in the name of David Torrance, on congratulating Fife Gingerbread on its 25th anniversary. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament congratulates Fife Gingerbread on its 25th anniversary; understands that the group supports lone parents in Fife and acknowledges what it sees as the invaluable work that it carries out in the community by offering advice, representation and emotional and practical support; understands that Fife Gingerbread has developed many successful partnerships with other community organisations; considers that the charity does valuable work and that this could not be carried out without the help of the wonderful volunteers and buddies who give up their time to make a contribution to people who are in need; commends what it believes is the high-quality service provided by the organisation over the past 25 years, and wishes it all the best for the future.

17:32

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I welcome to Parliament staff and volunteer members of Fife Gingerbread. It was a pleasure to attend Fife Gingerbread's 25th anniversary celebrations, and a privilege to be a guest speaker at the launch of the think big, dream big project that was recently held in Glenrothes. One of the highlights of the day was the presentations, which were delivered with enthusiasm and skill by lone parents, many of whom are in Parliament today.

Fife Gingerbread is a voluntary sector organisation for lone parents from all over Fife. Its remit, which has remained constant over the years, is to provide accessible, approachable and non-judgmental support, as well as advice and information, to all lone parents. It provides services to people from varying backgrounds and walks of life, with children of all ages.

Fife Gingerbread offers a variety of services, including advice and information; one-to-one support; support through local groups; advocacy and representation; family activities and events; volunteering opportunities; and teen parent support. The services that are offered are invaluable, as lone parents, who constitute some of most vulnerable members of society, find themselves facing new challenges and increasing stress and worry because of the potential loss of income following the recent welfare reform changes.

Figures show that, in Fife, there are 10,500 lone parents, with a median age of 36, 66 per cent of whom live on an income of less £15,000 a year. A

report by One Parent Families Scotland indicates that many lone parents lack confidence, have low self-esteem and lack social, educational and vocational skills. They are often left trapped in social isolation, stuck on benefits and struggling with debt and poverty. That is why the work that Fife Gingerbread is engaged in across local communities is both invaluable and important.

Fife Gingerbread, with its 10 staff and 22 volunteers, is the only organisation of its kind in Fife and rightly prides itself on being open, inclusive, approachable and friendly. It maintains excellent links through its work with a wide range of local, voluntary and statutory services to identify and engage with lone parents in order to make accessible and provide the best services available.

Many of the projects that Fife Gingerbread offers, such as aspire—a nine-week course that the organisation designed to increase the knowledge, skills and confidence of lone parents—are backed up by other agencies, which provides lone parents with access to a broad spectrum of help in many fields, catering for such aspects as budgeting, relationships and learning how to stay healthy and safe in a fun and supportive way.

Fife Gingerbread also offers other services in the form of advice, information, support and advocacy. Its buddy project, which aims to match hand-picked lone-parent volunteers with parents who need practical and emotional support, is a huge success. What struck me most, having spoken with many of the volunteers from the buddy project, was the passion and pride that they exhibited when discussing the work that they were doing with lone parents—that is a great credit to them. Some 82 buddies have now been involved in the project, with around 23 now in employment and 27 at college or university. A further 14 are volunteering in the community, and 19 continue to volunteer with Fife Gingerbread.

I have had a particular interest in the teen parent project since its inception, due to the fact that my constituency has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in Europe. The pilot of the project took place in Leven and proved very successful, which led to the project being launched in Kirkcaldy in 2011. The project's main aim is to identify specific issues affecting young parents that impact on them and their parenting skills. It provides one-to-one support to teenage parents in conjunction with group work and peer support. The project addresses many of the issues that are faced by teenage parents, such as isolation, post-natal depression, and mental health and relationship problems, thus enabling them to try to overcome the difficulties and challenges that they face in order to do the best that they can for their children.

The ability to identify and understand the support needs of teen parents has ensured the success of the project from the time of its first referral in January 2012. It now works with more than 50 families in the Kirkcaldy area, with the main emphasis being on working in partnership with such groups as the YWCA, Barnardo's, Mellow Parenting and the Cottage Family Centre in Kirkcaldy. That partnership working has helped to contribute to the project's success. I will quote a teen parent who is involved in the project to highlight how important the work is:

"I was terrified when I found out I was having a baby and I felt quite alone. I am so glad I now have someone to talk to who can help me and who knows how I am feeling."

Since it began, the teen parent project has supported 341 parents and 316 children in the Levenmouth, Kirkcaldy and Glenrothes areas. Project outcomes include mothers showing increased confidence and self-esteem, better health and wellbeing and increased parenting and self-advocacy skills. Children show improved levels of physical, intellectual, emotional and social development and are engaged with more and wider-ranging services to help facilitate their health and wellbeing.

The gateway project, which is specifically aimed at vulnerable families, is currently running a pilot in a local primary school that focuses on early intervention and support for local families, the benefits and impact of which should become apparent in future years.

Recently, I was privileged to spend a Sunday morning in Kirkland high school, interacting with parents and children in a series of tasks and games, including around healthy eating. It was a delight to see families participating and bonding with one another while having a good time. I have no doubt that when that project is rolled out, it will prove a success. I found the whole experience most enjoyable, despite getting soundly beaten at football by a six-year-old boy.

I attended the recent launch in Glenrothes of the Poverty Alliance report "Surviving Poverty: The Impact of Lone Parenthood", and I congratulate Fife Gingerbread on working in partnership with the Poverty Alliance on that report. I bring the report to the attention of all MSPs in the chamber and I urge them to read its findings. I also thank the Fife Gingerbread community researchers for all the work that they put into the report and to Claire, Debbie, Lana, Kelly, Nicola, Lisa, Kerrie and Hazel for such an excellent presentation. Key issues for lone parents that are highlighted in the report include food costs, debt, employment opportunities, stress and isolation—issues that clearly reflect the challenges of balancing and managing life as a lone parent.

Fife Gingerbread offers many other services that I have not had time to mention but which are, nonetheless, as important in helping lone parents across Fife. I have no doubt that, through the dedication of the staff and volunteers, Fife Gingerbread will continue to highlight the issues facing lone parents throughout Fife and maintain the provision of an excellent and valuable service to lone parents and some of the most vulnerable families in society.

Having such a fantastic, flexible team with a proven model of success driving it forward, Fife Gingerbread will undoubtedly continue to adapt to ever-changing circumstances and deliver the best possible services to lone parents in Fife.

17:40

Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I should begin by declaring an interest, because I am a councillor on Fife Council, which provides funding to Fife Gingerbread.

I congratulate David Torrance on securing the debate. Fife Gingerbread is an organisation that is rooted in Fife communities, providing vital peer support for lone parents. I am pleased to have the chance today to speak about that work.

Anyone who has raised children, let alone raised them single-handedly, will know that it is hard work. Apart from the day-to-day joy of scraping food off the walls and kissing goodbye to one's bed, the relentless responsibility, worry and sheer exhaustion one experiences can take their toll. Not only do lone parents have to deal with all the challenges and worry by themselves, but they face additional multiple barriers around income, security and stigma.

Lone parents do tough and important work, and Fife Gingerbread does tough and important work to support them. Led by a hard-working and dedicated team, Gingerbread provides non-judgmental advice, information, encouragement and understanding to lone parents across Fife. Gingerbread also engages with all levels of Government on behalf of lone parents to make sure that their voices are heard.

Gingerbread does not tell lone parents what to do or what is wrong with them; it provides the support that lots of lone parents need to be able to meet the challenges that they face, to know that they are not alone and to recognise their own strengths.

Just over a week ago, I spoke at the Fife launch of research undertaken by Fife Gingerbread in partnership with the Poverty Alliance. Together, they have produced a report called "Surviving Poverty: The Impact of Lone Parenthood". The research is focused on the experiences of lone

parents living in rural Fife and was carried out by a team of community researchers who were themselves lone parents. The report tells us that although lone parents need our understanding, without the right actions, they and their children will continue to struggle.

We have to take action to mitigate the impacts of welfare reform. As I have said before in the chamber, the Scottish Government must use its powers in health, housing, childcare and education. To tackle child poverty, we need sustained investment in the early years, education services, extracurricular activities and informal educational experiences. We must also recognise that by helping parents, we help children.

Debt is an enormous worry for lone parents. Colleagues will be aware of the excellent work by Kezia Dugdale, through the debtbusters campaign, to raise awareness of the dangers of payday loans and strengthen the role of credit unions. I will be taking that work forward in Fife.

Making available affordable, flexible and good-quality childcare has to be at the top of the to-do list of any Government that is serious about tackling child poverty and removing barriers to work for lone parents.

The report also highlighted the importance of public transport. It is clear that the current system of bus services is failing these families badly. That is why we should support attempts to look at re-regulation of buses in Scotland.

We must also ensure that it pays to be in work, which is why I am a firm supporter of the roll-out of a Scottish living wage.

Fife Gingerbread is also at the heart of early years work in Fife.

I just could not miss this opportunity to make those voices heard here in the chamber. In such frightening and uncertain times for lone-parent families, it is critical that we continue to celebrate, support and, as policy makers, take forward the work of Fife Gingerbread.

17:43

Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): As the SNP member for the Mid Scotland and Fife region and a member of the Welfare Reform Bill Committee, I am very pleased indeed to have been called to speak in the debate. I congratulate my fellow Fife MSP David Torrance on securing this timely debate.

I extend my warmest congratulations to Fife Gingerbread on its 25th anniversary. What a credit to all those involved in setting up Fife Gingerbread 25 years ago and to all those who have, over the years, worked tirelessly to support its excellent

work. I commend the hard-working staff members and, importantly, all the volunteers who have given of their time and enthusiasm to make a real difference to the lives of lone-parent families.

As we have heard, Fife Gingerbread is a voluntary organisation that works with lone-parent families throughout Fife to provide practical help, support and information. It does that through traditional project models and through very innovative project models. I will return to that briefly in a moment, but it is important to highlight one of Fife Gingerbread's landmark achievements, which is the breaking down of the completely erroneous and misleading stereotype that lone parents are primarily teenagers and—if the more lurid tabloids are to be believed—that they are teenagers who became pregnant deliberately to get a council house and benefits. Nothing could be further from the truth.

In relation to the stereotyping that goes on when some people talk about lone-parent families, notwithstanding what my colleague David Torrance said about the incidence of teen pregnancy, we need simply to look at the study by One Parent Families Scotland, entitled "One Parent Families—A Profile", which was published in August 2009, to see that only 2 per cent of lone-parent mothers are teenagers.

The stereotype is not only entirely manufactured and insulting; it also fails to take account of the fact that many lone parents find themselves in that position as a result of relationship breakdown, bereavement or fleeing from the home because of domestic abuse. Understanding the nature of the issues that face lone parents is key. If we do not understand those issues, we cannot do our best to help them properly.

Fife Gingerbread is exemplary in that respect. Through its pioneering buddy project, to which David Torrance referred, it has shown what can be done to bring about step changes in lone-parent families' lives. The project's success is in its focus on the parent of the child or children, providing them with practical help and aiming to inspire individuals to have confidence to grow and develop.

Another excellent initiative is the provision of a dedicated student support worker, who helps people to address barriers to pursuing further education or training. I do not have time to describe all the many other excellent initiatives. What has struck me about Fife Gingerbread's success is the number of self-initiated referrals—the rate is 25 per cent—which testifies to the high regard in which Fife Gingerbread is rightly held.

A major cloud on the horizon is the looming United Kingdom Government welfare cuts, which are expected to have a significant negative impact

on lone-parent families, as on other vulnerable individuals across Scotland. I know that Fife Gingerbread will do what it can to provide support and clear information. However, the only way to secure the welfare system that we in Scotland want is to ensure that it is our Parliament here in Edinburgh, and not a Tory Government in London that the people of Scotland did not vote for, that controls welfare.

17:48

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I add my congratulations to David Torrance on securing this worthwhile members' business debate. Fife clearly owes the Gingerbread movement a huge amount for all that it does, so it is fitting to have this occasion in the Scottish Parliament to recognise the work, support and commitment of Gingerbread. It was good to see members of the Gingerbread movement attending committee meetings this morning.

David Torrance highlighted many examples of the support that Fife Gingerbread provides to many lone-parent families. Some of that happens in challenging situations, which are part of the backdrop to the support. However, Annabelle Ewing made a sensible point about the difficulties that relate to stereotyping.

We must bear it in mind that there is a wide variety of reasons why parents end up as lone parents, including divorce, separation, bereavement and a spouse being away in the armed forces. My mother was very grateful for the support that she had in our local community when my father died very early from an unexpected heart attack. We must be careful about the circumstances by which we judge anything.

Fife Gingerbread is a genuine example of how charities throughout the United Kingdom and Scotland can work as a network. From the establishment of the Fife Federation of Gingerbread in 1987 to the Fife Gingerbread organisation today, the guiding purpose has been not just to provide information to lone parents, but to ensure that they have someone to turn to—as David Torrance described movingly in his speech when quoting a young person who had found someone to speak to who turned their life around. That is very much needed and valued.

Notwithstanding what I have just said about categories of lone parents, the circumstances can be highly challenging, reflecting many of the difficulties of modern life, which has changed so much in the past 20 years. We must accept that many people who seek the support of Gingerbread's services are in difficult circumstances, whether through poverty or a very low income base, or because of substance abuse.

We must accept that that is a very real situation, which needs to be addressed. I note from the website that there are about 10,500 lone parents in Fife alone, so there is a clear need for Gingerbread's support.

When thinking about the debate, I was struck by a story that I was recently told in a constituency surgery about a couple who, sadly, had separated, and about the difficulties that the lone parent was having in paying the household bills, not because she was unable to do that, but because it was something that she had never had to do before. She very much appreciated the advice—albeit that it was basic advice—from somebody who had been through the same thing. The Gingerbread group has been highly successful in providing such support in Fife.

As a regional MSP for Mid Scotland and Fife and a member of the Education and Culture Committee, I have been very aware of much of the other support that has been given in linking up with other groups—including the student support worker that Fife Gingerbread can offer—that offer childcare and assisted benefits.

Fife Gingerbread is to be congratulated all round on the terrific effort that it has put in—not only in doing its own work, but in yielding that experience elsewhere.

17:52

Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP): With others, I congratulate David Torrance on bringing the debate to Parliament and commend him for highlighting the work of Fife Gingerbread. I add my congratulations to Fife Gingerbread on its quarter-century celebrations last year. It has given 25 years of invaluable service in supporting lone parents across Fife, and can be justly proud.

Fife Gingerbread's remit has remained the same throughout its history. It is there to provide accessible, approachable and non-judgmental support, advice and information to all lone parents with children of any age from all backgrounds and walks of life. Although there are times when individuals feel that they are alone, Fife Gingerbread is there to support them. No one can understand their situation better than the volunteers at Fife Gingerbread. It is a vital organisation for lone parents in Fife, and the level of support that it offers could not be achieved without the hard work of its staff and volunteers.

As Jayne Baxter and other members have mentioned, both the staff and the volunteers at the organisation have been working on "Surviving Poverty: The Impact of Lone Parenthood". That was a study of lone parents in rural communities in Fife in particular, including people in the Howe of Fife and around Cupar in my constituency. That

research forms part of the Poverty Alliance's evidence, participation and change project. The EPIC project aims to enable people with direct experience of poverty and social exclusion to have their voices heard in the policy-making process.

The research sought to explore and understand the quality of life in rural communities, and it included a project that involved 10 women as peer researchers, who conducted the fieldwork in September and October last year. Lone parents were contacted through a postal survey of 200 one-parent households, and eight in-depth one-to-one interviews were conducted to explore the issues that were raised in the survey. Both those approaches were carried out in conjunction with the peer researchers. The peer researchers were, largely, lone parents who are involved with Fife Gingerbread. They went through comprehensive research training, which not only improved their research skills but increased their confidence and ability to speak out on matters that are important to them.

A fundamental fact that comes across clearly in the report is that a lack of adequate income, whether through low pay or benefits, is the underlying cause of many problems that are faced by lone parents, who have the responsibility of being both breadwinner and carer. As Jayne Baxter and other members said, the report noted that rising costs of food and fuel, in particular, have had a significant impact on lone-parent families. The report also mentioned difficulties to do with debt and accessing mainstream credit, and noted that employment opportunities are difficult to find. An overwhelming feeling of social isolation is all too common a problem among lone parents.

It is likely that welfare reform will make the situation more acute. We need to ensure that we are doing all that we can at the Scottish level to help to alleviate the hardship that lone-parent families all too often face. We need a Government that is committed to mitigating the impact of unfair welfare reform. It is important that policy at local and national levels ensures that approaches that are taken to support lone parents take account of individual and family needs.

We need to ensure that policy makers are doing all that they can to engage effectively with service users. I encourage all members to read the report and to help to ensure that its recommendations are heard by all.

I wish Fife Gingerbread all the best for the future and I thank David Torrance for bringing this worthwhile debate to Parliament.

17:56

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab): I congratulate David Torrance on securing this important debate and I welcome to the gallery the representatives of Fife Gingerbread. I am not a member of the Scottish Parliament for Fife, but I have been aware of Gingerbread as a national organisation for a long time and I have a long-standing interest in support for lone-parent families. Because of that, I was interested to read about the activities of Fife Gingerbread, and like other members I am extremely impressed by the range of its activities.

I was pleased to hear Annabelle Ewing and Elizabeth Smith criticising the stereotyping of lone parents. I was particularly pleased to hear that from Elizabeth Smith, because I think that the first speech that I gave on lone parents was 20 years ago when, I am afraid to say, stereotyping of lone parents was raging in the party that she represents. I do not think that that is the case today, but we must recognise that the UK Government's welfare reforms will have an adverse effect on lone-parent families in particular. Children in lone-parent families are already twice as likely as children in two-parent families to be poor, and that is set to get worse.

An important part of the support for lone parents is the responsibility of Government. Jayne Baxter talked about the importance of affordable childcare; in general, financial support for lone parents should be top of the agenda. However, help for families with one parent goes beyond financial assistance. Emotional and practical support from groups that have an appropriate level of understanding and experience of the unique issues that lone parents and their children face is invaluable. Fife Gingerbread has provided such support for a quarter of a century and we cannot overstate the value of the service that it provides to hundreds of families, which highlights the importance of continued investment in a sustainable framework of support for all single-parent families.

I was particularly impressed by the buddy project, which has been mentioned. The scheme enables parents who have experience of being the sole provider to feed back into the Gingerbread project and to support others who are going through similar experiences. The buddies who take part gain satisfaction from knowing that they can impart knowledge in an empathic way, and the system provides the opportunity for training and gaining new skills in a community-oriented setting. I am not sure whether buddies were involved in the surviving poverty project, but I know that peer researchers were used and that the importance of the research comes from the fact that people listened to the experiences of lone parents.

I have also been impressed by the different ways in which Fife Gingerbread conveys information. There is the traditional newsletter, and the organisation also has a presence on social media; I was pleased to start following it on Twitter today. Of course, that approach enables it to reach a large number of interested people in a new way.

However, all the online information in the world is no substitute for the emotional and physical benefits that are provided in establishing a regular system of face-to-face support, and Gingerbread excels in assuring families and provides free home visits and group events.

My time is running out, but I am sure that Aileen Campbell will want to mention—I may be stealing her thunder—something that I saw on Twitter today. An advert has been placed for a new position with Fife Gingerbread that will link up with Edinburgh so, at last, there will be a connection with my constituency. It is looking to appoint a project worker to work with dads rock, which is an Edinburgh organisation. Unsurprisingly, that organisation will be called Fife rocks and will be based on the other side of the Firth of Forth. I know from my constituency experience of the great work by dads rock to provide one-to-one support to fathers and their children. I will stop on that convenient link to tomorrow's debate, which will provide another interesting angle on a similar subject.

18:01

The Minister for Children and Young People (Aileen Campbell): I thank David Torrance for securing the debate. I, too, welcome our friends from Gingerbread, some of whom I think I had the pleasure of meeting at a Save the Children event in the Parliament before Christmas. If those folk are not in the chamber, I certainly want to welcome those whom I have not met, and perhaps we will get a chance to meet sometime soon.

Like others, I pay tribute to Gingerbread for supporting families in Scotland and congratulate the Fife branch on its wonderful work over the past 25 years. It has been great to hear David Torrance's fantastic description of what Fife Gingerbread does in its local communities.

Despite Malcolm Chisholm stealing my thunder, I am delighted that Fife Gingerbread has been awarded £10,000 from the Scottish Government's community and families fund to run a pilot playgroup in Dunfermline for dads with children under five and an interest in music, which will build on the success of—as Malcolm Chisholm rightly noted—the two dads rock playgroups in Edinburgh. Dads rock is another wonderful organisation; it recently celebrated its first

birthday, so it is a wee bit younger than the Fife Gingerbread group.

The Scottish Government's aspiration for children and young people is a simple but ambitious one: we want Scotland to be the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up. We want Scotland to be a more child-friendly country, and to have a culture that supports all parents and carers—including those raising children on their own—and values their role.

We believe strongly that families need to feel supported not only by our public services but by their own families and communities. Gingerbread, One Parent Families Scotland and many other organisations play a crucial role in supporting lone-parent families.

Jayne Baxter asked that we do more to support parents. I am pleased that the Government has shown its commitment to Scotland's parents by ensuring that they are supported when they need it in order to do what can be—I am speaking as a mother of a two-year-old—a difficult job and to do it well.

In the national parenting strategy that we published last year, we have recognised the particular pressures that lone parents face. We consulted 1,500 parents from all backgrounds in that consultation. It was a pleasure to meet so many wonderful people whose contribution culminated in the publication of our strategy.

The main aim of the strategy is to strengthen the help and support on offer to parents. We want parents, carers and families to know that, whatever their needs and wherever they live, practical support is available. As David Torrance said, that could be to overcome self-esteem and confidence issues.

As the First Minister announced in September last year, the early years task force is committing £18 million over three years to improve the provision of family support across Scotland. Malcolm Chisholm is a member of that task force; I thank him for his work on that and his deep interest in the area. In addition, we will continue to provide specialist information, advice and support services tailored to meet the needs of lone-parent families and the practitioners who work with them. That includes telephone support, telephone mentoring, benefits and money advice, online information for lone parents, and training and material for practitioners.

I am particularly proud of the tradition of community-based projects in Scotland, including those, such as Fife Gingerbread, that rely on volunteers to deliver sustainable support for local communities, drawn from the communities themselves—a truly asset-based approach. They

provide a wide variety of services to lone parents in local communities, including early intervention and support for families who have a range of multiple and complex needs. It is right that we celebrate their work, the holistic approach that they take, and the volunteers who make all that happen.

I would like to touch on the support that lone parents in Fife get from Fife Gingerbread and, much more generally, on the challenges that lone parents face. The issue is an extremely important one, because almost one in four children live in one-parent households and the figure is projected to rise significantly.

Nine out of 10 lone parents are women, but I have met a number of lone fathers who face a number of different challenges. That shows us that, as Annabelle Ewing and Liz Smith said, we should scratch beneath the stereotypes; we should certainly not stigmatise lone parents. Liz Smith gave us personal testimony of why we should be careful of stereotyping.

We know from the latest growing up in Scotland findings—David Torrance and Jayne Baxter mentioned this, too—that lone parents are less comfortable engaging with formal services and less likely to attend baby and toddler groups, so the support that they get from services such as Gingerbread and One Parent Families Scotland can make all the difference.

Whether children have always had only one parent, or whether their parents have divorced, they were never married or one of their parents has died, there is no evidence to suggest that being brought up by one parent rather than two automatically leads to worse outcomes. It is important to avoid discriminating attributions and assumptions that relate to perceived links between lone parenthood and social problems. Loudly and clearly, I pay tribute to the many lone parents in Scotland who do an amazing job in raising children without the support of a partner, which they often do while living in particularly difficult circumstances.

However, it is also important to recognise, as many members have, that just under half of the children who live with one parent are poor, compared with 24 per cent of children who live in couple families. As Roderick Campbell pointed out, Fife Gingerbread's recent report, "Surviving Poverty—The Impact of Lone Parenthood", powerfully highlights the many challenges that lone parents face. As organisations such as One Parent Families Scotland, the Poverty Alliance and the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland tell us, our best efforts to support Scotland's parents are undermined by poverty.

This Government firmly believes that children in Scotland deserve the best possible start in life. We do not want any child to be born into, or condemned to, a life of poverty. It is simply morally unacceptable that 17 per cent of our children still live in relative poverty. We are doing all that we can to tackle poverty and inequality in Scotland within the limited powers and resources that we have, for example through our commitment to increase the offer of early learning and childcare for three and four-year-olds to 600 hours and through the work of the early years task force and the early years change fund.

Although I know that there is constitutional disagreement, this Government's point of view is that we need the powers over personal taxation and welfare benefits that are currently reserved to the UK Government. We all want a welfare system that is simpler, that makes work pay and that lifts people out of poverty, but I believe that the solution is for this Parliament to have control over such matters, so that we can devise policies for the benefit of the Scottish people.

I end by thanking Fife Gingerbread and its team of volunteers and other projects in Scotland that provide crucial support to lone-parent families and help parents to do the best job that they can. I wish Fife Gingerbread and the families that it works with every success for the future.

Meeting closed at 18:08.

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