



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

## Official Report

# MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 21 February 2013

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# Scottish Parliament

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[The Presiding Officer *opened the meeting at 11:40*]

## General Question Time

### Local Produce

**1. Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands) (Ind):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is encouraging people to purchase fresh, local produce. (S4O-01819)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment (Richard Lochhead):** It is vital that the people of Scotland have access to the fantastic range of food and drink products that we have right here on our doorstep, and this offering is also available to all those who visit our shores, of course. That is why, over the next three years, we will invest £3.2 million to support think local and the community food fund; to support Scottish food champions to encourage our tourism businesses to offer Scottish produce; to support sourcing for growth—which is about bringing together our local supply chains—and to support prestigious food and drink events across the country, such as our annual Scottish food and drink fortnight.

We are ramping up our efforts so that our local food and drink sector is ready for 2014—and beyond—and all the opportunities that are presented.

**Jean Urquhart:** I thank the cabinet secretary for his reply. What action is the Government taking to spread a culture of belief in buying local produce? Such produce is often perceived as having an expensive price tag, but in fact it can be the most economical way of feeding a family. Action in this area could be processed through the education system or could involve other aspects of the buying and use of local produce.

**Richard Lochhead:** That is an important point on a topical theme. It is, indeed, the case that families can have affordable, healthy and nutritious meals using local ingredients when they cook at home, and food education has a large role to play in that. Michael Russell, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, and I are working together on a number of food education initiatives to ensure, at least, that the next generation is able to do that.

However, we have to find ways in which to encourage all families to source more local ingredients. We are working through some of the initiatives that I mentioned in my original answer,

as well as with retailers and our primary producers in the wider food industry in Scotland. The suggestion is certainly something that we support.

### Scottish Police Authority

**2. Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government under what circumstances it will give direction to the Scottish Police Authority. (S4O-01820)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill):** The Scottish Government provides direction to the Scottish Police Authority on an on-going basis in a range of different ways. We have a strong working relationship with the SPA and we continue to support the authority on a daily basis. The Scottish Government also has a range of specific responsibilities, which include agreeing and putting in place an appropriate framework document, setting the SPA's strategic priorities, approving its strategic police plan and setting its annual budget.

**Alison McInnes:** Iain Whyte, an SPA board member, has been quoted as saying:

"We"—

that is, the SPA—

"want to be able to say, 'Yesterday you charged over there and started a murder investigation, pulled in all these resources. Did you need to do that?'"

He has also been quoted as saying:

"Other than that you should not tell them"—

that is, officers—

"who to arrest, there aren't any no-go areas."

Are we now to expect that the SPA will at every turn try to second-guess senior investigation officers? Is that really the role that the cabinet secretary envisaged for the SPA or does he agree that he might need to invoke his power of direction? During the passage of the bill, the cabinet secretary refused to define the operational independence—

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** I think that we have got the question, Ms McInnes.

**Alison McInnes:** Does the cabinet secretary now regret that?

**Kenny MacAskill:** I have had no need to invoke the power of direction. I have been working closely with the SPA, as have my staff and the chief constable and his staff. I disagree with some of the comments that have been attributed to Iain Whyte, but I hold him in high regard. He served as the convener of the board of Lothian and Borders Police.

Those matters will be sorted out between the police board and the authority. It is clear in the

legislation that operational matters are for the chief constable. That is how it was, that is how it is and that is how it will remain.

### School Closures

**3. Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what importance is placed on Education Scotland's findings on local authority plans to close schools. (S4O-01821)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell):** The Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 makes it clear that educational benefits should be a key consideration when an education authority proposes a significant change to its schools estate. When an education authority proposes a school closure, there is a statutory requirement that it must provide an educational benefits statement, and Education Scotland must provide an independent report on the educational aspects.

The Education Scotland report, along with the education authority's proposal paper, the consultation report and any representations that are received, are all considered when it is determined whether Scottish ministers should call in a school closure proposal, where it appears to them that a council might have failed in a significant regard to comply with statutory requirements, or to take proper account of a material consideration.

**Jamie Hepburn:** Where Education Scotland finds that a proposal does not give sufficient consideration to the impact on the local community of closing a school; where it takes the view that closure might have a detrimental impact on the education of some young people, particularly those with additional support needs, who require careful transition planning; where it finds that stakeholders are justifiably concerned about the timescale for implementation and the lack of evidence on the possible detrimental effect on young people's education; and where it finds that concerns about the walking route are also justified, would the cabinet secretary expect any local authority to amend its proposals significantly?

**Michael Russell:** Once Education Scotland has submitted a report containing such information, the education authority must explain, in its final consultation report, how it has reviewed its proposal in the light of the Education Scotland report, and of any other representations that it has received. In determining a school closure case, I will of course look closely at the Education Scotland report and the authority's response to it, along with the other relevant documentation.

**Fiona McLeod (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** Will Education Scotland give any weight to

the informal consultation in the East Dunbartonshire Council area, which has been deeply flawed and has caused a great deal of misery?

**Michael Russell:** Internal consultations are not part of the legislation and so do not form part of the process. The informal consultation that is being undertaken by East Dunbartonshire Council invites views on a number of options. The council has a statutory duty to ensure that there is adequate and efficient provision of school education in its area, and it is accountable for the decisions that it takes. I understand, however, that the council has not taken any firm decision. If East Dunbartonshire Council formally proposes to close a school, the clear statutory process that is in place requires it to undertake a public consultation—as is set out in the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010.

It would not be appropriate for me to comment on any aspect of an informal consultation, given that I might have a statutory role to play in any subsequent process.

**The Presiding Officer:** Can members check that they do not have their mobile phones close to any speakers? I am getting feedback in my ears.

### Child Protection (Alleged Sexual Abuse)

**4. Margaret McDougall (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what protection there is for young children in cases where allegations of sexual abuse have been made but no evidence has been found. (S4O-01822)

**The Minister for Children and Young People (Aileen Campbell):** In all cases where allegations of child sexual abuse have been raised, social services, the police and other relevant agencies must ensure the safety of the child and identify whether any on-going actions are necessary to protect the child and others. A range of issues is considered, including whether the child needs counselling or therapy. Local authorities assess each case on its own merits to determine what level of support and protection is required by the child, for the immediate future and in the longer term.

**Margaret McDougall:** As the minister knows, some young children do not respond well to interview and, for one reason or another, a physical examination is not carried out. Then, despite a family member still having concerns for the child's wellbeing, no further investigation is carried out by the police or social services, because they say that there is no evidence to prove that abuse is occurring.

In such cases—where, in effect, the cycle of abuse is being allowed to continue—what steps

will the Government take to ensure that the child comes first and his or her rights are protected? At present, it seems that, until the child can articulate what has been happening, there is no case to answer and the child continues to be at risk of abuse.

**Aileen Campbell:** The Scottish Government does not tolerate any form of abuse at all. Our practices are delivered through the prism of the getting it right for every child approach, and we want to ensure the safety and protection of our most vulnerable children.

There are always opportunities to refresh guidance and to find ways of improving the situation. Recently, we have achieved three significant gains in our manifesto. We published the national framework for child protection, learning and development—the risk assessment framework and child protection guidance for health professionals. We are also in the process of refreshing the national child protection guidance that was published in 2010, and intend to publish that later this year.

There are strict guidelines for how to approach a child with regard to the sensitive situation that we are discussing. There is guidance on how to conduct interviews. Opportunities to further improve the situation are presented by the Victims and Witnesses (Scotland) Bill, which is about improving the way in which vulnerable witnesses are treated in courts.

There are a variety of opportunities and a range of on-going work. Through the prism of GIRFEC, we seek to ensure that we get it right for every child in Scotland.

#### **Access to Further Education (Fife)**

**5. Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the impact that college mergers will have on access to courses in Fife. (S4O-01823)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell):** The Fife colleges have yet to submit to me their business case in support of merger—to which the colleges declared a commitment last November—but when they do so, I will consider it carefully. I will also consult all those who might have an interest in the prospective merger before I decide whether to approve it.

**Willie Rennie:** That does not seem to be a commitment that there will be no reduction in access to courses in Fife. I will continue to press the cabinet secretary on the issue, which is important in the context of the proposed change.

I want the cabinet secretary to go further and to consider whether people should be able to access

courses throughout Fife and not just in the traditional places in the region. Will he consider supporting a college base in St Andrews, which up to now has not had the further education support that it needs?

**Michael Russell:** Mr Rennie should not put words in my mouth. I made it clear that I have not seen the business case. When I have seen it, I will consider it, and of course I will consider representations on it. I will take what I have just heard as a representation on the business case.

Of course, colleges should look at the totality of the region in which they are set. That is one of the advantages of regionalisation. I hope that as the colleges come together they will consider serving all those who wish to take up courses in Fife. That will be another benefit of regionalisation, which I am sure will get a warm welcome from all Fife MSPs, including Mr Rennie.

#### **Passport System**

**6. Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government when a Scottish passport system will be in place if Scotland separates from the rest of the United Kingdom. (S4O-01824)

**The Minister for External Affairs and International Development (Humza Yousaf):** I would expect a Scottish passport system to be in place on independence. [*Applause.*] That is the easiest applause that I have ever had.

**Mary Fee:** On doorsteps and in surgeries, I have been asked by constituents what will happen to their passports in the unfortunate circumstances of a yes vote in 2014—[*Interruption.*]

**The Presiding Officer:** Order. Let us hear the member.

**Mary Fee:** Can the minister tell members and the people of Scotland what will happen to their current British passports? Will there be a cost involved in changing over by 2016? Will the British Government honour people's current passports? Will Scottish people have access to British embassies around the world after separation?

**Humza Yousaf:** I was not even born in 1979, but that sounded like a throwback to those days.

Mary Fee can reassure her constituents that we have always said that we would have inclusive and open citizenship—unless she has information that the United Kingdom Government will give dual citizenship to people of every nation on this earth except an independent Scotland. We will give details in the white paper later this year. The member can reassure people that the sky will not fall in, the earth will not swallow up her constituents and the Messiah will not have to postpone his second coming, come an independent Scotland.

## Renewables Target 2020

**7. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government how many wind turbines will need to be erected to meet its target of providing 100 per cent of Scotland's electricity needs from renewable sources by 2020. (S4O-01825)

**The Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism (Fergus Ewing):** We expect and want a wide range of renewables technologies to be developed to help Scotland to meet its target. That range includes onshore and offshore wind turbines, in the right places, guided by a planning and consent process that we will ensure remains fit for purpose.

**Murdo Fraser:** What is the Scottish Government's response to the recent academic study that was published by the eminent scientist Professor Gordon Hughes of the University of Edinburgh? The report reveals that although newly erected wind turbines have a load factor of 28 per cent, the load factor falls by half, to 15 per cent, after 15 years of life, which means that to meet renewable energy targets we would need twice as many wind turbines as are currently proposed. Surely the research drives a coach and horses through the Scottish Government's energy strategy.

**Fergus Ewing:** It was David Cameron who said:

"We need more wind farms".

The Scottish Government is committed to a mix of sources of electricity. Of course, renewable energy supports 11,000 jobs in Scotland, and last year renewable energy contributed a greater proportion of Scotland's electricity than ever before.

There appears to be division among Tory MSPs on wind farms. Some are for them, some are against them and others already have one of their own.

It used to be that the Tory party in Scotland was unequivocally in favour of more jobs and businesses, but it now looks as though that was just another one of its lines in the sand.

**Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab):** Do the renewables targets mean that the Scottish Government is likely to overturn a local planning decision, which accords with the wishes of my constituents, to reject a wind turbine at Annathill in my constituency?

**Fergus Ewing:** I apologise to Elaine Smith; I did not catch the very beginning of her question. She will appreciate that it would be utterly inappropriate for me to make any comment on a live application, but I can say, for her benefit and for the benefit of

other members—I hope that this is relevant to her question, not all of which I caught, but I will reply to her in writing later—that, in the vast majority of cases, which is to say in two thirds of cases, Scottish ministers have upheld the decisions of local planning authorities. Those are the facts.

**Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP):** Does the Scottish Government consider that the export potential of our clean energy, in particular that of our wind energy output, is essential to providing clean electricity security for Scotland?

**Fergus Ewing:** Yes, that output is more important than ever before, as has been illustrated by the bleak warnings, which the Office of the Gas and Electricity Markets issued last October and again this week, that the capacity margin for meeting the electricity needs of the United Kingdom is dwindling from 14 per cent over peak demand—when "Coronation Street" is on on a cold winter's evening—to just 4 per cent.

The neglect and negligence of UK energy policy has led to the pretty pass that it may not be possible to keep the lights on without massive importation of gas from places such as Russia. What a pretty pass we have reached. Therefore, Scottish renewable energy is now more important than ever for keeping the lights on, both north and south of the border.

**Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab):** In the area between Kirknewton and Shotts, the combination of applications, consents and active sites means that we could have around 20 wind farms. I know that the minister is a reasonable man, so does he accept that a free-for-all resulting in such an overconcentration is undermining the very policy that he promotes?

**Fergus Ewing:** I accept back-handed compliments even from the most unlikely of sources.

It would be utterly wrong for me to interfere in the decisions of local authorities in the way that Neil Findlay's question implies is necessary. It is the responsibility of each local authority, which is accountable to its electorate, to take decisions in its area. As I have already said, the Scottish Government—contrary to the misinformation that is being peddled by some people—has supported local authority decisions in two thirds of cases.

## Flood Protection (North East Scotland)

**8. Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to protect communities in the north-east from flooding. (S4O-01826)

**The Minister for Environment and Climate Change (Paul Wheelhouse):** We are helping to



protect communities across the whole of Scotland from flooding by working with our partners to implement the Flood Risk Management (Scotland) Act 2009. We provide funding through the local government settlement for local authorities to continue to invest in flood protection schemes. Local authorities can apply for that funding on the basis of criteria that have been agreed by the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

A total of £73 million is being made available in this spending review period, on top of the £53 million funding that was allocated to existing projects and included within local authorities' general capital grant allocations. Local authorities are also free to allocate additional resources to flooding from within the overall funding provided to them by the Scottish Government and from within their own resources.

**Richard Baker:** Can the minister outline what support is being given to the community in Stonehaven in the aftermath of flooding that has resulted in the closure of the town's Maritime Rescue Institute? On mitigation of the impact of flooding in the north-east, can he clarify why Grampian is not one of the areas in the Scottish Environment Protection Agency's extended floodline warning service?

**Paul Wheelhouse:** On Richard Baker's first question, I saw for myself when I visited Stonehaven the support that the Scottish flood forum is giving to the community there.

On coverage by the wider coastal flood warning system, much of the north-east has already been included in the roll-out of the floodline direct warning service. Indeed, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment launched the north-east flood warning scheme for the Rivers Dee, Don, Deveron and North Esk in March 2010. A flood warning scheme for the River Carron in Stonehaven is also in development and is planned to be rolled out in September this year.

I recognise that the recently launched coastal flood warning scheme for the firths of Forth and Tay on the east coast, covering Arbroath down to Eyemouth, does not cover the community of Stonehaven and does not extend as far as Grampian, but I assure Richard Baker that we are working on proposals for a flood scheme for the north-east coast, following the incidents in December. The timing of those events was unfortunate, as we had already announced plans for the Forth and Tay at that point, but we are trying to accelerate what we can do to cover the north-east.

## First Minister's Question Time

12:00

### Engagements

**1. Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister what engagements he has planned for the rest of the day. (S4F-01192)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** I have engagements to take forward the Government's programme for Scotland.

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** Ruth Davidson—I mean Johann Lamont.

**Johann Lamont:** In June 2011, the Scottish Government told us that only 3 per cent of patients had to wait more than nine weeks for an in-patient appointment. The truth was not 3 per cent, but 23 per cent—that is not three out of 100, but one out of four patients waiting. Why did the Scottish Government so mislead patients in need of hospital treatment in that way?

**The First Minister:** The waiting lists have always had areas of social and medical unavailability. That is part and parcel—*[Interruption.]*

I hear some disgruntlement from the Labour benches. As members will remember, one of this Government's first acts was to abolish the availability status code that was established under Labour. That represented 33 per cent of the in-patient waiting list. Presumably, at that time, the Labour Party thought that there were reasons for that figure being 33 per cent. Therefore, Johann Lamont must accept that the 23 per cent figure—which I am quite happy to go into detail about—is, by definition, 10 per cent less than the figure that was inherited from the Labour Party.

**Johann Lamont:** The people of Scotland might expect the First Minister to take what I said a little more seriously. It is not good enough for him to come here week after week and to say—this is his new defence—"It wasnae just me who did it." The fact is that the figures represent real people waiting for real help from the national health service. However, the First Minister's response is about something entirely different—his is a political game, which is not the key issue.

If the First Minister took his job seriously, he would know that in March 2010 the then health secretary, Nicola Sturgeon, said:

"no one—no one—is on a hidden waiting list."

Even after we found out that NHS Lothian was fiddling the figures, her replacement, Alex Neil, told the Parliament last December that

“the waiting times that are published by boards are reliable and accurate.”—[*Official Report*, 20 December 2012; c 15052]

The systems that Nicola Sturgeon and Alex Neil used to make those claims are described by the Royal College of Nursing as

“inadequate for the job and ... letting patients down, time and again”

Is not the truth that, far from abolishing hidden waiting lists, Nicola Sturgeon—for her own political convenience—reinvented and reinforced them?

**The First Minister:** The social unavailability figures are published so, by definition, they cannot be hidden. [*Interruption.*] Published figures cannot be hidden.

Johann Lamont says that I am talking about two different things. I am not: I am talking about exactly the same thing. The availability status code was a hidden waiting list because people were placed on that code—33 per cent of people on in-patient waiting lists—and then had no patient guarantee for their pathway through the health service.

There are a variety of reasons why people will not have operations at a particular time. They might have a medical condition that prevents them from having an operation, such as high blood pressure or a heart condition, or they could be pregnant, which would make a medical procedure inadvisable. Those reasons are in the report, if indeed Labour members have read it.

The report points to the fact that the information technology systems in the health service are not robust enough to give the proper examination across the health boards. That is exactly why the IT systems are being enhanced and improved. Therefore, it is not just a tale of two Governments. It is a tale of changing a system that was clearly a hidden waiting list, which affected 33 per cent of patients; of constant improvement to get the IT systems into a position that enables us to have robust figures; and of making the changes that are required so that patients round Scotland can have confidence in the figures. That shows that the Government is facing the issues, as opposed to the position that we inherited, in which people were dumped on the availability status code and left there ad infinitum.

**Johann Lamont:** The First Minister’s first defence is that there is nothing wrong; his second defence is, “A big bad computer did it and ran away”; and then he says, “However, we are changing things.” If he does not understand what the problem is, I am bemused about how he can work out what the changes should be.

Let me make it simple for the First Minister. In June 2011, Nicola Sturgeon was given a set of

figures that said that only 3 per cent of patients waited for more than nine weeks for hospital treatment when the truth was that it was 23 per cent. At the same time, she was given figures that said that the number of people who were too busy to go to get the treatment that they needed had tripled. She was told that one Scot in three on waiting lists had said that they were too busy to be cured.

Nicola Sturgeon knew what was happening. Did she not have the wit to notice that waiting lists were being falsified or did it simply suit her purpose?

**The First Minister:** Let us have a look at why patients might not be able to have their operation in the timescale of a waiting list. [*Laughter.*] Okay, let us point to page 30 of the report. Audit Scotland recognised that medical unavailability

“has remained fairly constant ... at around six to eight per cent over recent years”.

There is an element, which has been consistent over recent years, of people who, for medical reasons, are not in a position to have their procedure within the waiting time. That is medical unavailability. There is also a range of reasons why people might not want to have an operation at a specific time, such as work reasons or because they are on holiday. That is also perfectly legitimate.

The report points to the IT systems not being robust enough to provide that examination. That is the point of the report. If we have a problem with our information technology systems, is it not a good idea to introduce the TrakCare system to sort it out? Would it be preferable to leave it alone, as the Labour Party did, and not improve these things in the health service?

We can point to areas that are not about social or medical unavailability. We know that 88 per cent of patients are satisfied with the waiting times in the national health service. Although 88 per cent is not 100 per cent and means that the national health service is not perfect, it is a very high figure indeed. That means that, although the national health service is not perfect, it is an outstanding health service and every member in the chamber should be proud of the work that it does.

**Johann Lamont:** It is precisely because of the importance of the national health service that we deserve better than a Government that looks at health figures in order to gain political advantage rather than to serve the interests of patients. In December, Alex Neil said that there was nothing wrong. Today, the First Minister again says that there is nothing wrong. The rest of the world knows that the figures were manipulated to avoid the Government having to confront the failures in its own policy.

Of course, one policy, one code and one belief runs through everything at the heart of the Government: the nationalists think that, whatever the truth, if they say something often enough, they can fool the people of Scotland into believing it. *[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Order.

**Johann Lamont:** Alex Salmond believed that, if he compared his protégé Nicola Sturgeon to Nye Bevan often enough, we would see her in the same light. I have to tell members that Nye Bevan never put press releases above patients. *[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Order.

**Johann Lamont:** We have found out from Audit Scotland that patients come second to propaganda with this Government. Someone should tell Nicola Sturgeon that false statistics and public perceptions do not cure patients, and they do not win referendums either.

It has been said that, in politics—*[Interruption.]* It has been said that, in politics, there are two types of health ministers: failures and those who get out in time. Today, is not the truth laid bare that, despite the spin, Nicola Sturgeon did not get out in time?

**The First Minister:** I was going to say that there are three types of health minister. There was Andy Kerr, who tried to close accident and emergency wards before we sorted that out.

Let us address the issue. First, the Audit Scotland report examined 273,000 transactions and the internal health board audits examined a further 200,000 transactions. The conclusion was:

“Our sampling found a small number of instances in which unavailability codes were used inappropriately.”

Only a small number of such instances were found out of the vast number of transactions that were investigated.

I have already pointed out the level of patient satisfaction with the health service and waiting times—

**Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** That does not make a waiting time guarantee.

**The First Minister:** Jackie Baillie says that that disnae matter; that is what matters. That is the point.

We can also measure how the health service is doing above and beyond the issue of social unavailability. Since 2008, the median time wait for treatment in Scotland—that is the mid-point in waiting times, which includes those who have been marked as medically or socially unavailable—reduced from 40 days to 32 days.

That tells us that there has been an improvement in the national health service over that period.

In reading out her prepared question, Johann Lamont gave the game away. We were told that this Government is obsessed by the politics. This issue is not about the health service; it is all about the Labour Party trying to get Nicola Sturgeon. Did the statement that it released say, “We want improvement in the health service; we want the computer system to be fast-tracked”? No. It said, “Sturgeon knew of hidden waiting lists.” That is the point. Nicola Sturgeon knew of Labour’s hidden waiting lists, which is why she changed things as health secretary.

Jackie Baillie said that when it came to hospital-acquired infection, Scotland was the “superbug capital of Europe”, until she found out that the relevant figures were from 2006, when the Labour Party was in office. The relevance of that is that it typifies Labour’s attitude to the NHS, which is not about improving the service or being jointly proud of the greatest public service in our country, but is about making demeaning political attacks on health secretaries. Instead of coming to the chamber to ask about the improvements that must take place, Labour accuses the Government. My goodness me. Is the Labour leader not aware of the unintentional comedy in her question over the most serious issue of all—the NHS? The NHS is not without failings or faults, but it is an outstanding health service, of which every one of us should be proud.

**The Presiding Officer:** Question 2, Ruth Davidson.

### Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)

**2. Ruth Davidson (Glasgow) (Con):** This time—thank you, Presiding Officer.

To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Secretary of State for Scotland. (S4F-01184)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** No plans in the near future.

**Ruth Davidson:** On Tuesday, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment, Richard Lochhead, gave a statement to the chamber on the still unfolding horsemeat scandal. Can the First Minister tell us why Mr Lochhead failed to mention that the operating budget of the Food Standards Agency in Scotland has been secretly slashed by 10 per cent in the past year?

**The First Minister:** The general opinion, not of this Government but of every commentator, is that our decision to leave key responsibilities with the Food Standards Agency—as opposed to taking them directly into Government, which is what was done south of the border—has resulted in us being in a better position. We will be in an even better

position as we publish our proposals to have a Scottish food standards agency.

**Ruth Davidson:** A minute ago, it was a computer's fault and now it is Westminster's.

The First Minister has made quite a big play of the fact that, in Scotland, none of the FSA's functions was moved to a Government department and none of its operations was moved elsewhere. Let us look at the timeline, because that makes things worse, not better. The Government learned that there was horsemeat in the food chain on 14 January. On 7 February, it published its spring budget revision, which showed a £1.1 million smash and grab on the FSA three weeks into a food scandal. That was not because any functions had been taken away from the FSA; it is a direct assault on the work that the agency does in Scotland.

Did nobody notice or think that it might be a risky idea to take money out of the FSA's budget in the middle of a growing crisis? Surely—at this time more than at any other—it needs the full resources and tools to maintain public confidence in our food. Can the First Minister explain the logic behind ripping £1 million from the FSA's budget?

**The First Minister:** There is an unconscious irony in a Tory spokesperson talking about “smash and grab” raids or “ripping” apart public spending. Every part of the public sector is under the most extreme pressure, bar the health service, which has been guaranteed a real-terms revenue increase, although it is still under pressure. Given the cuts from the Tory Government at Westminster, every part of the public sector is under pressure. Of course, the decision to leave key functions with the Food Standards Agency, separated from Government, is part of the better—although not perfect—position in Scotland in facing up to the crisis.

Incidentally, I do not accept that confidence in Scottish food has been lowered by the events of the past few weeks. As the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment has rightly said, there is a sea change in attitude and in people's rightful demands about the sourcing and integrity of products. I think that that will be good for the Scottish industry, which can match those high standards. I hope that Ruth Davidson will join with the Government as we prepare a Scottish food standards agency, learning the lessons from the deficiencies that have been clearly shown over the past few weeks and the lessons about the dangers of taking functions out of an independent agency and into Government. I hope that she will work constructively with us to ensure that the new Scottish food standards agency is the best that it possibly can be.

I say gently to Ruth Davidson—

**Ruth Davidson:** Och!

**The First Minister:** Well, I will say it very, very gently. I do not know that it is the greatest position for a Conservative leader to come to the Parliament and talk about additional public spending in a week where she has proposed a £500 million reduction through a penny cut in income tax. The Conservative Party should try to equate the calculation: it is difficult for that party to ask for more public spending when its new core policy is really to smash and grab and slash public spending much further.

**The Presiding Officer:** I have a number of constituency questions and I want to get them in. I ask the three members whom I hope to get in to keep their questions as brief as possible—and if we could get brief answers, that would help.

**Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green):** The First Minister will be aware of the report that was published yesterday confirming that the Forth road bridge is not about to fall into the sea and, indeed, has a long-term future. Does he now regret committing to a massively expensive additional bridge, sucking money away from other projects, before knowing the results of the repair work? What will prevent this Government or a future one from bringing ever more traffic and congestion to the Lothians by going back on the commitment to dedicate the existing bridge to public transport and to avoid an eight-lane motorway across the Forth?

**The First Minister:** We will maintain the commitment that Alison Johnstone mentions. I do not share her analysis of the situation. Just maintaining the current bridge—not its falling down—would have imposed huge costs on the Scottish economy. That analysis was done. One reason why the Parliament decided to go ahead with the new bridge—by a massive majority, as I remember—is that it looked at that analysis.

It should be quite good news that some of the remedial measures that have been taken over the past few years are having some effect. However, as the report yesterday indicated, there is no guarantee that that position can be consistently maintained in future. That is why we will be in a hugely better position if we can do more rigorous or full-scale maintenance of the current bridge in a situation in which we have an alternative bridge across the Forth so that we do not impose costs on the Scottish economy. Therefore, I do not share Alison Johnstone's analysis. However, the commitment on the use of the bridge will be maintained by this Government.

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** The First Minister will be aware that the Scottish Government has taken away the fishing and shooting rights in Raasay from local crofters and sold them to a shooting company in Ayrshire. The

crofters have built the value of those rights over the years and invested the profits in their community, thereby boosting the local economy. Does the First Minister agree that the move flies in the face of the ethos of land reform? Will he take steps to overturn the decision immediately and return the rights to the local community, where they rightly belong?

**The First Minister:** There are difficulties, as the member should know, relating to upholding the Scottish public finance principles and best value. It is not necessarily within ministers' discretion to overturn those principles, by which we are bound.

However, I heard the minister on the radio this morning addressing the subject and referring to an initiative that would allay some of the fears that had been expressed. I am sure that we all support the Scottish minister in doing that.

**Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister whether, in light of the fatal accident in Fairlie on 14 February, he believes that a fatal accident inquiry should take place. Also, will he ask Transport Scotland to bring forward a permanent traffic regulation order to restrict the movement of 44-tonne coal lorries through Fairlie and neighbouring communities?

**The First Minister:** That was a terrible incident and our sympathies are with the family and friends of Miss Catherine Bonner, who sadly lost her life in that tragic incident. The member will understand that police investigations into the accident are ongoing and, in light of that, it would be inappropriate to comment on the particular circumstances that will follow from that. However, officials from Transport Scotland will be meeting with the police, and our operating company for the south-west will obtain more detailed information on the general public transport aspects of the incident. Once the investigations are concluded, I will be happy to report back to the constituency member.

### **Cabinet (Meetings)**

**3. Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD):** To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S4F-01187)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** Matters of importance to the people of Scotland.

**Willie Rennie:** I am astonished that the First Minister seems satisfied with the waiting times figure of 23 per cent. Has he any regrets about what he told us when he put out a press release on 27 May 2008 bragging that the Scottish Government had got rid of "the smoke and mirrors"? Has he got any regrets?

**The First Minister:** Although there are individual instances of patients who have not been

properly treated within the national health service, the NHS and ministers have apologised for those specific circumstances. I was making the point that, if we look at the integrity of the NHS, we have an excellent, first-class health service that, by any measurement, has been improving its efficiency and standards over recent years. In the anxiety for political to-ing and fro-ing, we should not—as a Parliament and as a people—lose sight of how valuable, important and wonderful that institution is. Of course it is not perfect; of course there are demands—rightly—for proper improvement in systems. However, let us remember that the integrity of the system is an outstanding public health service.

**Willie Rennie:** The First Minister talks about political to-ing and fro-ing. His Government issued 50 press releases bragging about his waiting times initiative. Fifty press releases! He told us how good the system was at the same time as thousands of people were being sent to the waiting times equivalent of Siberia. Has he got anything humble at all to say to those people?

**The First Minister:** The availability status code that was used under a Government, of course, that the Liberal party was part of, was abolished. That code could have been described as the health service equivalent of Siberia, because people lost all rights and waiting times within the system.

The whole purpose of the new system that was introduced—the new ways system—was to ensure that people did not lose those rights. The clock was reset and they still retained their rights within the health service. Perhaps that was a helpful question from Willie Rennie, as it allowed me to explain that point. It is a bit much to talk about the health service equivalent of Siberia, which is what the availability status code was when the Liberal party was in power, and then to criticise a system the point of which is to ensure that patients keep their rights within the health service.

I am sure that when Willie Rennie thinks about the matter, he will recognise that there are proper reasons why people might not undergo a procedure in a set timescale. That is why the Audit Scotland key conclusion, out of the sampling of a vast number of patients, found a small number of instances in which unavailability codes were used inappropriately. That finding by Audit Scotland tends to back up the fact that, when improvements are necessary in style and in the computer systems that back up the process to give security, this health service is performing substantially better than it was when the Liberal party was part of the Labour coalition—which did, I am afraid, leave some patients in the health service equivalent of Siberia.

### BBC Scotland (Redundancies)

**4. Jim Eadie (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister what recent discussions the Scottish Government has had with the BBC in relation to redundancies at BBC Scotland. (S4F-01190)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** In discussions with the chair of the BBC trust, the BBC trustee for Scotland, the director of BBC Scotland and all four director generals of the BBC over the past few months, the Scottish Government has consistently argued for BBC jobs in Scotland and for high-quality news and current affairs coverage.

BBC Scotland's decision to front load cuts for a licence fee settlement is particularly disappointing. When Scotland is debating a hugely important public decision, the BBC should be prioritising its capacity to cover Scottish current affairs, rather than attacking it or at least reducing it, as is being done presently.

**Jim Eadie:** Does the First Minister agree that the BBC's status as an institution that not only explains Scotland to itself but explains Scotland to the world depends not only on the correspondents that it employs but on every member of staff who supports those people in producing high-quality news and analysis? This week, those staff have felt compelled to take industrial action. Is it now time to heed the call of the National Union of Journalists for a six-month moratorium on the redundancies?

**The First Minister:** That proposal is positive. I see with dismay that no fewer than nine of a total of 30 compulsory redundancies across the BBC are to be in Scotland. That should tell us that there is huge disquiet among staff about not just their individual futures but the BBC's collective ability to serve Scotland.

I will give a small example. I am not saying that this will be the most dramatic loss to the Scottish population, but I understand that "Sunday Politics Scotland" will not be broadcast next Sunday, because the Westminster Parliament is in recess. I accept that that might not be devastating news for the vast majority of the Scottish population, but it should raise an issue for reflection.

Surely our public service broadcaster should have the capability to cover politics and current affairs in Scotland and surely it should not be not broadcasting a programme because the Westminster Parliament is in recess. That points to a lack of ability in BBC Scotland to produce a programme with its current resources, which will surely be made much more significantly challenging if the cuts go ahead.

### Child Poverty

**5. Drew Smith (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government plans to implement new measures to tackle child poverty. (S4F-01196)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** We should reflect the point that, according to the latest statistics that are available, child poverty is at its lowest level since devolution—the rate is 17 per cent, which is down from 28 per cent in 1999. However, I am sure that there is general agreement that the figure is still far too high. We remain committed to tackling child poverty through early intervention and prevention. That was set out in the child poverty strategy, which focused on maximising household incomes and improving children's life chances.

**Drew Smith:** Earlier this week, Professor Kate Pickett told Health and Sport Committee members that inequality is a human rights injustice and that it behoves all of us to shout about it all the time, so that solutions can be found. She argues that many different solutions exist at every level—in our communities, in local authority areas, nationally and internationally.

Today's *Evening Times* quotes Dr John McKendrick of Glasgow Caledonian University as saying:

"The evidence is damning. Not only has progress in tackling child poverty ground to a halt, but current levels in Scotland are higher than they were in 2004/5 ... the projections are our poverty shame will worsen as we approach 2020."

**The Presiding Officer:** Can we get a question, Mr Smith?

**Drew Smith:** Since we know that some of the First Minister's flagship policies redistribute in the wrong way, which extends inequality—

**The Presiding Officer:** Can we get the question, Mr Smith?

**Drew Smith:** —will the First Minister acknowledge the need to re-evaluate his approach?

**The First Minister:** Drew Smith should acknowledge two points. The Government has many policies that support family budgets and enhance the protection against child poverty. I think of the policy on the living wage, for example. In comparison with the minimum wage, the living wage has resulted in a 30 per cent increase in people in that stratum of wage while the Government has been in office. That is an example of the progressive policies that the Government has pursued.

I must make the rather obvious and overwhelming point to Drew Smith, which is made

by every organisation and in every report on the matter at present. When we are on the brink of a smash-and-grab raid—a huge withdrawal from some of the poorest sections of our community—that will involve massive amounts of money and billions of pounds over the next few years, by virtue of the Westminster Government controlling this country's welfare system, is it not time that people such as Drew Smith recognised that people in this country will get an infinitely better deal from a progressive Parliament in Edinburgh than they would from a Tory coalition in London?

### Obesity

**6. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the First Minister what strategies the Scottish Government has to combat obesity. (S4F-01186)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** The issue is serious and a serious report on it was issued this week. The strategy has been laid out in the Government's route map towards healthy weight. This week's report contains many proposals that require substantial examination.

**Murdo Fraser:** Will the First Minister assure me that any Scottish Government approach to tackle rising levels of obesity will be based on the principle of personal responsibility, that he will not implement barmy proposals such as a punitive tax on fizzy drinks or chocolate bars, however eminent their advocates might be, and that he will help protect those of us who enjoy the odd can of juice or Mars bar from meddling, nanny-state policies?

**The First Minister:** The member does the report a disservice. There were 10 recommendations and he has picked on one of them—as, indeed, did most of the tabloid press—which I suppose is fair enough, in terms of politics and politicking. However, he should not ignore it that in many of the other recommendations there was serious—how shall I put it?—food for thought for the Scottish Government and other authorities.

## Speed Limits (Heavy Goods Vehicles)

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):** The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-05086, in the name of David Stewart, on the 50 miles per hour campaign. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

*Motion debated,*

That the Parliament recognises the efforts of the Inverness-based HGV driver, Conor McKenna, who has set up a campaign, 50 Miles Per Hour, which aims to persuade both the Scottish and UK governments to increase the speed limit for HGVs on single carriageways from 40 to 50 mph; considers that such an increase would reduce any frustration for drivers who follow HGVs and the subsequent risks of vehicle collisions; believes that it would also shorten delivery times to businesses; understands that the UK Government has welcomed such proposals and has launched a consultation exercise in England, which, it believes, could demonstrate that such proposals would make roads safer, help hard-pressed businesses and relieve the pressure on HGV drivers to meet target times, and recognises the calls to ensure that the speed limit for HGVs in Scotland is aligned to that for England and Wales.

12:31

**David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** I thank the members here today for their interest in the debate and for signing my motion. For those members still to sign, I always welcome sinners who wish to repent.

The context of the debate is road safety, but I also believe that increasing the speed limit for heavy goods vehicles will improve productivity in the haulage industry, reduce the costs of production and transportation of goods, and cut prices for the end user: the customer.

What is it that I am calling for? I am calling for the raising of the speed limit for HGVs that weigh more than 7.5 tonnes from 40mph to 50mph on single carriageways. Members will be familiar with the fact that the United Kingdom Government recently ran a consultation exercise for England and Wales on this very subject and that we await the results. Members will also be familiar with the fact that the Scotland Act 2012 gives the Scottish ministers the powers to regulate the speed of all classes of vehicle.

As I am a road safety campaigner on issues such as the graduated licence scheme for young drivers, I was contacted by a lorry driver, Conor McKenna, from Inverness, whose campaign I agreed to support. Mr McKenna argued that the HGV speed limit for single carriageways frustrated other motorists and led some to make dangerous overtaking manoeuvres.

The Automobile Association chief executive, Edmund King, said:

"Drivers will generally support this proposed change as a common sense move. Slower lorries can lead to tailbacks, dangerous overtaking and road rage. Freer-flowing traffic will benefit road safety by reducing dangerous overtaking and benefit the environment by reducing emissions."

Many members will be aware of the environmental issues. My general view is that we should be taking freight off the road and on to rail. When the Labour Party formed an Administration with the Liberal Democrats, it pursued the freight facilities grant and took much freight off the road and on to rail. I was taken by the Road Haulage Association assessment that lorries that do 50mph in higher gears produce fewer emissions than vehicles that do 40mph at lower gears. It is interesting that the policy is beneficial in terms of climate change, as well.

Neil Greig, who is the director of policy and research at the Institute of Advanced Motorists, said:

"We welcome the consultation on new speed limits for lorries. On many long-distance rural roads, platooning behind lorries who are sticking to the limit is often blamed for causing frustration and dangerous overtaking. Ideally this change should be introduced in a series of trials and pilots first so that the real impact can be assessed before the change is made permanent."

From all parts of the country the message is the same: modern trucks are perfectly capable of doing 50mph safely and fuel efficiently on suitable A roads, and raising the limit would lead to greater road safety and a reduction in death and injury. I call on the minister to pilot a trial on a cross-section of our key road network such as the A9 before making further decisions.

Truck drivers have the difficult duty of watching in their mirror long queues of increasingly frustrated drivers building up behind them. Occasionally, such drivers make dangerous manoeuvres as their patience comes to an end and the red mist comes down and clouds their judgment. Sometimes such frustration ends in tragedy. Many believe that having a higher speed limit would avoid that.

The answer is to give professional HGV drivers the latitude to drive at up to 50mph on single-carriageway roads where there is no restriction on motorists beyond the national speed limit and where it is safe to do so.

Members will be well aware that the speed limits that are currently legislated for are detailed under schedule 6 to the Road Traffic Act 1984. We are talking about a speed limit that was set almost 30 years ago when the design and safety capabilities of HGVs were very different from what they are today.

Today, HGVs have safety and design improvements in line with normal family cars and other road vehicles. Of course, the stopping distance of an HGV is more than that of a family car, but so is the stopping distance of an HGV under 7.5 tonnes, which can legally travel at 50mph on a single carriageway. We therefore have a strange anomaly. Two sizes of HGV can legally travel at different speeds, yet all cars, no matter their size, are subject to the same speed limit.

A crucial point concerns the driver. An HGV driver is technically far better trained than a normal car driver as they have to pass two separate practical and theory tests on driving and road safety awareness. In addition, HGV drivers undertake regular sight tests, unlike car drivers. Those facts alone should surely lead us to conclude that there are far fewer road collisions involving HGVs than collisions involving other forms of transport.

I welcome the consultation exercise that has taken place south of the border in relation to this issue and, as a long-standing road safety campaigner, I urge the Scottish Government to look seriously at this issue and to consider a study on the A9 and beyond.

As Jack Semple, director of policy at the Road Haulage Association said:

"The overwhelming view of members is that the current 40mph speed limit is quite unnaturally slow on many roads and creates congestion, frustration and avoidable road safety risks for no good reason; that it is an out-dated limit. Developments in braking and other safety systems mean that HGVs on the road today are perfectly capable of doing 50mph safely and fuel-efficiently on suitable single-carriageway roads. Raising the limit would lead to greater road safety and to a reduction in death and injury."

A new chapter in road safety is ready to be opened. To quote Sir Walter Scott, what we need is:

"the will to do, the soul to dare".

12:38

**Dave Thompson (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP):** I congratulate David Stewart on securing the debate, which is on an incredibly important issue, and I agree with what he said. This is a relatively simple issue, so I apologise if I repeat and reinforce some of the points that he made.

I have initiated and sustained many discussions with a number of trade associations, local businesses, MSPs and Scottish Government ministers in support of the change that is proposed. I believe that we are moving forward.

Raising the speed limit for HGVs over 7.5 tonnes from 40mph to 50mph on single-



carriageway roads is an issue of great importance to my constituency, as the A9 is the main artery connecting Inverness and the north-east Highlands with the central belt.

As David Stewart said—I have personal experience of this—the build-up of long queues of traffic behind convoys of slow-moving lorries, which is known as platooning, is a particular issue on the A9, where much of the route is single carriageway. Frustrated drivers who are stuck behind such lorries are tempted to take chances overtaking, which is undoubtedly one of the reasons why the A9 has experienced so many safety issues over the years.

I applaud the designing and planning that are currently under way to dual the A9 from Inverness to Perth by 2025—perhaps that will be completed a bit sooner; I hope that it will—but in the meantime, action must be taken to alleviate the dangerous conditions that are currently faced on the A9 and other single-carriageway roads throughout Scotland. I believe that increasing the speed limit for such HGVs from 40mph to 50mph would lead to a reduction in platooning and risky overtaking manoeuvres, which would mean that the roads would be safer for all drivers.

Beyond creating a safer Scotland, the decision would create increased revenue and savings for local businesses. According to the Department for Transport impact assessment, raising the speed limit for HGVs over 7.5 tonnes from 40mph to 50mph would create a net benefit of £454 million by 2030 throughout the UK. In addition, an increase in the speed limit would save 2.4 million man hours a year for HGV drivers and countless more for other motorists. The direct impact of the change would save UK businesses £30.6 million a year. Obviously, significant proportionate savings would apply in Scotland.

There would also be positive environmental impacts, as Dave Stewart said. The increase in the speed limit is supported by the Road Haulage Association, which has noted that the increase would mean that drivers would be able to stay in a higher and more fuel-efficient gear, which would lead to a more sustainable drive. That would mean fewer CO<sub>2</sub> emissions not only for HGVs but for all the traffic behind them. The Malcolm Group Ltd, which is a leader in logistics, has stated:

“the vehicles of today run at their optimum level at about 50mph. At 40mph, an HGV is labouring and costs more to operate.”—[*Official Report, Local Government and Transport Committee*, 7 March 2006; c 3481.]

In 2006, the freight transport inquiry that the Scottish Parliament conducted recommended that select arterial roads should incorporate the higher speed limit to test the effects of a change on traffic. A Transport Scotland project report in 2008 suggested that an experimental trial should be

conducted on the A9 between Perth and Inverness to resolve the issue. It is regrettable that no action was ever taken.

The Government should be applauded for its commitment to dualling the A9 all the way to Inverness. That will deliver a huge boost to the Highland economy and road safety along the route, but in the meantime there is a strong case to pilot an increase in the speed limit on single carriageways for HGVs.

Increasing the speed limit on single-carriageway roads would have many benefits for all drivers and the wider economy, not only HGV drivers. It would also deliver an environmental boost through a more efficient average speed. I hope that the minister supports a pilot project on the A9 so that we can properly evaluate the pros and cons of such an increase.

12:42

**Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab):** I am delighted to contribute to this debate on the 50 miles per hour campaign, and I thank David Stewart MSP for securing the time for it. I know that my colleague has a wealth of experience in advocating on road safety issues and is well placed to illustrate the key issues that surround the important proposal.

The UK Government has welcomed the proposition to increase the speed limit for HGVs on single carriageways from 40mph to 50mph, and the proposition is the subject of a Government consultation document at Westminster. It has also gained the approval of the Automobile Association and the Institute of Advanced Motorists, which has welcomed it as a “common sense move” that would be welcomed by all drivers, not only HGV drivers. However, other groups have expressed concerns about the proposal.

The consultation document highlighted some of the advantages that such a move could bring. One such advantage would be the reduction of congestion and frustration on our roads, as members have already said. A common problem on many long-distance rural roads is the large number of cars that can potentially drive faster but are often stuck behind HGVs that stick to the speed limit. That leads to frustration for drivers, who often attempt extremely dangerous overtaking manoeuvres, which can often lead to fatalities. It has been argued that the proposals will mean that those platoons of traffic will be less likely to attempt such manoeuvres, which will, in turn, lead to fewer accidents.

In addition, it is believed that the proposals will lead to a more level playing field for freight operators. Government figures suggest that 70 per cent of UK lorry traffic exceeds the current speed

limit. In such a time-sensitive industry, that gives the drivers concerned an unfair advantage over those who follow the law.

The proposal, which would affect around 280,000 vehicles, would also have obvious economic benefits. For example, it is estimated that companies would save up to 2.4 million driving hours per year and between £31 million and £36 million, making them more profitable, allowing them to take on more workers, increasing tax revenues and providing a much-needed boost to related industries such as fuel and tyre suppliers.

That said, we must acknowledge the proposal's potential disadvantages. Increased wear and tear on the road network would mean increased repair costs for local authorities, and there is also a potential for more serious accidents. The road safety charity Brake has expressed concern, citing the direct link between traffic speed and the number of devastating crashes and casualties on our roads.

It is of utmost importance that, in considering this proposal, we carefully consider and reflect on the evidence of all its effects on road safety, the environment and the economy before we make any decision. I call on the Scottish Government to consider the experimental trial and pilot study that my colleagues have already mentioned.

12:46

**Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** I congratulate David Stewart on securing this debate and I thank him for bringing this important matter to the chamber. This is one of those happy issues on which there is a degree of unanimity across the chamber. I find it difficult to disagree with anything that we have heard from the previous three speakers—although if the Greens had troubled themselves to turn up we might have heard a different perspective.

As David Stewart has made clear, the UK Government is reviewing the 40mph speed limit for HGVs over 7.5 tonnes, with the proposals subject to an extensive consultation process, and I believe that we should be doing the same in Scotland. It has been said that the A9, which is in my region, would benefit from an increase in the single-carriageway speed limit for HGVs; I certainly feel the same way and believe that, until the A9 is fully dualled, it will continue to have the reputation of Scotland's deadliest road.

Accidents on the A9 are caused by a number of reasons. There are dangerous junctions, confusing switches between dual and single carriageways and the phenomenon of platooning, which has already been mentioned. When they look in their mirrors and see long queues of cars

behind them, HGV drivers sometimes feel pressured by those motorists to travel over the speed limit. If they keep to the recommended 40mph, long queues often form and driver frustration can lead to dangerous overtaking manoeuvres. Any HGV driver caught doing 47mph risks a fine and three points on their licence. In an industry in which a person's licence is their living, that is causing a great deal of strain. As a result, increasing the HGV speed limit could reduce the number of fatal accidents caused by platooning and, in the interim period before the A9 becomes a full dual carriageway, such temporary solutions could provide the answer to preventing serious head-on collisions.

I understand the consternation of some road safety campaigners who, as Anne McTaggart mentioned, believe that increasing speed limits results in more accidents. However, until a trial is put in place, we will never know. At the very least, Transport Scotland should be trialling a 50mph speed limit on the A9 that, if successful, could predicate a permanent shift in that direction.

We should also look abroad to countries where an increased speed limit is in force for ideas, evidence and figures on road safety. For example, when in New Zealand the speed limit for HGVs over 7.5 tonnes was increased to 56mph, there was an 18 per cent reduction in accidents.

As well as highlighting the safety elements of increasing speed limits, we can also make a substantial business case for such a move. Shorter, more efficient delivery times would give hauliers an advantage, and the Department for Transport has claimed that between 1.1 million and 2.4 million driving hours per year could be saved. The A9 is the main trunk road connecting the Highlands with central Scotland, so improving transportation on that main artery could be a major boon to businesses operating to and from the Highlands.

There is an additional road safety element in legislating for a speed limit change, because tired hauliers who drive over their allotted hours are a road safety danger. Increasing the speed limit on single-carriageway lanes could see a reduction in hauliers' testing the limits of their endurance; faster delivery times would result in fewer exhausted drivers.

Further, HGV drivers currently operate in a corridor of uncertainty relating to speed limits. As Anne McTaggart said, figures show that 70 per cent of all HGV drivers currently break the speed limit and that those who travel at or below the speed limit are faced with slower transportation times, which can put them at a competitive disadvantage. We should also understand that the current speed limit was introduced decades ago and has remained unchanged since then, despite

improvements in technology, HGV design and stopping distances.

The move that the motion proposes would be good for the economy, for drivers, for the environment—there is evidence that it would lower carbon emissions—and, most importantly, for road safety. For those reasons, I think that we should set the wheels in motion for at least a pilot increase in HGV speeds on the A9.

12:51

**The Minister for Transport and Veterans (Keith Brown):** I am grateful to Dave Stewart for having gained the debate, for his comments, and for the contribution that he has made to the issue. He has made the case on the HGV speed limit on a number of occasions, as have Murdo Fraser and Dave Thompson. Fergus Ewing has also been very interested in the issue.

I take on board Murdo Fraser's point about the lack of an alternative view in this debate. Obviously, I am not here to represent the Scottish Green Party, but I think that other viewpoints must be presented.

I gently take issue with my colleague Dave Thompson because he reckoned that the issue is a simple one. I do not think that it is that simple; I think that there is more to it than perhaps meets the eye. It is incumbent on Government before taking a decision such as the motion proposes to take into account the complexities and possible consequences of taking action.

I agree with much of what members have said on the issue. I do not want that to be forgotten as I go through some of the points that might raise issues in the minds of others.

Significant challenges face us in road safety in Scotland, as Anne McTaggart mentioned in passing. It is true that we have had the devolution of powers to the Scottish ministers to set our own national speed limits. Dave Thompson mentioned the 2008 report about which nothing had been done. However, we did not have the required powers at that time. We gained them only recently, and we now have the greater freedom that Dave Thompson and others have mentioned.

In the road safety framework that we set for 2020, we set ourselves challenging national road safety targets. We still have them in Scotland, although similar targets have been dispensed with elsewhere in the UK, or at least at Westminster. Our targets were to reduce fatalities by 40 per cent and serious injuries by 55 per cent, based on a 2004 to 2008 average.

It is worth saying that the latest confirmed figures for road casualties in Scotland—for 2011—show that the figures are at their lowest level since

records began. It is also worth noting that two thirds of fatal and serious accidents involving HGVs are on A roads and that two thirds of accidents and three quarters of fatal accidents involving HGVs are on single-carriageway roads. There is no guarantee that a speed limit increase would alleviate the problem of frustration and dangerous overtaking. It is worth bearing in mind that, if the HGV speed limit was raised, overtaking would continue but at a higher speed. It takes longer for a car to overtake an HGV travelling at 50mph than one travelling at 40mph.

Members have heard mention of the Transport Research Laboratory report of 2008, which had 14 recommendations for further research. As Dave Thompson said, it also referred to the possibility of considering an experimental trial of a raised speed limit for HGVs. The suggestion was that a trial could be conducted over a three-year period on the A9 between Perth and Inverness.

As I said, at the time the Scottish ministers did not have the powers to enact such a speed limit, even if they had wanted to. However, the modelling work done by the TRL on the A9 in 2009 suggests that to gain an optimum reduction in accidents we would have to install average-speed cameras and maintain the current 40mph speed limit. That is a change from the previous approach. The TRL also said that, from a road safety perspective, the best approach could be to leave speed limits as they are or even slow cars down. There is different advice even from the same organisation.

National-level modelling suggests that there are economic benefits from increasing the speed limits for trucks—a number of members mentioned that—and decreasing journey times. However, TRL said that the economic benefits are likely to be at least partially offset by greater emissions. A number of members said that they reckon that emissions could be reduced, but TRL reckoned that there would be greater emissions and lower air quality. It also suggested that economic benefits would potentially outweigh the published cost of accidents. The modelling in 2009 did not examine the impact on other road users of road closures, which could be an especially significant issue on the A9 given the lack of alternative routes.

I wanted to make the point that there are different points of view on the proposal.

**David Stewart:** I thank the minister for his comments. He is being very fair minded about the debate that we have had.

The consultation in England and Wales has finished and there will be a massive amount of evidence, which will also be applicable to Scotland, on air quality, speed and safety. I

assume that the minister's officials will analyse the consultation in England and Wales. What are the costs of having a Scottish consultation or a mini-pilot? I understand that there are practical constraints, but it seems to me that this is a fairly minor experiment that could have greater gains for Scotland.

**Keith Brown:** To answer the first point, I confirm that we are keen to see the evidence from the consultation that has been undertaken elsewhere as it is obviously relevant to Scotland as well. It does not follow that we should do the same as is done elsewhere, but the evidence that has been collated will be interesting, and Transport Scotland officials are looking to get it.

On the point about the pilot, I have said before in response to a point that Murdo Fraser made and separately in correspondence with Dave Thompson that we are seriously considering the matter. However, the first consideration has to be road safety. Once we get past that point, we can start to think about the costs, which Dave Stewart mentioned. One cost would arise from the establishment of average-speed cameras, which we think would be essential to ensure that the change, if it was to happen, was conducted safely.

In his speech, Dave Stewart asked that we seriously study the issues. We are doing that, not least in relation to a pilot on the A9. He said that the proposal would lead to a reduction in accidents but, as I said, the evidence on that is not complete.

On the example that Murdo Fraser gave, it is worth bearing it in mind that the evidence from New Zealand does not show that increased speed limits led to a reduction in accidents. There was a continuation of a long-term downward trend in casualties per 100 million vehicle kilometres, but there is no evidence that a change to HGV speed limits ensured that that continued. There was a fall in the proportion of fatalities caused by HGVs from 2006. The policy was introduced in 2004, though, and fatalities increased between 2004 and 2005 and between 2005 and 2006. There was also an increase in injuries. The evidence is not conclusive, but it is something that Transport Scotland officials have looked at and they will continue to do that.

We have to consider how we maintain safety if we are to increase the speed limit, but I am certainly open minded on the proposal. The Government is considering it seriously, as we have been asked to do by the members who are present, but we have to do that in the context of considering safety. We have no plans to consider making changes to national speed limits or vehicle speed limits without established evidence. Separate from that, although we have no plans to do that generally, the issue of a pilot, specifically

on the A9, is one that we are looking at very seriously. I am more than happy to confirm that we will keep members updated on the progress.

12:58

*Meeting suspended.*

14:30

*On resuming—*

## **“Management of patients on NHS waiting lists”**

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** Good afternoon. The first item of business is a statement by the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing, Alex Neil, on the Audit Scotland report “Management of patients on NHS waiting lists”. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement and there should therefore be no interventions or interruptions. Members who wish to ask a question can press their request-to-speak button now. I call the cabinet secretary. Mr Neil, you have 10 minutes.

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil):** I welcome the opportunity to make a statement to Parliament on the report prepared by the Auditor General for Scotland, “Management of patients on NHS waiting lists”.

First, I welcome the findings and accept the recommendations of the Audit Scotland report, and in particular the fact that after extensive investigation no examples were found of any deliberate manipulation of waiting list records.

The Audit Scotland report is entirely consistent with and accords with the findings of the 15 internal audits reported to Parliament by me on 20 December, which also found no examples of deliberate manipulation.

I remind Parliament that this is the largest investigation into the management practices of waiting times ever carried out in NHS Scotland. Between both sets of audits, more than 500,000 transactions relating to periods of unavailability were scrutinised, and 400 staff were interviewed as part of that process. Consistent with the internal audit review last year, Audit Scotland commissioned consultants to extract extensive data from national health service board systems and to provide a breakdown of that data, which was then analysed in detail to identify any unusual patterns and practices. That information was used to select samples, which Audit Scotland used to carry out more targeted investigation of individual patient records.

I refer to some of the detailed findings of the report. Audit Scotland comments that

“Systems for managing waiting list information have inadequate controls”

and that a number of different systems are in operation in Scotland. We accept that systems needed to be modernised and that information contained within those systems has to be timely and accurate and must serve patient needs.

Audit Scotland also makes several references to the rise in social unavailability since 2008 and the fall in 2011-12. There is a very simple explanation for that. The Government introduced the new ways system on 1 January 2008, scrapping the previously discredited hidden waiting lists system in which patients could be left without a guarantee for many years. When we took office, 30,000 patients languished forgotten on those hidden waiting lists, with no hope of quick treatment. Audit Scotland recognised that in its 2010 audit, in which it welcomed the introduction of the new system as being more open, transparent and fairer to patients and said that the NHS had “done well” to implement the changes.

Since 2008, boards have been gradually switching over to the new system, hence the rise in recorded periods of social unavailability. I would hope that members would recognise that the system was designed to be helpful for patients. It gave patients some choice and control over when they should come to hospital and allowed them to come at a time and on a date convenient for them.

One of the by-products of the significant reduction in waiting times is that some patients might need to delay routine attendances at hospital to accommodate their own personal preferences and social circumstances. Audit Scotland recognised that social unavailability started to reduce in most boards in late 2011. That was partly a consequence of NHS Lothian switching how it recorded its patients. The reduction reflects the previous cabinet secretary’s instruction to NHS Lothian to immediately remove patients from the unavailability list and put them back on the treatment list.

Boards quality assuring their lists as part of the data migration to new systems as well as additional capacity being increased by boards locally, such as in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, were other reasons for the reduction in social unavailability levels. We should also recognise that, in 2011-12, boards were preparing for the introduction of the new treatment time guarantee.

The report identifies that there was “not enough scrutiny” of the reasons for the increasing numbers of patients with periods of unavailability by the Scottish Government and boards. As part of the legislation relating to the 12-week in-patient and day-case legal treatment time guarantee, there is a requirement that periods of unavailability must be recorded and monitored. The legislation covers in-patients and day cases, and we have made it clear that that approach also applies to out-patients.

Over the past six years, waiting times have fallen dramatically and, according to our patient surveys, we have the highest level of satisfaction

in the United Kingdom and the highest levels ever recorded in Scotland, with 88 per cent of patients being satisfied or very satisfied with their waiting time position.

We need to ensure that patients' individual needs are met and that information is clear, consistent and readily understandable. That continues to be a high priority for the national health service in Scotland, and that is why I am pleased to announce that I am introducing a patient advice line to ensure that, if patients need help and support in relation to their waiting time rights, they will get it.

There is one additional point of clarification that I would like to make to members on the findings of the Audit Scotland report. NHS Tayside has now completed its detailed internal investigation into allegations of manipulation of waiting lists. I am pleased to advise members about the outcome of that investigation. NHS Tayside said:

"there was no evidence presented throughout the investigation to substantiate this allegation, no evidence found that managers sought to deliberately manipulate waiting times, nor any evidence that they sought to bully or coerce members of staff to inappropriately code waiting times data".

Audit Scotland acknowledged the outcome of that investigation in its report.

In my previous statement to Parliament on waiting lists, I advised that we would swiftly follow up all the internal audit recommendations. That will also apply to the nine recommendations from the Auditor General. I am pleased to say that, as of today, more than 91 per cent of the recommendations from the internal audits and many of the recommendations from Audit Scotland have already been implemented. A small number of actions have an implementation period beyond March. The extended timescale reflects the complexity of some of the recommendations—for example, on upgrading and introducing new information technology systems, which in some cases requires recontracting. We are continuing to hold chief executives and chairs of NHS Scotland to account for that timetable.

I say again that boards will undertake a follow-up audit on the management of waiting times within the next 16 months to ensure that the planned improvements that have been requested have been made, and that they are working effectively.

I hope that that will finally put to rest some Opposition members' accusations that NHS staff are involved in widespread dishonest and deliberate manipulation of patients' records. I stand by the integrity and basic honesty of our 155,000 staff, and I expect members to support that position.

**Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** I thank the cabinet secretary for the advance copy of his statement.

It is really surprising that, as a nationalist, Alex Neil is relying on the "Little Britain" defence of "Computer says no." Audit Scotland's report on the management of waiting times is

"a wake-up call to the Scottish Government".

Those are not my words—they are the words of the Royal College of Nursing. In the words of the British Medical Association—again, they are not my words—the systems are

"inadequate and have been open to manipulation."

In short, the Scottish National Party has been accused of putting targets before patient care.

What Audit Scotland has exposed is that one in three patients was parked on hidden waiting lists. Their waiting time guarantees were suspended, and some were without an end date for that suspension.

Social unavailability reached a high point in July 2011, then NHS Lothian was rumbled and suddenly the numbers fell across Scotland. It was not that patients were being treated faster; at the same time, waiting times were going up. One in four patients had their waiting time guarantee breached but, miraculously, only 3 per cent were reported to the Scottish Government. As the cabinet secretary himself conceded on radio this morning, we can have no confidence in the reporting and monitoring systems.

The Scottish National Party crowed about having the lowest waiting times, but is it not true that none of those figures was real or based on fact? In its 2010 report, Audit Scotland warned the SNP about a problem with social unavailability. Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP knew about this in 2010 but they chose to turn a blind eye and do nothing about it.

I ask the cabinet secretary to please stop using the staff as a human shield; this is about him putting spin ahead of patient care. Is it not the case that we cannot trust the SNP with waiting times and certainly cannot trust it with the NHS?

**Alex Neil:** Since this situation became public, Jackie Baillie has been quoted many times accusing people in the NHS all over Scotland of fiddling figures à la Lothian. Even members of her own party privately say to me that they are embarrassed by her continual attacks on the integrity and honesty of NHS staff in Scotland.

Under the Administration of which Jackie Baillie was a part, a total of 104,000 people were on waiting lists in Scotland, including the 35,000 on the hidden waiting list. The number of people on the waiting list in Scotland is now down to 65,000,

including those designated as socially and medically unavailable. That represents a 40 per cent reduction in the waiting list since Nicola Sturgeon became health secretary.

As for Jackie Baillie's accusation that we have hidden waiting lists, I will make two points. First, how can they be hidden when the information is public knowledge and is published and updated regularly on the Information Services Division Scotland website, which is open to everyone? If everyone else is so unsmart, why was Jackie Baillie herself not smart enough to find out that there was a problem when she looked at the website? Secondly, the 35,000 people on the previous Administration's hidden waiting list lost their guarantee. No one on our list has lost their treatment guarantee.

All day Jackie Baillie has been quoting the figure of 23 per cent as part of some kind of attack on the numbers in relation to unavailability. I point out that a third of those people told us that they were medically unavailable. As a result, it is dishonest to make hay with that figure—that is extremely worrying in an Opposition party.

Finally—again, this information is in the public domain, so Jackie Baillie can go and check it out—if we look at the second quarter of 2011, which ended in June and is therefore relevant to this discussion, and include the people with unavailability, we can see that 94.3 per cent of patients under this Government and under Nicola Sturgeon met the 18-week guarantee. If we exclude those with unavailability, the figure was 97.3 per cent. At no time in the eight years from 1999 to 2007 did the Labour-Liberal Administration get anywhere near that kind of performance.

**Jackson Carlaw (West Scotland) (Con):** I thank the cabinet secretary for the advance copy of his statement.

While no less concerned, Scottish Conservatives have attempted to steer an even course. I have no interest in perpetuating a debate between the present Government and its predecessor as to who did what best. We are concerned for patients.

We have had two sets of reports: the internal reports, and the report from Audit Scotland. At the very least, they have created anxiety and confusion in the public's mind. Is there a case for some health boards to answer? Can the cabinet secretary assure the public that they can now have confidence in the system? Given that, in response to the internal audits, he suggested that he would consider repeating the exercise after 18 months, will he today, in the light of the information that we now have, give a more express commitment to do so? Could we have agreement

to commission a further internal audit earlier than that—perhaps after 12 months?

**Alex Neil:** I thank Jackson Carlaw for the tone of his question, which was much more reasonable and realistic than the tone that we heard from the Labour Party.

Jackson Carlaw's suggestion of doing that audit quicker, within 12 months, is a very good one, and I am happy to accept it. I hope that that partly answers the part of his question about public confidence in the system.

More than 70 per cent of the population in Scotland are living in health board areas covered by TrakCare or an enhanced version of TrakCare, which is a very robust system and has been recognised as such by Audit Scotland. By the end of this year, more than 90 per cent of the population will be covered by that system. I am confident that, once all the systems are in place, we can have absolutely total confidence about the integrity and robustness of data collection in every health board in Scotland.

**Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP):** Does the cabinet secretary believe that there is a need for clearer recording of reasons for social unavailability, given that it is reported that 900 orthopaedic patients at Glasgow's Western infirmary were deemed socially unavailable? For some patients, that was because they had opted to wait for their preferred hospital and consultant. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that such preferences are not part of the waiting time guarantee, that NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde did not remove those patients from the waiting list, and that they were still being seen by their preferred clinician in the hospital of their choice?

**Alex Neil:** Bob Doris is absolutely right in what he says, but I point out that, as a result of the reforms that were introduced last year by my predecessor, Nicola Sturgeon, as of 1 October last year we no longer have a category called social unavailability—it is simply called patient unavailability. If a patient advises the NHS board that, for whatever reason, they are unable to attend on a certain date, that is fully recorded and agreed with the patient. The options that are open to the patient are then explained to them and a way forward is agreed.

To ensure that there is no dubiety about that, either now or in future, the TrakCare system records all that information, including the reasons. Furthermore, the board is then required to send out a letter to the patient to confirm the conversation and the way forward for the patient's care.

**Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** How does the cabinet secretary explain exhibit 8 in the report, which shows a ninefold

variation in ophthalmology and a fivefold variation in orthopaedics for social unavailability? We know that those specialties are under the greatest pressure and, surprise, surprise, they are the ones where up to 50 per cent of patients, in different board areas, declared themselves unavailable. Are the SNP's boasts on waiting times not actually based on fiction, as is made completely clear by exhibit 9? What SNP credibility is left with regard to the system as it has operated until this point?

**Alex Neil:** I will quote from Audit Scotland in relation to our introduction of the new system—Richard Simpson will accept this as gospel, as his whole argument is based on what Audit Scotland says. In “Managing NHS waiting lists: A review of new arrangements”, which was published in 2010, Audit Scotland said:

“The NHS has done well to implement the new arrangements”,

and people no longer

“remain on the waiting list indefinitely.”

In 2011, another report relating to the new system was published, “Measuring NHS waiting lists: Twelve-month summary impact report”. Let me quote exactly what Audit Scotland—not me or my predecessor—said:

“This audit provided assurance that the new arrangements are generally working well. The Scottish Government has developed further guidance about the areas where we raised concerns such as the treatment of patients who do not or cannot attend their appointments. ISD Scotland is continuing to work with NHS boards to improve the quality of New Ways data. There should not be any need to conduct a follow up study in the foreseeable future.”

Audit Scotland had full faith in the new system. Clearly, as a result, the allegations that have been made by the Labour Party are nonsensical. Having reviewed half a million files and more than a quarter of million transactions, and having interviewed 400 staff, although Audit Scotland did not bring itself to say so, it found no evidence of Lothian-style fiddling. It is totally unacceptable for the Labour Party to infer that there is that evidence.

**The Presiding Officer:** If I am to call all members who want to be called, we will need shorter questions and answers.

**Aileen McLeod (South Scotland) (SNP):** One clear aspect that has come out of the Audit Scotland report is that the patient administration IT infrastructure was not robust enough when the audit was carried out. For example, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde had 11 different IT systems. What progress has been made in upgrading IT systems to meet the required standard?

**Alex Neil:** Substantial progress has been made. As I said, 70 per cent of the population is now

covered by TrakCare or an enhanced version of it, and by the end of the year more than 90 per cent of the population will be covered by that system.

In relation to Glasgow, Aileen McLeod is absolutely right. We inherited 11 different systems. There are now three systems, and that number is going down to one system—TrakCare. However, even though the old systems that we inherited from the previous Administration were not robust enough for interrogation by Audit Scotland to get the answers to its questions, when it did a manual check it found that there was no manipulation and no concern about the robustness of the information. We should bear it in mind that the manual check proved that there had been no Lothian-style fiddling in Glasgow.

**Drew Smith (Glasgow) (Lab):** Seventy per cent of all orthopaedic patients at the Western infirmary were marked as socially unavailable at the beginning of 2011. Nine hundred real people with painful conditions waited for treatment in Glasgow. Some of them might even have been Nicola Sturgeon's constituents. Does the cabinet secretary not realise that it is not credible to say, and he is making a fool of himself to pretend, that Glaswegians were somehow twice as likely to be on holiday as people in the rest of the country in January and February 2011? Will he now, on behalf of Nicola Sturgeon, apologise to the thousands of patients across Glasgow who may have waited for longer than they needed to?

**Alex Neil:** Not only am I not going to apologise, but I am going to say that I am proud of the fact that we have an 88 per cent satisfaction rate on waiting times from patients in NHS Scotland. Had there been any major problem with waiting times and waiting lists, Nicola Sturgeon's surgery, my surgery and everybody else's surgery would have been absolutely full of people complaining about the time that they had to wait. Quite frankly, if the Labour Party had anything like half the 88 per cent satisfaction rating that the NHS has had, it would have made a decent Opposition.

**Jim Eadie (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP):** Given that there have been two robust and thorough investigations, initiated by the Government, into NHS Lothian, can the cabinet secretary provide an update on what steps have been taken to implement the changes at NHS Lothian so that patients in Lothian will never again be denied treatment because of the manipulation of waiting times and an unacceptable management culture?

**Alex Neil:** A comprehensive programme has been implemented by the newly appointed chief executive, Tim Davison, and we already see a substantial improvement in waiting times and the number of people waiting for various procedures in NHS Lothian. I take this opportunity to pay tribute



to the tremendous work that Tim Davison has undertaken since his appointment as chief executive of NHS Lothian. I think that it will soon be back to its rightful position, in these terms, as one of the best performing health boards in Scotland.

**Jim Hume (South Scotland) (LD):** The minister has again asserted that the situation was not widespread across Scotland, but the Audit Scotland report, from which the minister likes to quote, clearly states:

“The trends in NHS Lothian were similar to the rest of Scotland.”

Will he finally accept that the situation was not the fault of inadequate IT systems but was down to capacity issues in certain specialties and clinics across all boards? Will he take the opportunity to apologise to the hard-working NHS staff who were forced to amend patient records in order to achieve his Government's targets without having the necessary tools to do that?

**Alex Neil:** I hope that Jim Hume is never called to do jury duty because, if he looked at the evidence, he would see that nobody outside of Lothian is guilty of manipulation or any other kind of fiddling of waiting lists in NHS Scotland. *[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Order.

**Alex Neil:** Instead of trying to manufacture suspicions and innuendo against NHS staff, Mr Hume should accept that the situation is a historical one—the period that is covered by the Auditor General's report ended in December 2011. We have accepted that there was a lack of sufficient robustness in the IT systems and are putting that right. When the problems at NHS Lothian were uncovered, my predecessor dealt with them effectively. The result is that we now have extremely robust systems. It is fair to say that we probably now have, in most of our health board areas, some of the most robust IT systems in the whole of the UK.

**Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):** What policies will be brought into place to ensure that NHS boards will share good practice on enhancing performance reporting to monitor patients and waiting lists?

**Alex Neil:** That is part of our interpretation of how to implement the original internal audit recommendations and Audit Scotland's recommendations. I have also requested a monthly report from each of the 15 boards that are involved in the exercise so that I can check the progress of the implementation of the recommendations. Further, as I said to Jackson Carlaw, I will commission a comprehensive evaluation after about 12 months in order to

ensure that the new systems are working properly throughout the national health service in Scotland.

**Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab):** Whatever Audit Scotland said in 2010, today it said:

“there was not enough scrutiny of how NHS boards were applying waiting list codes. Available information on increasing use of social unavailability codes should have highlighted potential concerns for the Scottish Government and NHS boards to investigate further.”

That information included evidence of increasing rates of social unavailability, the reported use of social unavailability codes for patient choice, and retrospective changes to waiting list data. There was not enough scrutiny.

Is the truth not that, for three or four years, Scottish ministers simply turned a blind eye to the evidence in order to make claims on waiting times that they knew to be inaccurate?

**Alex Neil:** Every health board in Scotland is audited every year. Half of them are actually audited by Audit Scotland. Not one audit brought to our attention any of those problems. Auditors are employed to audit the systems as well as the books. *[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Order.

**Alex Neil:** They are pretty hysterical this afternoon, Presiding Officer. It is because they cannot get a story out of this.

**The Presiding Officer:** Can we just get an answer, Mr Neil?

**Alex Neil:** The reality is that all the normal auditing procedures were carried out and the moment that the issues came to light, my predecessor acted decisively and swiftly.

**Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP):** Most people would agree that a whistleblowers hotline would be an important thing to have in order to give the public confidence in relation to this issue. What steps will be taken to introduce a whistleblowing system, and when is that likely to happen?

**Alex Neil:** I have already announced that, on 1 April, I will introduce a whistleblowing system throughout the NHS in Scotland. I hope to announce the details of that shortly.

**Margo MacDonald (Lothian) (Ind):** Can I ask the cabinet secretary to strike out on a new road and remember that we are talking about patients, who get flu or who trip and fall over and therefore cannot keep appointments, and doctors, who get caught up in traffic accidents and so on? We are allowing ourselves to be driven by targets that are unattainable, and everyone is getting far too neurotic about it.

**The Presiding Officer:** I think that that was a question, cabinet secretary.

**Alex Neil:** We have achieved and exceeded the targets. Nevertheless, the underlying point that my friend Margo MacDonald made was that we should never forget that this is about patients. That is why we set the targets. Under the previous Administration the waiting time was six months. We reduced that to 12 weeks. I think that patients will benefit enormously from that huge reduction.

## Renewable Energy Targets

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-05596, in the name of Murdo Fraser, on the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee report on the achievability of the Scottish Government's renewable energy targets.

I remind members that time is a bit tight.

15:00

**Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** In January 2012 the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee agreed its approach to a short, focused inquiry on the achievability of the Scottish Government's renewable energy targets. After 11 months of taking evidence, we published our report in November. Some members might infer that the timescale indicates poor convenership on my behalf; what it actually reflects is the seriousness and rigour that committee members—some of whom I see are applauding my last remark—applied in examining the Scottish Government's ambitious targets for the development of renewable energy technologies by 2020.

Before I comment on the substance of the committee's report I want to place on record my thanks to everyone who gave evidence to the committee, whether they did so in writing, in person or during a committee visit. The committee is grateful for their time and contributions, which helped to shape the conclusions and recommendations in our report.

I also thank my fellow committee members for their patience and support throughout the lengthy process. We had a number of changes of personnel during the period and I am aware that there was a particular challenge for members who were asked to approve the report when they had not directly heard the evidence.

I thank our very competent team of clerks, who supported us efficiently and with good humour. In particular, I thank Joanna Hardy, who had the difficult job of drafting the report. Thanks are also due to Scottish Parliament information centre staff, in particular Alasdair Reid, and to the Parliament's media office for handling so well the arrangements for Donald Trump's appearance before the committee. Whatever our views on his contribution, that was a good day for the Parliament.

In a 13-minute speech I cannot do justice to all the areas that the committee scrutinised and commented on. I will focus on areas that I think are key to achieving the Government's ambitious targets.

It is worth making the point that this was a report into not the desirability but the achievability of the targets—had it been the former, it might have been even harder to get a consensus around some of the report's conclusions. Members will be aware that I have views on certain aspects of renewable energy policy, in particular the expansion of onshore wind, which—in my usual understated, shrinking-violet fashion—I occasionally air publicly. However, in this debate I speak as convener of the committee, so today, at least, I will leave it to others to make those arguments, if they wish to do so.

As the committee learned during its inquiry, the renewable energy sector is a rapidly evolving policy area. During the committee's consideration of our draft report and after its publication there have been a number of policy announcements at Scottish and UK levels. I will endeavour to comment on those, where they are relevant.

First, let us consider the big question. Are the Scottish Government targets achievable? In relation to the target of generating the equivalent of 100 per cent of electricity consumption by 2020, yes. The committee agreed that, on balance, the evidence that we heard is that the target is achievable, but—and this is crucial—it will be achievable only if a number of issues are addressed. I will say more about those issues later.

What about the target for renewable sources to provide the equivalent of 11 per cent of Scotland's heat demand by 2020? There was a more mixed result in that regard. We recognised that the interim target had been met, but the committee received evidence that there is a risk that the 2020 target might not be met.

Finally, a target has been set for local and community ownership of 500MW energy by 2020. We have doubts about the level at which the target is set and we recommended that separate targets for local and community ownership be established.

I return to those issues that need to be addressed if the 2020 target of generating the equivalent of 100 per cent of electricity consumption is to be achieved. We believe that one of the most challenging issues is planning. As we learned, uncertainty, time delay and complexity within the current planning regime increase the levels of risk and therefore expense for developers, which in turn could place in jeopardy the Scottish Government's ability to meet its targets. We also heard from many objectors, particularly those who were opposed to inappropriately sited wind turbines, concerns about the way in which the current system works.

As members will be aware from the media, an increasing number of renewable energy

applications are being submitted to local authorities for determination. The distribution of those applications across local authorities is resulting in some councils experiencing very high volumes of applications. Combined with the pace at which renewable energy technology is evolving, that can leave councils facing the significant challenge of balancing national priorities with local interests. The committee heard that the pressure had become so great that some councils, such as Aberdeenshire Council and Fife Council, had called for a temporary moratorium on onshore wind-farm applications to allow their planning teams to cope with the volume of work.

One potential remedy for the squeeze on resources that the committee considered is the introduction of higher planning fees to enable an expansion in staff numbers. As members are aware, an increase in planning fees was the subject of a recent Scottish Government announcement, which stated that, subject to parliamentary approval, planning fees will be increased by 20 per cent in April 2013.

**Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP):** Having been involved in the predecessor committee's inquiry into renewable energy, I recall that the committee reported in 2009 that councils were underresourced with planners. Did the committee look at why the number of planners has been cut further in the time between then and now?

**Murdo Fraser:** I do not recall that that issue was specifically addressed in the evidence. I would need to go back and check what the witnesses said to us, but I suspect that the issue is a symptom of the broader squeeze on local authority budgets. Perhaps I could come back to the member later if I get the opportunity.

The committee supports the Government's proposed fee increase for larger-scale planning applications where those will not disadvantage community developers. However, we are clear that, in return for higher fees, planning authorities should look to address duplication of effort for developers and to improve efficiency. One example of removing duplication of effort that we highlighted is that planning authorities could gather information on cumulative visual impact from their own records rather than require each developer to undertake that task separately.

We welcome the minister's confirmation that the Government, along with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, will look at proposals to link performance with the wider reform of planning fees. We also welcome the fact that the Scottish Government is working with stakeholders to identify and pilot good practice on a proportionate approach to the provision of information to support planning applications. However, it would be helpful

if the minister could confirm when that pilot will be completed and evaluated.

Another issue that I want to mention relates to environmental impact assessments, which are required for planning proposals that are likely to have a significant effect on the environment by virtue of factors such as size, nature and location. As the committee learned, planning authorities are tending to err on the side of caution in requesting such assessments for medium to small-scale projects, as they are aware that the absence of an environmental statement is open to challenge by objectors. We therefore recommended that the Scottish Government should clarify to local authorities those circumstances under which it is acceptable not to provide an environmental statement.

In its response, the Government explained that the requirements derive from European directives, which the European Commission is currently reviewing. We would welcome information on how the Government is engaging in that review and on how the Government is working with local authorities to ensure that they are not overly cautious in interpreting the circumstances in which an environmental statement is required.

It is a source of frustration to planning authorities that developers ignore spatial plans and put in speculative applications to councils for determination. Spatial plans identify the areas appropriate for siting turbines and provide clarity for developers and local residents on the preferred areas for development contained within the plan. We were extremely disappointed by the progress made by local authorities in producing spatial plans. In its response, COSLA explained that a short-life working group on onshore consents had been formed during the committee's inquiry and that the working group would look to take forward some of those matters.

Although the committee welcomes that consideration, it remains concerned by the speed of progress in providing spatial plans, which are crucial to informing developers and the public what they might expect in relation to renewable developments in their area. In our report, we also urge developers to play their part in reducing planning authorities' workload by paying due cognisance to the local spatial framework and areas of search, where those are available.

Throughout the inquiry, the committee heard a strong message from potential investors that strong political leadership and a robust, reliable and predictable investment climate and subsidy regime are crucial if the Government's targets are to be met.

A range of funding is available to support the development of renewables, including the

renewable energy investment fund, the Green Investment Bank and the community and renewable energy scheme. However, the committee heard that small and medium-scale projects faced distinctive difficulties in attracting lending from banks, with some banks withdrawing from the market segment supported by feed-in tariffs, which tends to be the smaller developments.

Given that small-scale installations have a valuable contribution to make towards achieving the Government's targets and that they are more affordable for farmers, landowners or community groups, it is important that such developers are able to access lending. We therefore regret the reluctance of banks to lend in that sector, but we welcome the commitment of the renewable energy investment fund to support community and rural business projects. We would welcome an indication from the minister of any projects that will be financed by the fund.

I will touch briefly on the question of infrastructure. In addition to the question of transmission and distribution, another issue that arose was the ability of the grid to reach areas where renewable energy resources are most abundant. Infrastructure—or the lack of it—also impacts on Scotland's capacity to export spare energy. Scottish islands such as Orkney best illustrate the issue. Orkney's connection to the mainland is at full capacity, but there is no project big enough to provide the critical mass that would provide a return on the investment in a new cable.

Although we heard from some witnesses that there was a strong case for transmission network operators going ahead and increasing capacity in advance of increased demand, the Office of the Gas and Electricity Markets' duty is to ensure that investment does not place in advance of need, in order to protect the consumer from the cost of an asset that is not used. Although we welcome Ofgem's announcement in April last year that it would fast-track the business plans of Scottish transmission network operators to hasten upgrades to capacity and greater interconnection, we remain concerned that Ofgem is not taking a proactive approach to grid development.

We will also watch with interest the outcome of the Scottish island renewable generation steering group, which was set up by the United Kingdom Government in October 2012 to advise on the barriers to faster connection of Scottish island renewables.

The committee was strongly supportive of grid-connected test facilities, such as the European Marine Energy Centre in Orkney and the proposed European offshore wind deployment centre at Aberdeen Bay. We were fortunate enough to see the test centre and the impressive array of other

renewables facilities in Orkney and the Pentland Firth. Test facilities are critical to Scotland being at the forefront of newer technologies, proving the case for investment and helping to drive down costs.

I will close by commenting on one of the most contentious issues relating to renewable energy—its potential impact on tourism and Scotland's rural and remote areas. I do not doubt the strength of feeling on the issues. At the time of reporting, the committee had received no robust, empirical evidence indicating a substantial negative impact. However, given its importance, it is vital that VisitScotland and the Scottish Government continue to gather and take account of evidence from visitors to Scotland and other research in the area, and we welcome the Government's commitment to do so. Since concluding our evidence taking, I am aware that at least one more study—from the John Muir Trust—into the area has been published. I am sure that there will be more.

The inquiry into the achievability of the Scottish Government's renewable energy targets may not have ended up being short and focused; nonetheless, I hope that it was valuable. I hope that our recommendations will be helpful to the Government in developing future policy, and that the report will be a useful contribution to the ongoing and lively debate about the development of renewable energy in Scotland.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations in the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee's 7th Report, 2012 (Session 4): *Report on the achievability of the Scottish Government's renewable energy targets* (SP Paper 220).

15:14

**The Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism (Fergus Ewing):** I thank the committee members and clerks for the report and the huge amount of work that went into producing it.

The report is presented in a balanced fashion and makes a positive and constructive contribution to the debate about Scotland's energy future. Its publication coincided with our update to the Scottish Government's renewables route map. Both publications underline the welcome degree of broad consensus in the Parliament about the importance of renewable energy and energy policy as a whole.

I warmly welcome the committee's central finding that our target to produce the equivalent of 100 per cent of domestic electricity demand from renewables by 2020 can be achieved.

Our renewable heat target is also of the utmost importance. Recent figures from the Energy

Saving Trust show that renewable heat is on the increase throughout Scotland. However, monitoring progress is complex and we are working hard to improve in that area.

Meeting our renewables targets will really help to reduce carbon emissions. Figures released this week show a 35 per cent drop in emissions from our fossil fuel power stations between 2006 and 2011. That has coincided with huge growth in our renewable energy output.

The targets are also about jobs and investment. They are about making the cost of energy more affordable to consumers by reducing our reliance on fossil fuels.

Renewables are also fundamentally a matter of energy security. This week, Alistair Buchanan—Ofgem's chief executive—warned us that the United Kingdom's electricity capacity margin could drop from 14 per cent today to less than 5 per cent by 2015-16. I think that I am right in saying that that repeated the warning that was given to the UK Government last October. It could hardly be more serious. The fact that we have, it is sad to say, reached the pass at which there will be a margin of only 4 or 5 per cent between generation capacity and peak demand can be seen only as a sad indictment of the neglect of energy policy for far too many decades.

Secure supplies are of paramount importance. That is particularly true in the context of the developing UK Energy Bill and its incentives for new renewables and low-carbon thermal capacity. Put simply, Scotland's renewables output, especially offshore wind, can play a vital role in helping to keep the lights on throughout the UK—something to which, I think, we all subscribe. Our renewable power will, therefore, play a vital role in the UK achieving its binding renewables targets as well as keeping the lights on.

We also hear concerns about the timescales for building new gas capacity. Clear and fast signals are necessary if those investments are to be made and to become available when they are needed. The warnings by Keith Anderson of Scottish Power should be given considerable weight by the UK Government in that respect. That is important because the lower-carbon thermal generation will complement and help to balance Scotland's renewable generation.

Investment in that new low-carbon capacity creates major implications for the UK grid network. The Beaulieu to Denny project represents Scotland's first major grid investment in 20 years and the first of the major reinforcements that will deliver a transmission network that is fit for an energy mix rich in renewables.

Ofgem is fast tracking a £7 billion investment programme by Scottish grid companies to upgrade

our network and deliver renewable electricity to the Great Britain market and, potentially, beyond. Crucially, it recognises that cost both to be competitive and to represent value for money for consumers.

Those investments of billions of pounds have been driven strongly by increases in operational and planned onshore wind capacity. That underlines the point that, in the right places, onshore wind developments play, and will continue to play, a vital role in driving investment and creating a platform for the development of our offshore renewables potential.

The recently formed intergovernmental group on island charging—which was formed at my behest and which, I am pleased to say, was agreed to by the UK Government, working in partnership on this matter—will play a crucial role in developing those resources, and I welcome the UK Government's acknowledgement of the impact of a charging structure that acts as a significant brake on development. That is extremely important work, as members such as Liam McArthur are aware. I am determined to work with members of all parties to drive it forward so that a solution emerges from the intergovernmental group. It is crucial that that solution emerges sooner rather than later, otherwise key projects might be placed in jeopardy.

Murdo Fraser quite rightly highlighted the area of planning, to which I now turn. I was encouraged by the report's reaction to the ways in which the planning system can help us to achieve our renewables targets, although I recognise the improvements and actions that the committee suggested. The system is well set up to deliver large-scale onshore wind or to steer it away from sensitive locations. My working group on onshore renewables wants to achieve continuous improvements in that respect. On a smaller scale, there are some tensions in the system, which we have addressed.

As Murdo Fraser said, the 20 per cent increase in planning fees that will come into effect from April is intended to help to improve planning performance. In addition, we have provided an extra £673,000 to help planning authorities to process wind turbine applications. We plan to monitor that closely and to share good practice.

Planning policy must continue to support the development of a diverse range of renewable energy technologies and to guide development to appropriate locations. Our review of the national planning framework and Scottish planning policy will reinforce and clarify policy on the areas that we expect to be protected from significant development.

Where the Scottish Government is the decision taker on electricity act consents or on planning appeals, we will approve only the right developments in the right places. Our decisions on such matters are available online and data capture—an issue that the committee highlighted—is improving all the time.

Our published response to the report covered the issues that I have dealt with and the others that the committee highlighted. I am sure that many of them will be raised during the debate, and I look forward to responding towards the end of the debate.

15:22

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** I echo the thanks that Murdo Fraser expressed to those who took part in the inquiry and who helped to draw up the report.

As has been said, the purpose of the committee's inquiry was to examine whether the Scottish Government's 2020 targets for renewable energy could be achieved. The renewables industry is new and developing and weekly developments added to the complication of managing the inquiry and meant that many aspects that are pertinent to the industry were hardly touched on. One such example is energy storage. We talked about pumped hydro and batteries, and we have since been learning about hydrogen. I hope that we will examine all those technologies further in the future, as we did not go into them in any depth in our report.

One of my main concerns at the outset of the inquiry remains: the ability of communities to develop their own renewables for the benefit of those who live locally. Community benefit clauses appear to be the answer, but the committee heard evidence that communities were much more likely to influence a development and to retain much more of the wealth that was created in their area when they had a real stake in it. The bigger the share that a community had in a development, the greater the amount of wealth that was retained, with outright ownership being very much the best option. However, communities struggled to engage in development because of the costs and the red tape involved. We need different criteria and planning processes so that communities can cut the costs of development, and we need to ensure that adequate funding is available to allow them to develop, as Murdo Fraser said.

There was much that the committee agreed on, but an aspect that we could not agree on was how constitutional change would impact on our ability to meet the 2020 targets. There are real concerns that the Scottish Government must address. If it does not, development will stall, which will impact

on our ability to meet the targets. The Scottish Government refuses to answer those questions, however, and has used its majority on the committee to remove them from the report.

**Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** Does the member not agree that, despite the fact that some witnesses expressed that view, all the evidence is that companies continue to invest in renewable energy in Scotland and that those who are sceptical and talk about uncertainty as a result of constitutional change are really just scaremongering with a political agenda?

**Rhoda Grant:** Companies that work in Scotland such as SSE cannot be seen as political scaremongers and need to be listened to. It is disappointing that the Government used its majority on the committee to close down the questioning on that aspect. However, the questions will not go away. The question that remains unanswered is: what will the Scottish Government do to honour the subsidy agreements that have been entered into under renewable obligation certificates or contracts for difference should Scotland separate from the United Kingdom?

To ensure that development is not stalled, the Scottish Government needs to give a commitment on that and tell us how it will pay for the subsidies. Currently, the subsidies are met by UK energy customers. In Scotland, we proudly boast of having a third of the UK's renewable developments, but we have only 10 per cent of the customer base. If the cost of the subsidy falls on that customer base, that will mean substantial increases in energy bills.

The committee heard a number of concerns about renewable heat, some of which appeared to be conflicting. One was that the targets are not ambitious enough, while another was that they are too ambitious and unlikely to be met. Although electricity that is generated by renewables is reasonably easy to distribute, there is no easy way to distribute renewable heat. We heard evidence of district heating systems that work well, but they work only in certain locations and they appear to be economic only when connected with new build, rather than existing properties, because of the cost of retrofit.

It was clear that a number of solutions are required, not least demand management through retrofitting insulation and improving building standards for new builds. If we are to meet our carbon emissions targets, we need to focus on renewable heat.

**Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP):** Paragraph 7 in the executive summary of the committee's report states that a factor in the difficulties with renewable heat

"has been the UK Government's delay in agreeing the domestic Renewable Heat Incentive".

Does the member not accept, therefore, that constitutional change offers benefits for achieving the targets that should not be dismissed?

**Rhoda Grant:** I do not share the member's confidence that the Scottish Government would be better than the UK Government at doing that. Indeed, we need retrofit for insulation to cut down demand, as well as the renewable heat incentive. However, I agree that we need that incentive with some speed.

On the grid, the minister talked about the work of the intergovernmental island charging group. It would be useful to get an update from the minister on the progress that the group is making and the timescale within which it hopes to report. If we cannot find a solution to island charging, an awful lot of the projects that are in line, especially community projects, will stall and will no longer be able to continue or to produce the economic benefit that they could bring to communities.

I realise that I am running out of time, Presiding Officer. I wanted to touch on skills shortages and what the Government needs to do to ensure that we reap the full benefit of renewables, but I see that you are indicating that I cannot do so. Therefore, I simply urge the Government to look at what the report says on those issues and act accordingly.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):** Many thanks. We are short of time, as Rhoda Grant has suggested.

15:28

**Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** As usual, I declare an interest in that my son is a project manager for wind farms and is currently working in Aberdeenshire.

I welcome the tone of the debate—so far. The Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee is to be commended for producing an excellent report that thoroughly addresses the achievability of the Scottish Government's renewable energy targets. However, I hope that the committee will find time to revisit the report in the current session of Parliament, given that the Government's understandable response to many of the recommendations is that it is "considering" issues; is "committed" to progress; plans to work with stakeholders; and "notes the Committee's remarks" on biomass. I hope that the committee's report and the Government's response are the start of a journey, rather than the end of one.

There are many aspects of the report that are worthy of debate—as Rhoda Grant has just said—but I will stick to just three issues. The first one is

the effect of wind farms on tourism. The committee rightly recommends that VisitScotland and the Scottish Government continue to gather evidence on that from visitors to Scotland. However, I hope that they also listen to the views of the Mountaineering Council of Scotland, which states that it is not opposed to renewables; it simply recognises that our wild lands and open spaces are fundamental to Scotland's character and identity. Many parts of the region that I represent form the last great wilderness in Europe and they should be recognised and valued—

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

**Mary Scanlon:** No. Certainly not from Mike MacKenzie, sorry.

They should be recognised and valued in this year of natural Scotland.

The John Muir Trust also confirmed that 80 per cent of respondents to its survey considered that some areas need protection from wind turbines, yet VisitScotland claims that 40 per cent of the responses that it got say that it does not matter. Given that we have these claims and counterclaims, there is no doubt a need for thorough and accurate research. It is not just visitors to Scotland who should be taken into account in making determinations on or justifying wind farms, but all of us who live in Scotland, particularly those of us who live in remote and rural areas and who value the wild land and scenery around us.

I appreciate that many studies were done some years ago—

**Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP):** Will the member take an intervention?

**Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP):** Will the member take an intervention?

**Mary Scanlon:** No, I will not; and no, certainly not.

There are now 10 times the number of turbines in Scotland that there were in 2004.

My second point is on the intermittency of supply. That is a critical issue, yet one on which the Government “notes the committee's views”. I know that Fergus Ewing has a good reputation for working in partnership with the United Kingdom Government. I hope that, in summing up, he will give a commitment to working on further research into and adoption of storage technology, which, as Rhoda Grant mentioned, will ensure far greater utilisation of our existing resource—particularly of wind turbines. It would increase production from the existing wind farms and would undoubtedly be a positive approach.

As the minister said, we should be concerned about the warnings of Ofgem. I will not repeat what he said on that, but I agree.

Conservatives support the new third and fourth-generation nuclear power stations, with their improved efficiency and safety standards. I remind members that we would need around 5,200 onshore wind turbines to generate the same output as one nuclear power station, which would last for 60 to—

**Chic Brodie:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Mary Scanlon:** Certainly not, Mr Brodie.

**Marco Biagi:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Mary Scanlon:** No, and if I have to keep repeating myself, I will take 20 minutes to finish my speech.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I think that it is fair to say that Ms Scanlon is not taking interventions.

**Mary Scanlon:** We would need around 5,200 onshore wind turbines to generate the same output as one nuclear power station, which would last for 60 to 100 years as opposed to the 25-year lifespan of wind turbines.

My third point is on planning, which often leads to heated debate. A claim that I hear more often than any other is about the lack of local democracy as regards planning. Local residents can engage with their councillors and the planning committee can determine an application, but if it is refused, the developer gets a second chance, with the Scottish Government quite often overturning the decision that was made by elected councillors.

There are also concerns over section 36 applications, and I was disappointed that that area received only one mention in the committee report, at paragraph 55. If councillors are acceptable arbitrators on applications with an output of less than 50MW, why are they simply consultees on applications with outputs of more than 50MW?

I hope that in the planning review, the minister will look at that requirement, which I understand is based on the Electricity Act 1989. However, planning is now devolved to the Scottish Government. Also, the requirement was brought in at a time when large power stations were being built, not local wind farms, so I hope that the minister will look at it again.

Just finally, Presiding Officer—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Just finally.

**Mary Scanlon:** The visualisations that are submitted with planning applications lack



consistency. In the Daviot application, the wind turbines were about twice as high in the information that was given to the council as they were in the local information.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You must close, please.

**Mary Scanlon:** I would also like the minister to look at buffer zones.

15:35

**Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** First, I commend my colleagues on the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee for their extensive work on this important inquiry. I also commend our team of clerks and advisers for their patience and professionalism and I thank the many witnesses who gave evidence.

The result is a comprehensive and valuable report on a subject that is of the utmost importance to Scotland. The issue is big and complex, and our inquiry was necessarily long. In such a fast-moving field, much has happened since we finished taking evidence. I am pleased that most of that has been positive.

I particularly welcome the First Minister's announcement of an even more challenging, but achievable, interim target of generating 50 per cent of our electricity from renewables by 2015. Political will is the vital ingredient in assuring our success in achieving such targets and—fortunately—we have that in abundance.

Renewable energy is important not only because we enjoy significant opportunities and economic advantages from such technologies but because, of all the commodities in the modern world, energy is the king. With sufficient low-cost energy, we can solve all our other problems. That, along with our oil and gas reserves, gives Scotland a huge comparative advantage that makes it difficult to see how we are not set for a future of long-term and sustainable economic success.

Of course, there are challenges in achieving the targets—if there were not, that would mean that we had not set the targets high enough. However, the committee painstakingly explored those challenges, and the overwhelming conclusion was that they are surmountable and that we are on course to achieve the targets.

Just as there are challenges, so are there many opportunities for jobs and growth, as well as for local social benefits, including the means in many areas to tackle the scourge of fuel poverty. It is an absolute disgrace that energy-rich Scotland should suffer fuel poverty to the extent that it does.

I am glad to note that, since the report was published, the difficulties that we indicated with the planning system have been at least partially dealt with. The planning minister recently announced a 20 per cent increase in fees and provided a fund, to which colleagues have referred, of £673,000 to help to deal with wind turbine applications.

I am glad that the committee successfully exploded some of the myths that surround renewable energy. The myth that onshore wind destroys tourism was thoroughly explored and no evidence to support it was found. The myth that wind power does not reduce carbon intensity was blown away in the breeze by no less an authority than National Grid itself.

The myth that wind intermittency presents a problem and negates carbon savings was revealed to be nonsense by National Grid and others. Another myth was that consumers are paying very high premiums to subsidise renewables, but the figure is now known to be of the order of £21 per annum, which is a tiny fraction of annual fuel bills. The committee made its view clear in paragraph 196 of the report, which says:

"It is the Committee's view therefore that renewable energy represents a safe bet both for energy security and for protection from price shock."

I particularly welcome the target of 500MW for community renewables, which offers the possibility of transformational change across the Highlands and Islands and elsewhere. When I look at what the Shetlanders have done—I thought that Tavish Scott was here, but he is not—with their oil fund, whereby a small levy on the oil that passes through their community has provided community facilities that are second to none, I see a model for what can be done in the rest of Scotland.

When I think of the difficulties faced by Scotland's islanders, who have struggled for generations in the teeth of a hostile climate, and the opportunities now offered by these exciting technologies, I am filled with great hope. That hope is increased when I see the world-leading research that is being done at the European Marine Energy Centre, with young Orcadians returning to Orkney to take up the exciting and cutting-edge career opportunities that are now available.

In considering the challenges in achieving our targets and the full potential of our renewables opportunity, one group of problems looms larger than others—those that are entirely within the province of the UK Government. Those include: damaging and disproportionate transmission charges for Scotland's islands; a failure to invest enough or early enough in upgrading the grid; delay and uncertainty on energy policy, manifested now in setting strike prices for contracts for differences; inordinate delay in

introducing the domestic renewable heat incentive; and a green deal that is not the right deal for the right people.

The list is long and, once again, the UK Government has made the case quite eloquently for such decisions being best taken here in Scotland, in this Parliament.

15:41

**Margaret McDougall (West Scotland) (Lab):** I was not a member of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee when it held its inquiry and produced its subsequent report on the achievability of the Scottish Government's renewable energy targets, but I look forward to participating in the debate today.

While reading the report, it struck me that, though they are ambitious, Scotland's renewable energy targets are achievable. However, numerous issues need to be addressed, because there is little point in setting ambitious targets and not taking the steps required to meet them.

If the targets are to be met, we need to ensure that we have the proper courses in place to deliver people with the right skills sets. Worryingly, a lot of the evidence in the report seems to suggest that we are falling short on that. Although I recognise that the Government is working in partnership with the industry and educators, it seems that something is being lost in translation.

For example, in evidence to the committee, Rob Moore from the National Skills Academy for Power stated:

"We have the potential to reach the targets, but it will take a lot of work. If we do not do things differently, we will not meet them."

Linda Greig from Carnegie College said:

"we will not meet the targets, because we are not taking into account that people are leaving and the fact that we have a workforce that is skewed over the age of 35."—*[Official Report, Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee, 28 March 2012; c 1251.]*

Robin MacLaren from the Institution of Engineering expressed concerns over the availability of skills and the fact that we are operating in a global market. It seems that something is going wrong in our ability to attract young people—particularly young women—into the sector.

I agree with the committee that we need to work with colleges, sector skills councils and employers to equip people with the right skills and to deliver hands-on, intensive, accelerated training schemes. However, I fear that that might not be achievable due to colleges already being overstretched and having had their budgets slashed once again.

The other point that I wish to raise is community engagement. Interaction with communities and developers generally comes from onshore wind farm developments in rural areas. In North Ayrshire, currently three sites operate, according to the register of community benefits from renewables, and they have all supported local groups, local schools and the larger community through community benefit payments. However, I hear that in some cases those sums of money come with conditions attached. For example, if a local group receives funding, it has to make an agreed number of appearances a year on behalf of the site—in other words, it has to promote the wind farm.

What is more worrying, as noted in some of the written evidence, is that those benefits seem to undermine the planning process and are used by the developers to build favour. In North Ayrshire recently, we saw exactly that happen when a community wind farm submitted a planning application to extend its site. The wind farm has made contributions to two primary schools in Dalry. They are grateful for that; however, the children's school bags were used to deliver a draft letter in support of the wind farm planning application. It was fully prepared and even addressed to the North Ayrshire Council planning officer so that all the parent had to do was sign it and send it off. The council has said that whether to distribute the letters was at the headteacher's discretion and the schools justified it as being part of an eco-course and a "Getting involved in your community" project that the children were doing. Does the minister agree that it is inappropriate to use children in that way, under the guise of environmental education? That is not to mention the conflict of interest for the school, given that it is part of the local authority that will decide on the planning application.

I am supportive of community benefits in principle, which, as the committee report notes, can stabilise fragile communities, provide and promote energy efficiency, thereby reducing energy bills, and help to promote renewable energy developments, which in turn will help us to achieve our targets. However, we need to make sure that those benefits are not then used as a form of bribe to get local support for planning applications. As the committee report says, community engagement should be a two-way street and developers should have to adopt a code of practice.

We need better connectivity with the industry and educational bodies to provide the right skills courses to attract more young people, particularly women, into the sector.

Although I certainly do not want to see community benefits removed, they do seem to

create problems with the planning process, so we need more clarity on that. I ask the minister to develop robust new guidelines so that incidents such as the one that I mentioned in North Ayrshire do not happen again.

15:47

**Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP):** Like Mary Scanlon, I draw attention to the declaration in the report.

The very first question in the terms of reference for the inquiry was:

“Are the 2020 renewables targets (for electricity and heat) achievable?”

The answer was, quite clearly, yes. Progress on renewable electricity has raced ahead further and faster than anybody could have hoped or imagined. It is very easy to be cynical about politics in today’s world—one could even say that it is fashionable—but such progress gives permission to everybody who is ambitious and believes that politics and political decision making can change things. We can move forward and do better than to make the mistakes of the past, whether in energy or any other field of endeavour.

I remember knocking on doors in the election two years ago. Even though the question of how energy is generated is a bit far from most people’s lives, time and again I saw that spark of inspiration in people’s eyes when they realised that their Government has this sort of vision.

After some careful and, I have to say, arduous drafting, the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee reached a common position—“consensus” would be too strong a word—on almost everything in the report. That, too, is refreshing and would be welcomed by the public who, after all, always say that we should work together and overcome our differences, rather than argue all the time.

However, politics is about differences and if we all agreed on everything, we would not need a Parliament. So, to keep things interesting, I will dwell on a couple of the divisions. Given that I am one of the members to whom Murdo Fraser referred who was not present during the evidence, I have to draw more on the experience of drafting the report.

It is fair to say that the committee mirrored the difference of opinion that exists between the Scottish Parliament and the UK Government on nuclear power, in particular. Contracts for difference are the price support mechanism that is being introduced for the UK. Everyone recognises that they are the new UK Government’s subsidy mechanism for renewables, but nuclear power is also eligible, so the contracts are, ipso facto, also

a subsidy for nuclear power, which is one of the points of contention in the report.

Although there are silos for the different energy types, nuclear draws from the same limited pot of money as renewables do. A lot depends on the strike price and implementation, but I am uncomfortable that they are sitting at the same table. My approach to nuclear power would probably be to take it, lock it up with a padlock in a cupboard and throw away the key. That is an aspect of UK energy market reform that has implications for Scotland and which the committee rightly opposed, although only by a majority. I do not think that any energy source should hide behind greenwash and Hoover up subsidy that is intended to support genuinely green energy. That goes for Scotland as much as anywhere else.

Rhoda Grant alluded to paragraph 185 of the committee’s report, which states:

“the support the Scottish Government can provide to the development of the renewables sector is limited by the current constitutional arrangements.”

That is factually true, as head D in part II of schedule 5 to the Scotland Act 1998 remains in effect.

**Rhoda Grant rose—**

**Marco Biagi:** I can only assume that the three members who voted against that paragraph did so not because it is false, but because it is an inconvenient truth. If Rhoda Grant would like to challenge that, I will give way to her.

**Rhoda Grant:** I want to correct Marco Biagi. The paragraph to which I referred is in annex C. The paragraph that the Government party voted down reads:

“The Committee believes that there are significant issues regarding the subsidy regime in light of the constitutional debate that require to be addressed and calls on Ministers to continue to update the Committee on these matters.”

That was the paragraph that I was concerned about.

**Marco Biagi:** I was referring to the paragraph that Rhoda Grant alluded to. On the paragraph that she has referred to, I note that the replacement paragraph was proposed by Patrick Harvie, who is not a member of the Government and who would, I believe, put green energy in front of independence at any opportunity.

We have achieved a great deal in Scotland, and I very much welcome the minister’s constructive tone, but as we were drafting the report, I kept on seeing issues in respect of which, instead of being able to act, we had only the power to ask nicely. Perhaps a bit more peace has broken out on transmission charging and the fossil fuel levy, but we still have challenges in the contracts for difference, the Crown Estate, funding for demand

reduction, and—perhaps most of all—accessing private finance. WWF has asked us to increase the renewable heat target, but would that be a target for which we had very limited levers, because renewable heat incentives are a reserved issue?

A related issue that is of particular interest is the report on proposals and policies 2. A great deal of importance is attached to carbon capture and storage. That may well be a necessary counterpart to providing the base-load that is needed for the 100 per cent target, but I would be delighted if, in his closing speech, the minister could provide some reassurance and information on how we in the Scottish Parliament can attempt to lever that in with the powers that we have. I do not think that a policy of a 2014 yes vote is really sufficient in that respect, much as I would be overjoyed by that result.

To look ahead, Murdo Fraser wanted to separate desirability and achievability.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You are in your final five seconds.

**Marco Biagi:** Those two things are very connected. Rather than endanger the confidence that has been shown with uncertainty fostered by an unsupportive UK Government, which does not have a strong commitment to renewable energy, there should be no barriers to our ambition. The sky is the limit.

15:53

**Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** I congratulate the rigorous Murdo Fraser and his committee colleagues on the report, whose gestation, as Marco Biagi suggested, was not always smooth. I also thank members for taking the time to come to my constituency, which is the home not only of marine renewables, but of community renewables.

I welcome the unanimous support for the targets, which are ambitious but achievable. It is important that the political steer is clear on our commitment to decarbonise our economy, and on creating a genuine renewables powerhouse in this country. The committee was right to set out a number of challenges for Scotland's Governments and others to ensure that that happens.

It is regrettable that there are areas of division along party lines, some of which have been explored, but there can be no dispute that, as SSE has confirmed, the potential break-up of the UK is being factored in as a potential cost in assessing future investment. It is not just SSE that is saying that. That is not a complaint about the Scottish Government and it is certainly not a complaint

about the minister, who I know is held in high regard.

I am not suggesting that investments are not being made, but I have to say that the nature of the investments and the timeframe for making decisions are interesting. Next to no one is arguing that independence is the answer to the sector's prayers, and businesses are understandably reluctant to put their heads above the parapet. They do not like uncertainty—financial, regulatory or political—and they have enough on their plate as it is with decarbonising our economy, including our transport system and heat, while keeping the lights on and bills manageable.

As a result, reform is essential. The report is right to highlight concerns about the lack of detail on electricity market reform and to highlight delays in the domestic renewable heat incentive. I hear those concerns myself and I support the comments in the report. I also acknowledge WWF Scotland's points about the importance of heat, which constitutes half of demand and is responsible for 47 per cent of emissions and 60 per cent of household energy costs.

However, that only illustrates the paradox for Fergus Ewing, for whom I have the utmost respect, with whom I have worked very collaboratively for a number of years and who very much takes a collaborative approach. The fact is that the better the deal on electricity market reform, transmission charging or whatever, the more we have to lose with separation.

**Mike MacKenzie:** Will the member give way?

**Liam McArthur:** No. We have heard enough of Mr MacKenzie's views.

The report makes a number of very helpful recommendations on a range of issues such as skills, workforce development, the supply chain and community development. I agree that we need separate targets for community and locally owned developments. Although Orkney has excellent examples of both, they perform different functions and are seen very differently.

Before I turn to the grid, I will focus on transmission charging, which we debated in the chamber shortly before Christmas. Then, I said that locational charging is now anathema to our achieving our objectives; it is discriminatory, hampers future investment and distorts decisions about where to locate. The Scottish Renewables report "Swimming Against the Tide: The Impact of TNUOS Charging on Marine Energy Development in Scotland" highlights cost comparisons with regard to grid charges and the dramatic effect of charging islands-based developers for what are called "local works", such as undersea cabling. That disparity, with an up to 120 per cent increase in charges by 2020, potentially undermines the

ability of our islands, including Orkney, to fulfil their potential. That, in turn, will compromise the ability of Scotland and the UK to deliver on their climate change and renewables targets. Given the global lead in wave and tidal energy that we currently enjoy, that would be a scandalously wasted opportunity to create thousands of jobs, attract millions of pounds of investment and develop the skills and expertise to allow us to build the sector internationally.

**Fergus Ewing:** I entirely agree with Liam McArthur's analysis of the potentially damaging consequences of not finding a solution to transmission charging in the islands. I emphasised that very point to John Hayes when I met him last week in London. Does the member agree that it would be extremely helpful if Mr Hayes or Mr Davey could attend a meeting of the intergovernmental group as soon as the consultant's report is concluded so that we can find, once and for all, a solution to the islands' transmission charging problem?

**Liam McArthur:** I certainly agree. The minister and I have already discussed the issue and I will repeat what I said privately: I fully support such a move and will lend what support I can with regard to my UK colleagues.

The renewables steering group has been strongly commended and is making progress. A couple of options for a solution are emerging, including enhanced ROCs for the islands to compensate for the additional charging burden, which would have the benefit of relative simplicity, or the use of section 185 orders to reduce charges around our islands. However, with the second option, amendments would need to be made, given the 10-year time limit on such orders. There is cause for optimism but, as the minister has said, we must maintain momentum.

The other area of concern, which I highlighted last year, is the grid. On the back of those concerns, the minister helped by setting up the steering committee and its subgroups at Orkney level. However, since then, Scottish Hydro Electric Transmission Limited has announced a further delay in laying the 132kV cable. That is hugely disappointing; I find the reasons for the delay difficult to accept in certain instances, and there is no doubt that the decision is having an impact on confidence and, potentially, on reputation. That will flow into impacts on investment and, in the meantime, lost opportunities. We need to reinforce and maintain the steering committee's work. I hope that I can count on the minister's support in that respect.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You should be drawing to a close, Mr McArthur.

**Liam McArthur:** There are many areas that I did not have a chance to touch on, notably fuel poverty. Again, I point to the work on teleswitching and the use of renewables in assisting fuel-poor households in Orkney.

The report's message is that targets are achievable. Much work is still to be done and we need to ensure that our islands, including those that I represent, play a full part. We have the skills, the natural resources—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You must close, please.

**Liam McArthur:** —and the appetite; we now need a more level playing field and an opportunity to be totally competitive. In return—

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

15:59

**Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP):** I welcome the report from Murdo Fraser and the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee. When the report was published back in November, it was reassuring to note the committee's central finding that the

"renewable energy target for electricity generation is achievable".

That is clearly subject to caveats, but in an international context it is not an exaggeration to say that Scotland is leading Europe and the world in terms of renewable energy and the wider transition to the green economy, as emissions from energy production fall.

Turning to the European Commission's "Energy roadmap 2050", the Commission's renewables target is 20 per cent by 2020. In Scotland, we are talking about meeting, or at least coming very close to achieving 50 per cent in the next two years—not to mention the figure of 100 per cent. It is therefore high time that some members of the Parliament refrained from describing the targets as "ludicrous".

It is important to keep an eye on the prize: a Scotland that is virtually self-sustaining in terms of energy generation and consumption. We should redouble our efforts to achieve that. That includes supporting the development and deployment of renewable technologies, which is in line with the "Energy roadmap 2050" and is necessary in order to meet our emissions reduction targets under the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009.

Looking internationally, the Energiewende in Germany—the transition to sustainable energy generation and consumption—is well under way. In the league of large European nations, Germany is more than pulling its weight in the process, with

more than 25 per cent of supply coming from renewable sources, according to the latest figures, compared with the UK's 9.4 per cent and France's 20 per cent. Despite that, Angela Merkel's CDU-led coalition has come under serious criticism for cutting back on subsidies for renewables too early, which is putting thousands of jobs at risk and potentially stalling Germany's impressive momentum.

However, Germany's decision to decommission all of its nuclear reactors by 2022 in response to the Fukushima disaster has been warmly greeted by environmental organisations around the world. Aside from the enormous subsidies that are associated with building and running nuclear power stations, and the astronomical costs of storing waste, the true cost of disasters to the state can be five times higher than the price that the nuclear industry has paid by way of insurance, as the Fukushima example showed.

**Murdo Fraser:** Will Roderick Campbell give way on that point?

**Roderick Campbell:** No. I do not have enough time.

There are concerns about the siting of wind turbines. Local authorities must ensure that they fully assess the cumulative impact of plans before making decisions. They need to undertake proper consultation of residents and businesses and to take into account guidance from important agencies such as Scottish Natural Heritage and VisitScotland. That is an important recommendation in the committee's report because we need carefully to balance the interests of everyone in the planning process.

As the committee suggested and as the Government has accepted, we need to make progress in identifying local spatial frameworks. We must acknowledge—as Fergus Ewing has stated—that the national policy on wind turbine development is under review as part of the review of Scotland's planning policy.

We need to consider those things in context. We must take a full view of subsidies in relation to wind farm development, rather than pursuing calls for slashing the funding to the industry while failing to take into account the fact that contracts for difference, as they are proposed, represent a subsidy in relation to nuclear industries—a point that was agreed, with one exception, I think, by the committee. That is not to mention the failure to take account of the substantial nuclear clean-up costs, which is, to say the least, unfortunate. If we were to accept the arguments about reducing funding, we would seriously jeopardise the energy and emissions targets that were agreed by Parliament.

At the end of last year I corresponded with and met representatives of a company that is based in north-east Fife that is promoting new and innovative designs for tidal energy generation. It is precisely that kind of sustainable industry that we need to support into the future. We must also recognise that the Scottish Government's saltire prize is an extremely useful incentive for developers of wave and tidal energy sources, in particular.

The debate surrounding energy production and consumption should not be seen just in terms of targets and Government strategies. Individual households and businesses have a role to play in reducing demand by consuming less. That includes proactive measures such as installing more efficient heating systems, replacing boilers through the scrappage scheme, designing new homes and fitting existing homes with the highest levels of insulation to increase energy efficiency, and making simple efforts around the home to use less energy.

As for the renewable heat targets, we should take heart from the fact that the interim target for renewable heat sources has been exceeded. Discussions between the Scottish Government and the UK Government on the detail of the renewable heat incentive scheme to be launched this summer could clear the way for more progress towards the 11 per cent target for 2020, which has hitherto been delayed by the UK Government's failure to act decisively on the matter, which was mentioned by Marco Biagi and is also mentioned in the committee's report.

However, as WWF Scotland says, heat accounts for more than half of energy demand in Scotland, 47 per cent of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and 60 per cent of household energy costs, so perhaps we should consider being a little bit more adventurous than 11 per cent.

The committee's report is valuable and I am pleased to note that the Government is taking it seriously. I welcome this afternoon's debate.

16:05

**Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab):** There is no doubt that Scotland's energy future is central to our economic prospects, to say nothing of the fact that it is crucial to the extent to which we can mitigate or reverse the damage that we do to our environment locally, nationally and globally. In the long run, that means delivering a shift to renewable energy technologies, so the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee should be congratulated on its important inquiry and the exhaustive range of evidence that it took from witnesses both erudite and—sometimes—colourful.

However, the central conclusion in the committee's report—that the target of 100 per cent equivalent energy consumption from renewables is achievable—hides more than it reveals. In its evidence, EDF stated that

“it may be technically feasible”

to achieve the target, but it went on to say that doing so would rely on subsidy levels, investment in transmission infrastructure, storage and a UK energy market, all of which are uncertain. The committee identified skills shortages, delayed grid development, intermittency and the affordability of offshore wind as genuine risks to meeting the target.

The committee rightly draws attention, too, to the risk to investment that is posed by uncertainty in transmission charging and electricity market reform. All the evidence pleaded for clarity, durability and stability in the support regime for renewables. However, people cannot seriously argue, as some colleagues have tried to do this afternoon, that uncertainty over the details of EMR is damaging but uncertainty over the potential future of EMR post-2014 does no damage whatsoever. That is simply not credible.

**Mike MacKenzie:** The member mentioned that there is a single UK market. The committee heard in evidence that, in future, we will move into a European market with a North Sea interconnector. When electrons are pushed down the wires, consumers do not care what the country of origin was. When they pay for them at the eventual point of use—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):** Please be brief, Mr MacKenzie.

**Mike MacKenzie:** —the subsidy will be contained in the final price.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** I can give you your time back, Mr Gray.

**Iain Gray:** In exactly the same way, the electricity consumers of England and Wales do not care where the electrons come from, and if they have cheaper alternatives to expensive subsidised renewable energy that is produced in Scotland, they may well choose to get their electrons from those alternatives. That is exactly the uncertainty that is affecting investments at present.

My constituency of East Lothian has a key role in meeting the targets. It already has significant installed wind capacity and it is close to consented offshore sites. However, we need to look at what is happening on the ground. If we consider planning, the committee emphasises the need for local spatial plans to give a clear indication of where developments might be approved. In East Lothian, we already have a carefully constructed local capacity framework for wind turbines, but in

recent months we have seen four single turbines that were deemed inappropriate by East Lothian Council simply railroaded through on appeal. In one case, the reporter explicitly says that the local spatial framework can and should be disregarded.

The minister needs to understand that that contempt for local democratic decision making for the sake of relatively insignificant capacity is driving many of my constituents to oppose all wind generation.

**Chic Brodie:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Iain Gray:** No. I am sorry, but I do not have time.

It is also undermining confidence in the planning system. In East Lothian, ministerial decisions are driving wind turbines into sensitive and inappropriate areas. Yes, that was my constituents laughing when they heard the minister's description of how he believes his planning system is operating. The situation is not helped by ministers imposing an unwanted energy-from-waste incinerator on my constituency and then expanding its consent so that waste will be shipped in from all over Scotland.

Locally, serious efforts are being made to use the opportunity of offshore developments to regenerate Dunbar harbour, exactly as the committee suggests that we should. However, any funding for that has so far had to come from hard-pressed council resources, and the dangling of the same prize in front of many competing communities is fuelling uncertainty there, too.

Meanwhile, Cockenzie power station closes next month, removing 1,000MW of capacity from the Scottish grid, with no sign yet of the already consented replacement gas power station. The minister acknowledged the importance of thermal base-load to back up renewables. As well as his UK counterparts, he has a role to play in ensuring that the project is delivered in my constituency.

Of course, East Lothian still provides up to a quarter of our electricity on any given day, with zero carbon emissions, 500 high-quality jobs and apprenticeships and training for the next generation. However, that is at Torness—unacknowledged, unsupported and unwanted by ministers and, indeed, the majority of the committee.

My county has always provided more than its share of Scotland's energy, from coal mines, to nuclear power, to wind farms in the Lammermuirs. Our local problems now are not unique. They reflect the weaknesses in the national energy strategy: planning issues; too narrow a focus on wind; an illogical and ideological opposition to nuclear power; a failure to develop the supply

chain and grid infrastructure quickly enough; and, above all, a failure to take the public along with the energy strategy, which might yet be the biggest risk to the Government's 2020 targets. Those risks are all to be found in the committee's report. I sincerely hope that it is to them that the minister and the Scottish Government respond, rather than to the bland conclusion that the targets can be met.

16:12

**Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP):** As a former member of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee, and one who took part in the inquiry up to the signing-off of the report, I will focus on some of the general findings as well as looking at how planning issues can impact on the Scottish Government's renewable energy targets.

The report is the result of a lot of work not just by the committee members past and present but by the clerking team, which once again provided excellent support to the committee. I want to put on record my appreciation and thanks to my former colleagues on the committee and to the members of the clerking team for their efforts. I also thank everyone who provided evidence to the committee.

As we know, Scotland has the potential to be a world leader in renewable energy, and it is in that context that we must look at the achievability of the ambitious targets that have been set by the Scottish Government. The committee's report is positive and highlights that the targets are within our reach, even if we have some issues to iron out.

One of those issues, which has been discussed already today, is the planning system. There was a concern that the pressure on the planning system is due in part to the high number of renewable energy applications. However, the Scottish Government has taken measures to address that, including a commitment to provide more funding to planning authorities.

I welcome the idea within the report of potentially increasing the planning fees that are charged for larger-scale applications, as long as they do not disadvantage community developers. That additional finance could be used to boost resources in individual planning departments where necessary. I also welcome the Scottish Government's announcement of the planning fees increase, which Murdo Fraser and the minister talked about earlier.

There should be greater clarity on environmental impact assessments. The Scottish Government and local authorities should come together to address that issue, providing greater standardisation and guidance on matters such as

visualisation standards and noise assessments. The report touched on those points.

I support the benefits of community-generated renewable energy and I agree with the report that the Scottish Government should consider making adjustments to planning policy that would include clearer consideration of the local economic benefit of projects through the planning system.

The generation of energy by local authorities came up during the discussion about RPP2 in yesterday's meeting of the Local Government and Regeneration Committee. Local authorities have the power to generate energy, if they want to do so. Start-up costs are high, but in some post-industrial areas there might be infrastructure that could be invested in and brought back into use. There is certainly potential in relation to hydro schemes across the country.

I welcome the letter from the Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism and the Minister for Local Government and Planning to COSLA and Heads of Planning Scotland, which set out the Scottish Government's requirement for spatial frameworks to be part of local development plans. There is concern about local authorities' rates of progress in producing spatial frameworks. The timely development of local spatial development plans that are agreed locally in an open, transparent and democratic process, with due regard to national targets, can reduce the costly and inefficient disputes about renewable energy developments that take place throughout Scotland. Greater clarity on the type of development that is likely to be permitted and where such developments are likely to be permitted in a local authority area can give citizens and developers more certainty about the planning process.

Local authorities must ensure that local development plans are consistent with national objectives and targets. Every planning authority has its own plans and policies, but there should be consistency for developers, who should expect a broadly similar service, regardless of where they make an application. As we know, the Scottish Government's planning policy is under review. I look forward to seeing what comes out of the process.

We heard from Liam McArthur, the member for Orkney. I was one of the members who went to Orkney. It was a fascinating trip and I learned a great deal. A key point for me was that the people there appreciate the tremendous opportunity that they have and that Scotland has. The enthusiasm with which they are trying to develop that opportunity is outstanding. They are building expertise daily, which will help not just Orkney but all Scotland.



I tried to intervene during Mary Scanlon's speech, but I was unsuccessful. I wanted to make the point that I am not aware that tourist numbers in Orkney have decreased as a result of the location of wind turbines there.

Renewable energy presents an opportunity for Scotland, which we must grab with both hands. The tough targets that have been set will help to steer a clear path for developers and communities and will help to create job opportunities for young people in Scotland.

16:18

**Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green):** This is a vast subject, which the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee dealt with in a long inquiry. I thank the clerks for their work and I thank the many witnesses who shared their expertise, to help us to scrutinise and shape policy on renewables, which is an incredibly important task.

I am pleased that we have a chance to debate the committee's report and I will concentrate on two important areas, which do not always get the attention that they deserve, although several members, including Rhoda Grant and Stuart McMillan, have helped to address the deficit during the debate. Those areas are the heat targets and community ownership of renewables.

Heat accounts for roughly half of Scotland's energy use. We are currently delivering 3.8 per cent of heat demand from renewable resources, with an estimated 5.6 per cent in the pipeline. The target is to deliver 11 per cent by 2020. There is promising progress, but as the committee's convener said, during the inquiry we heard evidence that suggests that we will not reach 11 per cent, because incentives have been delayed, development of the necessary infrastructure is too rare and there are serious concerns about biomass sustainability.

Those are challenges, but they are not insurmountable. Aberdeen Heat and Power Company's written evidence to the inquiry told an inspirational story. The arm's-length, not-for-profit company was set up 10 years ago by Aberdeen City Council, with the aim of providing clean, affordable energy. It provides district heating to 1,500 homes and more than 10 public buildings. Heating and water charges have dropped by 40 to 50 per cent, fuel poverty has reduced markedly, damp has been eliminated and homes have been created that people want to live in. There have been carbon savings of up to 40 per cent. The company does not even use a heating method that is renewable; it has simply found a vastly more efficient way of organising how we deliver heat.

That story demonstrates the leadership role that local authorities and other public sector bodies can

play, as is stressed in the report's recommendations. The Government, as its response makes clear, agrees.

**Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):** I welcome Ms Johnstone's mention of Aberdeen Heat and Power, which does a fantastic job. Does she agree that other local authorities have exactly the same opportunities as Aberdeen City Council and that they should probably look at what has happened in Aberdeen? We need to ensure that best practice is adopted throughout Scotland.

**Alison Johnstone:** Certainly. I also like to think that the Government will take every opportunity to provide leadership in ensuring that that happens.

As members will recall, the Greens dedicated debating time last year to the role that publicly owned renewable energy companies could play in delivering on our climate targets and in providing important extra revenue for public services. Given that the Government's response demonstrates its support for the recommendation in paragraph 266 of the committee's report, I hope that the Government will do all that it can to revitalise and support the publicly owned energy company idea.

We are seeing a renewables revolution in Scotland, and it is exciting. I am really pleased that, after listening to the evidence, the committee was able to agree—by and large—a very positive report. The public favour renewables, too, but there is scant support for big companies coming in, building turbines and keeping the vast amount of benefits for themselves and their shareholders. That simply does not feel fair, and there are far better models out there.

An exciting community-driven project in my region is Balerno Village Trust's plans to build a micro-hydro electricity generator on the Harlaw reservoir in the Pentlands. The project, which has planning permission and a licence from the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, is waiting for a lease from the City of Edinburgh Council and a grid connection before it can start to raise capital. The grant from Community Energy Scotland was essential in kick-starting the project, but more needs to be done to help to smooth the process of grid connection.

The Edinburgh community groups Greener Leith and PEDAL-Portobello Transition Town worked hard together to secure energysave funding to push forward their plans for a community turbine on the coast. Unfortunately, there are issues with the site. However, their commitment to the project highlights their belief in the many benefits that such an asset would bring to the community.

Kirknewton is another community in my region that is championing at the bit to get renewable energy projects off the ground. Kirknewton is progressing numerous initiatives but, by an accident of

geography, Edinburgh airport's radar has frustrated the community's attempts to build its own turbine. However, alternatives are being looked at.

Those are just two communities that have come up against barriers to their renewables ambitions by an accident of geography. We need to tap into, develop and support community interest. Kirknewton's commonsense suggestion is for a match-making scheme to help to ensure that the maximum amount of community benefit comes from renewable projects on the national forest estate. Up to 49 per cent of any national forest estate renewables project is available to the communities that live nearby—if those communities can raise enough money to buy into the scheme. However, raising the money is not always possible. In those cases, the suggestion from Kirknewton is that another community that is keen to develop renewables but is unable to do so on its own land could be brought in to help. That might be an ideal way for urban communities to participate, too.

I have talked about heat and the potential role that publicly owned energy companies have in delivering heat networks and generating new revenue for public services. I have talked about the desire of communities to have renewables projects that truly benefit the local area directly. Both of those link to the debate over the fair distribution of benefit. To maintain public support for ambitious targets, the benefits of the renewables revolution must be distributed in a fair and transparent way, not just to the large companies—although they of course have a role to play—but to the public, to the co-operative sector and to the community sector, too.

16:24

**Jim Eadie (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP):** Along with other members who have spoken in the debate, I welcome the committee's inquiry and its conclusion that Scotland's renewable energy targets can be met. That point was put rather well in the oral evidence of Graeme Blackett of Biggar Economics, who said:

"The short answer is that they are achievable. I am not suggesting that they will be met by onshore wind alone but, taking into account what has already been installed, what is being constructed and what is going through the planning system, I think that that and our current hydro capacity will get us pretty close to the 100 per cent target—and that is before we consider the offshore sector."—[*Official Report, Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee*, 14 March 2012; c 1108.]

Why is it so important that we achieve our renewables ambition by 2020? That is about more than simply delivering energy security and providing protection from volatile gas prices while being mindful that the gas price largely drives the

electricity price. It also means a major reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, as agreed by the Parliament. In fact, a Cambridge Econometrics study into the economics of gas and offshore wind, which was published on behalf of Greenpeace and WWF in November last year, clearly showed that the deployment of wind could reduce carbon emissions by two thirds across the UK.

One of the biggest prizes in achieving our renewable energy targets will be the reindustrialisation of Scotland—a process that will see the creation of highly skilled and high-technology jobs for Scotland's future workforce, including jobs in civil engineering, wind farm development, turbine production, 3D modelling and many more besides.

Over the next four years, Scotland aims to deliver 2,000 modern apprenticeships specifically for the industries involved in renewable energy and climate change, and a pilot apprenticeship framework in wind turbine manufacture has been created at Carnegie College, which was referred to by Margaret McDougall.

According to the industry's route map, which was published by the offshore wind industry group in January,

"securing one third of the UK offshore wind market would secure an estimated GVA"—

gross value added—

"in Scotland of £7 billion and create 28,377 jobs."

Over the past three years, the Scottish Government has offered considerable encouragement to the industry. It has done more than that: it has taken the necessary steps to deliver confidence, demand and certainty. Those steps have paid off.

The reality is that, in the past year, applications were submitted for more than 4,000MW of new offshore generation. To put that into context, that represents the capacity of almost half of the generating plant in operation in Scotland. That is a greater amount of generation capacity than has ever been in planning at any given time—and more is to come.

The formation of East Coast Renewables, which is an alliance of 10 local authorities working together to achieve Scotland's renewables targets, and the involvement of organisations and companies from Aberdeen—which Kevin Stewart referred to—to East Lothian, represented by Iain Gray, is a hugely positive development. Now that the industry has submitted its applications and its environmental assessments, it has provided a picture of what the economic opportunity will look like. There will be a new sector located within a 200-mile radius of Scotland's east coast that will require the construction and fabrication of upwards

of 900 offshore substructures, each of which will be up to 300 feet high, and made of steel or concrete. On top of those will sit a similar number of turbines, their associated blades, gearboxes and control systems. All the turbines will need to be connected to scores of new technology high-voltage current offshore substation platforms. That will be done with hundreds of miles of subsea cabling, which will eventually take the power to shore. To install that we will need dedicated installation vessels and the development and deployment of specialised deepwater installation techniques. To operate all that, we will need new and dedicated onshore facilities for a new and permanent workforce.

Alison Johnstone talked about the renewables revolution. Scotland has not had a better opportunity—in this generation—to achieve economic prosperity. The prize is the reindustrialisation of Scotland, the reinvigoration of our manufacturing base and the rediscovery of world leadership in heavy engineering.

16:29

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

I was interested to note how Murdo Fraser introduced the debate to Parliament. I thought that he was statesmanlike, but it occurred to me that, had he been sitting where I am sitting, he might have made a different speech. The duty falls to me to at least attempt to make the speech that he might have chosen to give.

The debate has been excellent and brought out a lot that was positive. There are one or two people whom I will praise for that as I go through my speech. Unfortunately, it also brought out one or two eminently predictable points, and I may mention a few names in that regard when we get to the appropriate stage.

The first thing that the minister said—it has been repeated several times—is that Scotland can achieve 100 per cent of its required electricity generation capacity from renewables by 2020. Whether that is desirable or whether we will show adequate concern for the victims of that policy remains to be seen. That is what I will talk about.

One of the key issues that were raised earlier in the debate and on which we have touched several times is planning. Planning has been the bane of the renewables industry since the start, particularly when it comes to onshore wind turbines. We have never adequately solved the problem.

We are getting to the phase at which significant numbers of turbines are being erected day on day. It is now rare for me to drive across the north-east and not spot a turbine that was not there the last time that I passed that way. People are now beginning to see the effects of the turbines.

Cumulative visual impact will be of concern to very many people.

I have spoken to some of the people in the Angus glens, for example, who are concerned that their proximity to Perthshire means that turbines are being erected with seemingly little reference to what is happening on the other side of the boundary. I can only share their concern.

**Rob Gibson:** Will Alex Johnstone give way?

**Alex Johnstone:** I want to deal with that specific point at this stage.

At the end of her speech, Mary Scanlon tried to raise the issue of buffer zones but, unfortunately, did not have the chance. I draw everybody's attention to paragraph 74 of the report, which says that most authorities are applying Scottish planning policy on the 2km separation from settlements appropriately. However, there seems to be a difference between the separation of turbines from settlements and the separation from individual houses, or groups of houses, in remote areas.

For example, someone living in Inverness will know that no large turbines can be built within 2km of the city. However, someone who lives in a more sparsely populated area could have turbines less than 1km from their home. Many people in rural areas are concerned that turbines are being approved in areas where they impose themselves on individuals who live in sparsely populated communities.

**Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** Is Alex Johnstone aware that, at the previous council elections, the Scottish National Party in Aberdeenshire offered to look at harmonising the separation distance with authorities adjacent to Aberdeenshire Council? It remains at 400m in Aberdeenshire, where the Tories lead the council. They are yet to review the separation distances.

**Alex Johnstone:** I am fully aware that the SNP is capable of saying one thing in Aberdeenshire and another in Edinburgh. There is nothing new in that.

I will move on to one or two of the other issues that have been raised.

I will talk about fuel poverty. Several speakers mentioned that our pursuit of the renewables target will drive up the cost of electricity. It seems to me simple arithmetic that, if we have a system that uses renewables obligation certificates and feed-in tariffs to encourage and underpin an industry and if the consumer pays for those additional subsidies, the consumer will suffer as a result. If we achieve our objective, we are forcing up the price of electricity.

**Stuart McMillan:** Will Alex Johnstone give way?

**Fergus Ewing:** Will Alex Johnstone give way?

**Alex Johnstone:** I am running out of time.

We have always argued that it is necessary to have a balanced energy policy. We have joined the Government in criticising the previous Labour Government for its failure to show adequate vision in energy policy, but the SNP—in opposition and government—has shown what some would describe as an irrational distaste for nuclear energy.

We heard that again today from a number of speakers. The reason why I call it irrational is that we hear people such as Roddy Campbell praising Germany because it will close its nuclear power stations by some time in the middle of the next decade and not mentioning the fact that that it is building 12 new coal-fired power stations to achieve that. If only we had our old friend Christopher Harvie with us to tell us how they do things in Germany—he might have had a bit to say about the old East German brown coal industry that might have informed us.

There is much that has been discussed in the debate that will require a lot of attention, but even the minister made it quite clear that most of the things that we need to deal with will have to be dealt with on an international—or, at least, a UK-wide—basis. Once again, Fergus Ewing has given us the opportunity to ask that Scotland's two Governments work together in harmony to achieve our renewable energy objectives without having the damaging consequences that the SNP's policy—and independence—could have.

16:35

**Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab):** The committee's report and the debate have revealed a tentative consensus. Mary Scanlon said that she welcomed the tone of the debate "so far". Marco Biagi said that "consensus" was perhaps too strong a word; he was right to say that the committee reached a "common position". He then went on to dwell on the divisions, which I hope that I will not do too much.

The report reveals agreement on the direction of travel but a surprising level of disagreement on how to get to where we are going and on the scale of the obstacles in the way. I will start with planning. It is clear that there is general support across Scotland for onshore wind, but the committee accurately identified the concern among some local communities about being overwhelmed by development. It would be unfortunate indeed if, in our genuine desire to promote renewables and tackle carbon emissions, we created an incentive for small landowners to

overpopulate the countryside with single or small numbers of highly visible but environmentally unhelpful wind turbines. On behalf of the committee, Murdo Fraser highlighted the need for spatial plans to be developed in every area of Scotland.

In an excellent speech, Iain Gray flagged up the problems that are created when democratically accountable local authorities reject applications for wind farms only to find those decisions being repeatedly overturned by the Scottish Government. As he concluded, the net effect of central Government seeming to approve every application, regardless of the circumstances, is to undermine confidence in the system and to provoke greater resistance to wind farms generally.

**Rob Gibson:** If neighbouring farmers each apply for a turbine on farms that are less than 2km apart, would Ken Macintosh say that one of them should not get approval? Given that 76 per cent of farmers find it difficult to get planning approval for turbines, does he think that we are making the best use of a natural resource by having such a restriction in the countryside?

**Ken Macintosh:** I think that Mr Gibson points out that such decisions are not easy, but surely we should trust the local authorities to work in harmony with developers and the Scottish Government instead of working against one another. For the Scottish Government to come in heavy-handed and pretend that it knows better than local communities does our shared objectives no good whatever. There is room for planned development in Scotland, but I would not have thought that overdevelopment was something that any of us would wish to see.

In the past, the Parliament has united on the need to ensure a fairer system of transmission charges to and from our islands, and the committee did so again. Liam McArthur and others have pointed out that the development of not just onshore wind farms on our islands, but offshore wind and potential future wave and tidal energy projects depend on the establishment of island connections to the grid with sufficient capacity to cope. The charging regime has yet to be finally agreed by Ofgem and industry, and our message that the Scottish islands must not be disadvantaged is a clear one. I welcome the fact that the minister said that he was keen to work consensually to resolve the situation.

However, I have a slight concern on the issue, which follows on from the publication this week of the Scottish Government's supplementary response to its consultation on the renewables obligation banding review. As the committee recommended, if the transmission charging regime cannot be amended, there is still a duty on all

parties, including the Scottish Government, to find a remedy to the problem. The ROC system could have been part of the remedy, but this week's paper failed to address the issue at all. In fact, a number of the Government's conclusions on ROCs left me worried, particularly on biomass.

I welcomed Alison Johnstone's comments on the role of heat but, like my colleague Rhoda Grant, I was slightly unsure about where the committee was heading in its conclusions on renewable heat. I thought that the minister agreed with Labour and many others that there is a role for small-scale biomass and potentially for good-quality combined heat and power generators, but his announcement this week gives the green light to develop plant that operates at 35 per cent efficiency, despite the European recommendation of a 70 per cent efficiency rate. In the past, the minister's excuse has been to highlight a 10MW cap on power-only plants, but he now appears to have raised that by 50 per cent. I hope that the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee will give the matter further consideration when the regulations on that come before it.

Several members raised the importance of securing community benefit, and there is an excellent section in the committee's report on that. As Rhoda Grant highlighted, the Scottish Government could do more to promote community ownership—rather than just benefit—by tackling the costs and red tape that get in the way.

Perhaps the most important issue that is raised in the report is the skills shortage. Witnesses to the committee were unanimous in flagging up the seriousness of the problem, with several stating clearly that we will not meet the renewables targets without an appropriately skilled workforce. Evidence to the committee identified some of the problems that stand in the way of building the workforce, such as competition from other industries and the failure of workers to transfer from the oil and gas sector. The committee went on to talk about how we might promote the science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects at an earlier age and challenge the gender segregation that still puts many young women off a career in engineering.

I agree with Margaret McDougall that the Scottish Government's actions in clearly favouring higher education over further education and in funding universities but not colleges send out a pretty negative message. All the work that we did in the first eight years of the Parliament to break down the academic-vocational divide and to build the knowledge economy is undone with that decision to cut college funding.

I had to laugh, or at least give a wry smile—I would not laugh at the report—when I read the committee's conclusions on electricity market

reform. It is not that I disagree with the concerns that are raised about the complexity of introducing the new contracts for difference and the potential destabilising effect that that might have on securing investment in renewables; what made me smile was the contrast between the report's constant references to the damaging effects of uncertainty created by EMR being followed, a matter of paragraphs later, by the admittedly dissented conclusion that apparently there is no such uncertainty over the impact of the referendum. My colleague Iain Gray clearly also saw the same unintended ironic contrast. The committee is willing to flag up the uncertainty of EMR, but rejects all other uncertainties or risks, despite having much evidence on them.

Presiding Officer, I want briefly to mention—

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** You do not have much time left.

**Ken Macintosh:** I do not have enough time, so I suggest to the minister that the words are fine and, if words were all it takes, we would be there already, but we need action. I will support the Scottish Government if it actually follows through with actions that overcome the obstacles.

16:43

**Fergus Ewing:** The debate has been extremely useful and wide ranging. I will try to do it justice and to reply to some of the requests from individual members.

Rhoda Grant asked what progress has been made on the intergovernmental island charging group. A consultant has been appointed, by agreement among Ed Davey, me and the other members of the group. Evidence-gathering sessions took place in the Western Isles on 13 February and are due to take place in Shetland on 27 and 28 February and in Orkney on 28 February and 1 March. Thereafter, my request to John Hayes, which was relayed at a meeting with him last week, was that, because of the huge importance of the issue, there should be ministerial attendance at the intergovernmental group.

Liam McArthur suggested some possible solutions. There are of course several possible solutions. One is an island ROC, which could be  $X + Y$ , where  $X$  is the evidence-based island ROC and  $Y$  is the cost of transmission. That would be a buffer and would ensure a return for investors. However, that would take us up only to 2017, so there would probably need to be a CFD solution as well. Thirdly, those solutions could be combined with others and with a section 185 order, which would put a cap on existing charges.

It must be said that we are in this position because the UK regulator, Ofgem, did not provide a solution for the whole of the UK. Indeed, the islands have been separated from a solution that has been offered to the mainland. That is a serious state of affairs.

There must be a solution, so I will continue to work positively and constructively with the UK Government and with colleagues in the Labour, Liberal Democrat, Conservative and Green parties in this Parliament. I will keep members informed about the progress of this important issue to the best of my ability. The matter will be raised at the convention of the Highlands and Islands, which I think is due to take place in Lerwick next month and which I will certainly attend. I will keep members fully advised about that.

Alison Johnstone made an excellent speech covering many topics that others perhaps did not cover. In relation to district heating, we have had an expert commission and I have chaired some of its meetings because I am passionately committed to taking forward district heating. Alison Johnstone rightly praised the success of district heating in Aberdeen. There has been success in Shetland and Glasgow as well.

What is at stake is the tackling of fuel poverty in an effective way. One lady tenant in a flat in Glasgow, who is in a tower block that has had the benefit of the district heating scheme, put it simply. She said, "This scheme has meant that I do not have to wear my duffle coat indoors any more." That puts it as well as it can be put.

**Rob Gibson:** Does the minister welcome the Ignis scheme in Wick, where 200 people in the town are now getting heat and the distillery is getting steam? Indeed, it can be expounded as another district heating system that is a great success.

**Fergus Ewing:** I was aware of that. I think that I have been invited to visit the scheme, which I hope to do. If I do, I will certainly combine it with a visit to the Pulteney distillery, whose best product is not steam.

Many members have touched on community renewables. I am advised that, prior to the end of this financial year, we expect funding for six community projects to be approved, five of which came through the community and renewable energy scheme pre-planning pipeline. That will result in a spend of around £2 million in the community renewables sector. I was pleased that so many members—including Mary Scanlon, Alison Johnstone, Stuart McMillan and Rob Gibson—highlighted that issue.

We want to do far more on community renewables but we recognise that the mechanics are extremely challenging and difficult. There is no

doubt about that at all. Our job, through Community Energy Scotland, CARES and some excellent civil servants who are fully committed to making this successful, is to spread out the benefits to as many communities as possible. I am keen to work with members from all parties on community renewables.

Margaret McDougall mentioned skills at some length—quite rightly so. Ken Macintosh mentioned skills as a particular challenge. I agree: the skills issue is a challenge. It is a challenge for the whole world. We are short of engineers; the whole world is short of engineers, as I know from when I visited Calgary and the First Minister visited Norway. It is a challenge that is faced by all nations, not simply with regard to renewable energy but with regard to oil and gas and across the spectrum.

Part of the answer, of course, is for more emphasis on STEM topics. I am pleased to say that the Scottish Government has provided nearly £2 million in funding for this academic year to allow the funding council to support an additional 300 funded STEM university places, increasing the total number to 1,200.

Out of the 25,000 modern apprenticeships, we have ring fenced 500 starts for energy during each year in this session, and engineering and energy-related modern apprenticeship starts show a 13 per cent increase over the past two years. That is welcome, but we need to do more: we recognise that. There is no point in backslapping and congratulating ourselves on what has been achieved—that is no use as a minister. Ministers always have to look to tomorrow and do better, and that is what we are determined to do. I am grateful that the skills issue has emerged clearly as a topic.

I also recognise the work that SSE and Scottish Power have done in setting up and supporting apprenticeships and work in places such as Carnegie, Inverness, Ayr, and Dumfries. That work also means that throughout those parts of Scotland, where, understandably, there are many people who are antagonistic towards aspects of the renewable energy policy, people can at least see that somebody—a son of somebody they know—is getting an apprenticeship or a job in the area. That is immensely important.

Nuclear energy has been touched on. I say with respect to Iain Gray that—as I think he knows—I have visited Torness and paid tribute to the professionalism of the work there. We are not opposed to continuing existing nuclear power stations in use, when that can safely happen.

I recognise the professionalism of the operation in Torness and in Hunterston, whose life extension we supported. However, we do not believe that it would be sensible to build new nuclear power

stations, when the costs of those that are being built in France and Finland have exceeded their estimates by two or three times and when the Public Accounts Committee at Westminster has estimated that the costs of decommissioning Sellafield alone amount to £67.5 billion. To be frank, that strikes me as game over for new nuclear power stations.

**Murdo Fraser:** Will the minister give way?

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The minister is just concluding.

**Fergus Ewing:** I am sorry—as always, I am happy to continue our discourse later.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** Please come to a conclusion, minister.

**Fergus Ewing:** The committee's report is a solid piece of work. There are challenges and it will not be easy to achieve the targets but, in setting the targets, Scotland has created an interest and an investment. That will mean jobs and businesses in Scotland now and tomorrow, which will be good for all of us and good for a proper energy policy.

16:51

**Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP):** I welcome the—almost—consensuality of the debate. The committee's inquiry explored whether the Government's renewable energy targets are achievable; the report proves that they are.

Before I start on the meat of my speech, I offer my thanks to past and present committee members, to the convener—who was not poor—and to the 87 witnesses who gave evidence. The committee received 183 submissions and 21 items of supplementary evidence and it visited Orkney, Caithness, Perth and Fife in producing the report, which took 11 months to prepare. It was more like "War and Peace"; we had a few skirmishes but, in general, the whole thing was a constructive team effort.

The debate has added constructively to the report. In support of that, the committee welcomes the Government's route map for renewable energy and the good practice wind project, from which the good practice guide has now been published. Those documents will add to the report's findings, as will the briefings that have been received from many professionals in the industry.

A significant proportion of the committee's time—perhaps a disproportionate amount—was spent on onshore wind. However, the significance of having a balanced energy supply from various sources was recognised, as was the need to consider how best to reduce domestic and

transport energy demand and to secure our low-carbon emissions targets.

After full consideration, the general summation is that Scotland will achieve its renewables targets for electricity and heat. It is hoped that the positive recommendations in the report will be accepted. I believe that the Government has recognised them in its positive response to the report.

Many members talked about planning issues, which I will touch on because planning is a key element in achieving the targets. How do we ease the planning process and the guidelines that planning authorities provide? The increased number of planning applications is largely, but not wholly, born of the past subsidy regime's suggested favouring of single turbine applications. Hydro and small biomass applications will, in time, add to that. That is why we welcome the recent funding and fees measures that the Government has taken to address resource obstacles. We need to understand, through regular reporting by local authorities, where we are on scoping, planning and approvals.

As the convener said, the committee felt that, if increased fees for larger-scale planning applications were applied, it would not be unreasonable to expect planning authorities to improve their efficiency by taking on at the centre the job of collecting and gathering data on cumulative and environmental impacts. That, I believe, will help to take some wind and heat out of local disputes.

Although a number of studies demonstrate that the majority of Scots support the development of onshore and offshore wind, we recognise that there has to be much greater involvement of, communication with and investment by communities, so that we get a balanced view on planning approvals. Guidelines, understanding and practice in, between and across planning authorities and bodies such as Scottish Natural Heritage need to be better established and applied.

As Margaret McDougall and Ken Macintosh mentioned, a major gating factor to achieving our targets is the availability and take-up of requisite skills—particularly in STEM subjects, as the minister mentioned. The interchangeability of skills requirements and competition for skills between the renewables industry and the still-burgeoning oil and gas industry provide a challenge to be met. I am encouraged by the engagement between the Scottish Government, the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council and the energy skills partnership, which is critical to overcoming that challenge and is welcome. However, the demographic demand requires much greater involvement of teachers and parents, who need to be actually taken out to the industry to be shown

that engineering, for example, is not a dirty industry.

Scotland is leading the way on technology through EMEC and the European offshore wind deployment centre and it can establish a skilled workforce that will give the country global reach in the renewables industry.

Finance was briefly mentioned by Marco Biagi, and certainly by Mary Scanlon. The committee recognises that when the relevant technologies are developed, and with them the potential for a higher proportion of tidal and offshore wave power, Scotland could secure up to £46 billion of investment and nearly 40,000 jobs in renewables by 2020. There are, however, some uncertainties, as has been said. The greatest financial challenge that we face is the uncertainty that is created by DECC and Westminster regarding the lack of clarity on ROCs to 2014, the currently apparently rudderless passage of EMR and an unsure Energy Bill.

Despite the coalition's agreement that there would be no subsidy for nuclear power, we heard just this week that the UK Government is now talking about 40-year subsidies for new nuclear stations. That is absolutely disgraceful and will certainly be fought rigorously.

In declaring that uncertainty, the committee found no significant evidence that there is uncertainty due to the current constitutional debate. I take Rhoda Grant's point, but in his answer to that point the minister indicated that the Scottish Government is trying to have meaningful conversations with the Westminster Government.

This has been a good debate. Eight minutes is not enough time to do justice to the time and effort of the witnesses, clerks and committee members.

The summary of the report is this: in the face of uncertainty, which has certainly been created by the situation at Westminster regarding EMR and the Energy Bill, I believe that with greater development of decentralised generation; demand reduction; storage; better and fairer interconnections; the involvement and awareness of individuals; and the involvement of communities, local authorities, suppliers, developers and investors, we can and will achieve our renewable electricity, heat and low-carbon emissions targets.

I hope that the report has contributed seriously to the debate and to securing the energy future of Scotland.

## Scottish Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund (Trustees)

16:59

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** The next item of business is consideration of motion S4M-05672, in the name of Liam McArthur, on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, on the nomination of a pension fund trustee for the Scottish parliamentary contributory pension fund.

*Motion moved,*

That the Parliament appoints Duncan McNeil MSP as a Fund trustee of the Scottish Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund, further to his nomination for such appointment by the Parliamentary corporation.—[*Liam McArthur.*]

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



## Decision Time

17:00

**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-05596, in the name of Murdo Fraser, on the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee's report on the achievability of the Scottish Government's renewable energy targets, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations in the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee's 7th Report, 2012 (Session 4): *Report on the achievability of the Scottish Government's renewable energy targets* (SP Paper 220).

**The Presiding Officer:** The second question is, that motion S4M-05672, in the name of Liam McArthur, on the Scottish parliamentary contributory pension fund, be agreed to.

*Motion agreed to,*

That the Parliament appoints Duncan McNeil MSP as a Fund trustee of the Scottish Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund, further to his nomination for such appointment by the Parliamentary corporation.

*Meeting closed at 17:00.*



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