



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

## Official Report

# MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 23 January 2014

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## Scottish Parliament

Thursday 23 January 2014

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

### General Question Time

#### Widening Access to Further and Higher Education

**1. Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council is taking to implement section 15 of the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013. (S4O-02827)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell):** The Scottish funding council has developed an action plan to respond to commencement of provisions in the 2013 act. The action plan includes preparation of a specific work plan related to implementation of sections 3, 15 and 16, which are the parts of the act related to widening access. In the meantime, the funding council has been monitoring and agreeing annual outcome agreements with each of the higher education institutions. As the chamber will know, those agreements include activity to widen access.

**Marco Biagi:** Section 15 is very close to my heart, as I am the member whose amendments led to its inclusion. Does the cabinet secretary share my hope that it will also be close to the heart of the soon-to-be-appointed new chief executive of the SFC, whoever he or she may be, and will he raise section 15 with them shortly after their appointment?

**Michael Russell:** I pay tribute to Marco Biagi for his work on this subject, which was extremely successful and very influential. When they are appointed, the new chief executive of the Scottish funding council will be focused on supporting delivery of our post-16 reforms, which aim to boost jobs and growth, improve life chances—especially those of young learners—and ensure that institutions are sustainable for a long time.

The SFC supports the Scottish Government's strategic objective of widening access and I am sure that the new chief executive will support that. I will be closely involved in discussing that with them, as I am with the interim chief executive and the new chair, who has been very supportive of the objective.

#### East Ayrshire Council (Learning and Teaching)

**2. Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what support it is providing to East Ayrshire Council to enhance learning and teaching. (S4O-02828)

**The Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages (Dr Alasdair Allan):** The Scottish Government is providing a wide range of support and funding to help education authorities, including East Ayrshire Council, to enhance learning and teaching. As Scotland's improvement agency for education, Education Scotland has a key role in supporting practitioners and authorities, such as East Ayrshire Council, to improve learning and teaching across all areas of their work.

**Willie Coffey:** I thank the minister for that answer and his recent visit to Kilmarnock's Grange academy campus, where he saw at first hand the great work that is being done on science, Scottish studies and languages, particularly Gaelic and Mandarin.

Does the minister agree that the planned development of a single, three to 18-year-old campus for James Hamilton academy and Kilmarnock academy, which will incorporate primary schools and early learning provision, represents a substantial commitment by the Scottish Government to the quality of educational provision in the north of Kilmarnock?

**Dr Allan:** It is certainly a substantial commitment. The schools for the future programme is committing £80 million to the project that Willie Coffey describes and it is fair to say that Grange academy is doing great and innovative things with Scottish studies, which looks set to become a very valuable addition to the array of qualifications with which people will come out of Scottish schools in the future.

#### Defibrillators

**3. Jim Hume (South Scotland) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to increase the number of public access defibrillators across the country. (S4O-02829)

**The Minister for Public Health (Michael Matheson):** A substantial investment in heart disease services has reduced Scotland's premature deaths from coronary heart disease by more than 60 per cent in the past 15 years. In 2011, the Scottish Government committed £7.5 million of funding to the Scottish Ambulance Service for state-of-the-art defibrillators. However, more can be done and we recognise the important role that public access defibrillators can play.

Local councils, community groups and organisations, as well as businesses, can have

assistance to look at the provision of public access defibrillators in their premises, with free support and advice from the Scottish Ambulance Service, which includes guidance and information about how they can apply for funding for such equipment.

**Jim Hume:** I thank the minister for that response, the work that has been done and the recognition that more must be done. Only a fifth of local authority leisure centres and community-use secondary schools that I surveyed have a defibrillator on their premises, despite the greater risk of cardiac arrest during and immediately after exercise. Does the minister agree that it is time for other local authorities and leisure trusts to follow the lead of Argyll and Bute Council and Angus Council, whose leisure facilities all have a defibrillator, and North Lanarkshire Council, whose secondary schools all have a defibrillator? Will he support a statutory requirement that any facility in which exercise routinely takes place must have a defibrillator on its premises as a condition of its licence?

**Michael Matheson:** I encourage local authorities and other leisure trusts to follow the good practice of those authorities and trusts that have installed defibrillators in their facilities. However, we have to be careful about putting the issue on a statutory footing because, as I am sure the member will recognise, some venues can be used for a variety of purposes, not just sporting purposes, and might operate at times at which it might not be appropriate for them to have a defibrillator.

That said, another aspect that I should highlight is our work with the British Heart Foundation in Scotland. We have provided £100,000 to roll out to school pupils cardiopulmonary resuscitation training, which I have witnessed myself, to give them the confidence and knowledge to decide when to offer CPR to someone who has had a heart attack. We can take the issue forward in a number of ways and, as I have said, I encourage our local authorities to follow the good practice of those authorities that have provided defibrillators.

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** Is the minister aware of the work of Wilma Gunn, a former constituent of mine who established Scottish Heart at Risk Testing following her son Cameron's tragic death from cardiomyopathy and who has campaigned with some success to secure defibrillators in public places? Furthermore, does he agree that her recent award of an MBE is very well deserved?

**Michael Matheson:** I, too, congratulate Mrs Gunn on being awarded her MBE and, indeed, take this opportunity to thank her for the tremendous amount of work that she has

undertaken over a number of years in pursuing this agenda through Scottish HART.

We have learned important lessons from the cardiac assessment of young athletes and the chief medical officer has asked Dr Brian Walker, the head of medicine at the sportscotland institute of sport, to consider what further lessons can be learned from that work. Indeed, I believe that Dr Walker's group is meeting today to explore the matter further and see what lessons sporting bodies and our national health service can learn from that initiative.

### Traffic Wardens

**4. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking—I am sorry; that is the wrong question. I was reading Mr Hume's question by mistake. [*Laughter.*]

I will start again. To ask the Scottish Government what action local authorities are taking in light of Police Scotland's decision to withdraw traffic wardens. (S4O-02830)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill):** I am happy to answer the question.

Local policing is at the heart of police reform and Police Scotland is engaged with local authorities and local partnerships on a range of matters. That will continue to be the case in relation to parking matters that are identified as an issue and agreed as a local priority.

The Police Scotland review of the traffic warden service was part of its approach to ensuring that resources are being utilised in the most efficient and effective manner, and I have been assured by Police Scotland that it will continue to address dangerous or obstructive parking. Indeed, police officers regularly carry out those duties.

The Scottish Government is engaging with local authorities to discuss the issues and possible solutions arising from Police Scotland's decision to withdraw the service. However, the action that local authorities take is a matter for them and will take into account their local circumstances and priorities.

**Murdo Fraser:** As the cabinet secretary made clear in his response, Police Scotland's removal of traffic wardens is putting an additional burden on local councils that have not decriminalised parking offences. In Stirling, for example, six traffic wardens are employed, and it will cost the council £180,000 a year to replace them. What will the cabinet secretary do about a situation in which a centralised public body's cost cutting is being carried out at the expense of a cash-strapped local council?

**Kenny MacAskill:** That is just not the case. At least 12 local authorities are operating decriminalised parking enforcement; that had been the case for several years with regard to the Strathclyde legacy force and, indeed, Mr Fraser's own region of Fife operates it. In such circumstances, it seems to me that Police Scotland is helping to provide a more uniform basis across Scotland and to ensure that police officers are available to deal with the kind of dangerous and obstructive parking that they should deal with as well as assist with individual local priorities. However, there is also a recognition that other such matters are better dealt with by local authorities, and it might be appropriate for Stirling to engage with Fife to work out how these arrangements appear to be working relatively and reasonably well there, never mind in the city of Edinburgh, which Mr Fraser clearly knows well.

**Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):** I echo the concerns that were expressed by Murdo Fraser and advise the cabinet secretary that a similar situation arises in my constituency. Is he aware that the role of the traffic wardens in Orkney extends far beyond the simple issuing of parking fines to helping with the logistics of events, notably Stromness shopping week and agricultural shows? Those policing responsibilities will fall to police officers who are already struggling with the additional burden of back-office functions.

**Kenny MacAskill:** I think that we will find that it is Police Scotland that already deals with those major matters. Mr McArthur can correct me if I am wrong, but I think that we would speak of the traffic warden—not wardens—in the Orkney Islands. Discussions are on-going between Police Scotland and Orkney Islands Council on that circumstance.

**Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** What assessment was done of the operational and financial implications for local authorities before Police Scotland announced its decision?

**Kenny MacAskill:** Discussions took place between Police Scotland and the local authorities. As I indicated, 12 local authorities have been operating decriminalised parking enforcement, including, of course, the City of Edinburgh Council, which has done so for some considerable time. I am not aware of Ms Boyack seeking to change that circumstance, which would be a matter for the local authority.

### Scottish Welfare Fund

**5. Michael McMahon (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government when it will publish the statistics for the Scottish welfare fund for the final quarter of 2013. (S4O-02831)

**The Minister for Housing and Welfare (Margaret Burgess):** The chief statistician has announced that statistics on the Scottish welfare fund, covering the period 1 October to 31 December 2013, will be published at 9.30 am on 15 April 2014.

Dates for all Scottish welfare fund statistical publications that are due for release in 2014 are available on the Scottish Government website. Annual statistics on the fund, covering 2013-14, are due for publication on 15 July 2014.

**Michael McMahon:** I thank the minister for that response, but it leaves me quite puzzled. When initial statistics that were published around September last year indicated that there had been a problem with the take-up of the Scottish welfare fund, I asked the First Minister, when he came before the Conveners Group, whether the statistics could be produced, because of the importance of the information. He gave a firm assurance that those statistics would be available in November, and he was also confident that there would be an increase in the uptake. We were then advised that the figures would not be produced until February, and now the minister appears to be indicating that they will be delayed further. Can she assure us that those statistics will be produced? Any problems that exist in the Scottish welfare fund really must be addressed, because that money has to get to the people in most need, who require the support of that fund.

**Margaret Burgess:** As previously indicated, the statistics up to September will be produced on 11 February. The member asked about the statistics to the end of the year.

We have been conducting informal monitoring of the Scottish welfare fund. As the member will be aware, in October we changed the guidance to make it easier for people to access the fund. Since that change, we have seen a noticeable increase in spending in the Scottish welfare fund. The figures are showing about £19 million up to the end of December. The Deputy First Minister will share that information with the Welfare Reform Committee, and I understand that she will be writing to the committee today.

### Chemical Restraints (Care Homes)

**6. Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government when it considers it appropriate to administer medicines as a form of restraint for residents in care homes. (S4O-02832)

**The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil):** We expect the highest standards of care to be provided to all adults in all care settings. Our national care standards set out the responsibilities of care providers and their duty

to ensure that residents are treated with dignity and respect.

Care homes must have a written policy and procedures on when restraint can be used, and we expect staff to be fully trained and supported in the use of restraint. Any use of restraint must be recorded in the care user's personal plan, which is reviewed every six months.

The use of medication as a form of restraint is permissible only in very limited circumstances and within certain parameters, for example to safeguard the health of an adult who is unable to consent to the treatment in question, and where other alternatives have been explored and none is practicable.

**Alison McInnes:** Around a third of care home residents suffering from dementia in Scotland are prescribed antipsychotic medication, and mental health campaigners are deeply concerned that, too often, antipsychotics are being used as a first resort for the symptomatic treatment of restless or agitated behaviour, as the national care standards allow, and not once every other form of intervention has been exhausted. The Department of Health has identified that the extensive use of such drugs has substantial clinical risk attached and contributes to thousands of extra deaths and strokes. Does the minister agree that further consideration needs to be given to how we can safeguard the human rights, choice and dignity of those care home residents? Will Scotland follow the example of England and Wales by making it a priority to reduce the use of antipsychotics for people with dementia?

**Alex Neil:** I fully understand Alison McInnes's concerns and I am happy to raise the matter again with the Care Inspectorate and the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland, which are jointly responsible for that area of policy. As the member will know, every care home in Scotland is subject to an unannounced inspection once a year, and the Care Inspectorate is conscious of the need to ensure during inspections that there is no abuse of the system. I call on anyone, including Alison McInnes, to bring the matter to the attention of both the Care Inspectorate and the Mental Welfare Commission if they have any evidence of abuse. I am absolutely sure that both those bodies will investigate thoroughly where there is any prima facie evidence of abuse.

### South Scotland Bus Routes

**7. Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to protect bus routes in South Scotland. (S4O-02833)

**The Minister for Transport and Veterans (Keith Brown):** The Scottish Government's commitment to supporting bus services in

Scotland is clearly demonstrated by the £250 million or so that is expended every year in bus service operators grant and concessionary travel reimbursement as well as the Scottish green bus fund, the bus investment fund and, more recently, the community transport vehicle fund.

**Claudia Beamish:** I thank the minister for that answer about the financial aspects. I have a particular concern about rural bus routes in my region. During the Christmas recess, Stuarts of Carluke pulled a bus service between Law and Wishaw, leaving a rural community with very poor transport links for constituents who need to get to work and to health appointments and leaving many people socially isolated. I am sorry to say that that appears to be a continuing pattern. In view of that, what plans does the minister have to support Iain Gray's proposed bus bill, which would bring real sustainable protection to Law and many other communities throughout South Scotland?

**Keith Brown:** I hope that the member has taken up the issue about the particular route that she mentioned with the relevant authority, which I think is the Strathclyde partnership for transport. Regional transport partnerships and local authorities have the power to intervene to protect particular bus routes. We provide the financial support that I have mentioned, but it is they who have the ability to safeguard routes. I hope that the member has taken that option, given that that is the way in which to address the issue.

We have still to see the proposals for Iain Gray's bill. We look forward to seeing them and have said that we will look at them with an open mind. However, we have had various other demands in relation to transport—whether to spend an extra £350 million on the Edinburgh to Glasgow rail improvement programme, or to give more money to local authorities or community transport providers—and I hope that, during the budget process, there will be a proposal from Labour of how much it intends to put towards those proposals and how it would fund them. In that way, we would know that the proposals are serious; otherwise, it would seem to me to be playing politics. Even if we were able to spend all that extra money on funding all those other things—we cannot do that, as we are limited in what we can spend—we would end up in the same position as the last Labour Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who, when he was hounded out of office, had to say that there was no money left.

### Help to Buy (Scotland) Scheme (Islands)

**8. Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the availability of the help to buy (Scotland) scheme for residents of island areas



that do not have participating builders. (S4O-02834)

**The Minister for Housing and Welfare (Margaret Burgess):** The £220 million help to buy (Scotland) scheme is available across Scotland to assist people who are looking to buy a new-build home. Participation in the scheme is voluntary and house builders, whether large or small, may register and offer houses for sale under the scheme. We currently have more than 100 house builders participating in the scheme, including house builders in two island authorities, and we would encourage all builders to participate.

**Tavish Scott:** Will the minister undertake to look into the situation in Shetland, where participating builders are not coming forward? Will she look at the flexibility of the scheme to allow housing associations or Shetland Islands Council, as a social landlord, to take on that role for the scheme, which could assist people?

**The Presiding Officer:** Briefly, minister.

**Margaret Burgess:** We recognise the difficulties with some of the house-building schemes in the islands and we are looking at ways in which the Scottish Government can assist further in rural and island communities.

## 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-01832)

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

**Johann Lamont:** We have just voted on a budget of scarce resources. Every pound and every penny should be accounted for and explained. The First Minister's trip to the Ryder cup cost in excess of £468,000. VisitScotland has accounted for how it spent £414,000 of the total figure but, despite a series of freedom of information requests and missed deadlines, the Scottish Government has failed to account for £54,000 of that total. Will the First Minister please account for that spending now?

**The First Minister:** Johann Lamont has partially answered her own question. The Scottish Government spend was not £460,000 but £50,000. The freedom of information request will be answered as soon as possible. [*Interruption.*] It will and why should it not be? In my mind, the spending on the trip to Chicago was about the investment decisions that have brought jobs to Scotland, the variety of activities that promoted our country and the huge importance of the estimated £100 million benefit from having the Ryder cup in our country—all that justifies our substantial effort to promote this country.

As we go into this year of the Commonwealth games, homecoming and the Ryder cup—as the attention of the world is centred on Scotland—can we not just agree that it is the duty and obligation of the Scottish Government and every public authority to maximise the benefit from those events?

**Johann Lamont:** The Scottish Government has spent £1 million of taxpayers' cash on a record 14 special advisers and still the First Minister cannot come up with an answer to a simple question.

My mother used to say that every penny should be a prisoner because it came from the sweat of your father's brow. The First Minister should be as cautious with public spending and the public purse. It is entirely reasonable to ask what has happened to that £54,000. VisitScotland has admitted to spending almost £1,000 on a pianist, more than £1,100 on flying in chefs from Gleneagles and more than £1,700 on ties.

It has been reported that the First Minister chose not to stay in the hotel where the rest of the delegation stayed, but in the more exclusive Peninsula hotel, further away from the course. Suites at that hotel cost more than \$2,000 a night. Will the First Minister confirm that he stayed in that hotel, explain why he wanted to stay in a more upmarket hotel than the rest of the delegation and what that cost?

**The First Minister:** From memory, 17 people were in the Scottish Government delegation, including a range of officials from Scottish Enterprise and the Scottish Government's industry department. I correct Johann Lamont: the visit was not just about the two days of the Ryder cup; rather, it stretched over the range of events in Chicago to attract investment to Scotland. The investment to Scotland that was announced on that trip was worth tens of millions of pounds and brought jobs to many areas of Scotland.

On special advisers, Johann Lamont mentioned the figure of £1 million. Our spending record on special advisers is incomparably better than that of the previous Labour-Liberal Administration. From memory—I am open to correction—the number of special advisers for the whole of the Scottish Government is also, I think, less than the number of individual special advisers to the Deputy Prime Minister.

The figure of £1 million sticks in my memory because I think that that was the expenditure by Jack McConnell's Administration during Scotland week. That spending could well have been justified. However, it is so interesting that we have managed to bring as many jobs by rightfully promoting Scotland in the United States without ever hitting that £1 million figure, spent by an Administration of which Johann Lamont was a minister.

Why do we not focus on how we promote this country, get the advantage of promoting Scotland on the world stage, embrace 2014 as a great year for Scotland and say that that promotion—whether it is by VisitScotland or the Scottish Government—is of immense value in bringing jobs and livelihoods to the people of Scotland? *[Applause.]*

**The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):** Order.

**Johann Lamont:** It is possible to do all that this year and answer simple questions about the money that the First Minister has spent.

I have to say that that answer plumbs the depths in finding anything to talk about except a simple question about a hotel bill. That £54,000 is more than twice what the average person earns in a year, but the First Minister cannot account for how he spent that much money in just a week.

When *The Daily Telegraph* asked the Scottish Government to account—*[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Order. *[Interruption.]* Mr Wheelhouse—order!

**Johann Lamont:** I am not sure whether we have quite got to the point of journalists not being allowed to ask questions but, if we have, we are in a very serious place.

When *The Daily Telegraph* asked the Scottish Government to account for the whole half a million pounds spent on the Ryder cup, the Government said at first that it could not. Then it said that it could. Then VisitScotland accounted for what it spent. Then the Government told *The Daily Telegraph* that it would give details on 10 January. Now, two weeks after that deadline and two months after VisitScotland responded, the First Minister still cannot give an answer. I ask him again: how did he spend his cut of the half a million pounds spent on a trip to the golf? *[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Order.

**The First Minister:** And Johann Lamont talked about plumbing the depths. I know that *The Daily Telegraph* is becoming the house journal of the Labour Party in Scotland, but—

For the third time, let us correct a few things. On the half a million pounds thing, it is obviously not the case because, as Johann Lamont rightly says, VisitScotland did not admit but spelled out what it had spent on promoting Scotland. The promotion of Scotland at the Ryder cup was an important aspect of what we have to do to realise the estimated £100 million of benefit.

In terms of defending VisitScotland, one aspect of what was done was that, at the Ryder cup, a film promoting Scotland as a tourist destination was shown to a live television audience of many hundreds of millions. Johann Lamont should consider what would have happened if VisitScotland had had to buy that sort of publicity.

When it comes to the Scottish Government spend, I have also pointed out that it ain't me who spent it, but 17 people in the Scottish Government delegation.

A range of investments, generating jobs and investment, was announced while we were in Chicago. Incidentally, that is one of the reasons why foreign direct investment—FDI—projects into Scotland are up 49 per cent in the most recent figures, just as the better together campaign was predicting a collapse.

Why do we not keep our eye on how we can promote our country and celebrate the opportunities that we have this year and how

many jobs we can generate for the people of Scotland?

As I have put the emphasis on jobs and employment, perhaps for once in First Minister's questions—though perhaps not in light of the job figures yesterday—Johann Lamont will get round to asking me about the economy, unemployment and generating jobs for the people of Scotland. *[Applause.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Order.

**Johann Lamont:** I welcome the unemployment figures—I genuinely do. I just want an explanation of the figures that I have given and of how the Government spent £54,000. The First Minister has still not explained it.

The First Minister talks about VisitScotland. It has done its job: it has explained how it spent its money. We ask him to follow its example. We know that he went to extraordinary lengths to stop the public finding out that he spent £250 of their money on a pair of Chinese checked trousers when he forgot his tartan trews, but this is more serious.

What do we know? We know that the First Minister spent half a million pounds on a trip to the Ryder cup and that he reportedly upgraded himself—at our expense—to stay in a hotel that is frequented by Beyoncé, Brad Pitt and Justin Bieber.

**The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney):** This is First Minister's question time.

**Johann Lamont:** This is the question.

For those who do not know the Peninsula Chicago, it is

“for those who love to spoil themselves with a luxurious five-star experience, without losing that comfortable home-away-from-home feel.”

The First Minister has to explain how he spent the money. He should understand that, in the real world, the people of Scotland will be disgusted at how he treats himself at their expense. Will he now at least have the decency to explain to them how he spent, in just one week, the £54,000 of taxpayers' money that he still has not accounted for?

**The First Minister:** There were—if my memory serves me—17 people in the Scottish Government delegation. The expenditure of £50,000 was on that delegation—flights and accommodation for 17 people.

This is an improvement, because the last time Johann Lamont mentioned the issue, she had me spending the entire £500,000, so I should be eternally grateful that we have now boiled that

down to £50,000. I ask her to go one step further and to accept that there were 17 people in the Scottish Government delegation. More important, I ask her to accept that key announcements were made for jobs across Scotland, that key promotion was carried out for many Scottish companies—including the oil and gas round-table discussion, which has also resulted in jobs coming to Scotland—and that there was great promotion of our country. I am talking not just about the Scottish Government's efforts over that week, but VisitScotland's efforts at the Ryder cup itself. I was proud to note on the television coverage that the saltire flew so prominently at the Ryder cup in Chicago. That is an essential part of preparing for the great success that we are going to have at Gleneagles.

I am proud of the work that VisitScotland does in increasing tourism, the results of which we are now seeing, and I am proud of the work that Scottish Development International does in bringing jobs to Scotland. That is one of the reasons why we have had a record increase in employment in Scotland and why unemployment in Scotland is 6.4 per cent. This Government is in office because we focus on the things that matter to the people of Scotland—that is, jobs and growth—not the ridiculous frippery that we get from Johann Lamont. *[Interruption.]*

**The Presiding Officer:** Order.

## **Prime Minister (Meetings)**

**2. Ruth Davidson (Glasgow) (Con):** To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister. (S4F-01830)

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

**Ruth Davidson:** A new report from the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council has revealed that the number of students who are studying in Scotland's colleges has plummeted by 140,000 over the past five years. That is a cut of more than a third in college places since the Scottish National Party came to power. How many women have been affected?

**The First Minister:** I dispute the figures that Ruth Davidson uses. The correct way to look at teaching in Scottish colleges is to concentrate on full-time equivalent places. That is important because it tells us the level of teaching that is taking place in the colleges. If we do not do that, we equate what could be a course of two or three hours with a higher national certificate or a higher national diploma, which would clearly be ridiculous.

The Scottish Government has kept to its commitment to maintain full-time equivalent places at the level that we spelled out in our manifesto. In

2012-13, there were 116,399 full-time equivalents—the funded places—which shows that we have kept to that manifesto commitment.

Scotland's colleges are being renewed and invested in throughout the country. Let us remember that although the budget for Scotland's colleges has come under pressure, the deal and the budget for Scotland's colleges are incomparably better than what is happening south of the border. Before Ruth Davidson says that that is irrelevant, let us remember that—as even she knows—our budget is governed by consequentialists. I can demonstrate—I will if she asks me again—that although the funding position for Scotland's colleges is under pressure, it is incomparably better than the position south of the border. Unless she can detail where exactly we will get Scotland's funding from, her question is nullified by practice south of the border.

Of course, Ruth Davidson could change her mind on independence and redraw her line in the sand. With independence we could use Scotland's resources to get even more success from our colleges and universities.

**Ruth Davidson:** The most telling thing about that answer was that, although I asked the First Minister about women, he ignored them. I can tell him that the number of women who are studying part-time courses has been slashed. There are now 80,000 fewer women studying part time in Scotland's colleges than there were on the day he took office.

The First Minister says that he wants more women in Scotland back in the workplace; I agree with him. However, childcare is only part of the issue. For a woman who has had a family and has had a career break and who wants to get back into the workplace, a part-time course allows her to juggle childcare and find a route back into work. Mike Russell has, in the chamber, flippantly dismissed part-time courses as “hobby” courses. What does the First Minister have to say to the 80,000 women who cannot get college places?

**The First Minister:** I answered Ruth Davidson in the way I did in order to correct the premise of her question. The key measure is the number of full-time equivalent places, which is crucial.

Ruth Davidson asks how we will get women back into the workplace. That is hugely important and is a concern of the Government. Has she not noticed the unemployment and employment figures that were issued yesterday? The employment figures show a rise in the year to November of 62,000 of women coming back into the workplace.

We are talking not just about what we will do in the future—which will produce an even greater rise—but about what has happened in the past

year. I heard Iain Gray say that many of the jobs are part time, but we know from the statistics that the positions are full time. The figure is 62,000—a 3 per cent rise in the number of women in the workforce.

We know from statistics that women are doing better than men on school qualifications and that they are going to better destinations from school. We also know from statistics that the number of women in the workforce is rising quickly—the increase was 62,000. Given that, the Government can claim not only that it is offering the prospect of free and comprehensive childcare in an independent Scotland, but that it is already succeeding in bringing women back into the workforce. That is partly because colleges are concentrating on courses that equip people and give them the required training and skills to get into the workforce successfully.

I will make a final point. I know that Ruth Davidson will—through her acute interest in such things—have noticed the rising number of women in modern apprenticeships, as part of the 60 per cent increase in the number of apprenticeships. All round, that is not a bad position, given the restraints from her colleagues in London and the Westminster straitjacket that this Government has been in.

### 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-01831)

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

**Willie Rennie:** Police stop and search rates in Scotland have increased fourfold since the First Minister came to power. In the past year alone, 750,000 people were stopped and searched—most without there being any suspicion of a crime. The vast majority were young people, and 500 were under the age of 10. It is difficult to understand how children under 10 are in any position to give the police consent to search. Is he comfortable with very young children being treated that way?

**The First Minister:** I am comfortable with the fact that 70 per cent of stop and searches were consensual under the regulations. I am comfortable that, as Police Scotland has indicated, many of the stop and searches achieved their required result—for example, finding potentially offensive weapons and addressing other aspects of behaviour.

The thing that I am most satisfied with—which Willie Rennie should dwell on for a minute—is the sharp reduction in offensive-weapon carrying and

in crimes against the person, including knife crime and other serious crime.

Willie Rennie should look at the results that we are achieving in respect of violent crime in Scotland. One of the things that the Government encountered and had to square up to when we took office was the serious problem of knife crime, with victims throughout Scotland calling for action. Considering the successful action that the police have initiated, the Liberal Democrats should at some point acknowledge that there is some sense and logic in how the police forces of Scotland—now Police Scotland—are carrying out their responsibilities.

**Willie Rennie:** If that is so clear, I presume that the First Minister will plan a further fourfold increase in stop and searches. I am genuinely disappointed that the First Minister is so blasé about use of that encroaching police tactic without checks and balances. Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People has said that there is a need for appropriate safeguards. The Scottish human rights commission has said that stop and search is "largely unregulated and unaccountable".

The First Minister should be concerned about the fact that in 750,000 cases of people being stopped and searched 80 per cent had no result, and that so many young children are being targeted. He risks the alienation of a generation. Is it not time that the First Minister sanctioned an overhaul of police stop and search?

**The First Minister:** Willie Rennie talks about the alienation of the public. He should look at the figures, which show that people's fear of crime in Scotland is not just reducing but is substantially lower than it is elsewhere in these islands. I do not accept for a second that we are complacent or blasé about these matters.

Willie Rennie will know that at its board meeting last August, the Scottish Police Authority discussed a report from Police Scotland entitled "Keeping People Safe through Stop and Search". The board instructed the SPA's performance and working group to undertake detailed scrutiny of the issue and to report back. That was long before Willie Rennie asked his question.

Chief Constable Sir Stephen House, speaking to the Parliament's Justice Sub-Committee on Policing last October, said:

"We stress to our officers that, first, they must do stop and search with integrity, fairness and respect. They have to have a reason for doing it, and they have to treat people fairly while they do it."—[*Official Report, Justice Sub-Committee on Policing*, 31 October 2013; c 265.]

The issue is being examined by the Parliament and the Scottish Police Authority and there is no indication that there is any complacency whatever.

However, we should reflect on the fact that crime in Scotland is at a 39-year low, violent crime is down by almost a half since 2006-07 and homicide is at its lowest level since records began. That is because of two things: first, we trust our police officers to carry out their responsibilities effectively and secondly, we have 1,000 more police officers on the streets and communities of Scotland, carrying out that work of behalf of the Scottish people.

### Renewable Energy (Pentland Firth)

**4. Jim Eadie (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to findings from the universities of Edinburgh and Oxford that the Pentland Firth could provide enough renewable energy to power approximately half of Scotland's homes. (S4F-01840)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** I welcome the work by the universities of Edinburgh, Oxford and Western Australia, which builds on last year's research and provides a valuable insight into how best to exploit that tremendous resource to meet Scotland's electricity needs.

In September last year, we consented the first tidal array in the Pentland Firth—the largest of its kind to be awarded consent in Europe. That initial array, by the developer MeyGen, will provide valuable learning for the research community and the wider tidal energy industry, as well as being a substantial development of tidal power.

**Jim Eadie:** Will the First Minister join me in paying tribute to the contribution made by the engineers at the universities of Edinburgh and Oxford? They have produced the most detailed study yet of how much tidal power could be generated by turbines placed in the Pentland Firth between mainland Scotland and Orkney. What more can be done to overcome the barriers to investment, created by the United Kingdom Government's handling of electricity market reform, in order to create jobs in manufacturing and throughout the supply chain so that we can power our economy and allow Scotland to realise its potential as a world leader in renewable and tidal energy?

**The First Minister:** I congratulate the researchers. Their estimate of 1.9GW is an informed insight and has provided expertise in the location of tidal turbines.

Scotland leads the world in wave and tidal technologies, which is why we established the saltire prize. The European Marine Energy Centre in Orkney was the first and only centre of its kind in the world to provide wave and tidal developers with accredited and grid-connected testing facilities.

There is no doubt that electricity market reform and the uncertainties that the UK Government has created have dealt severe blows to offshore renewable prospects in Scotland. It is estimated that, between offshore wind, tidal and wave power and onshore power, the islands of Scotland—Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles—have the potential to contribute 5 per cent of Great Britain's electricity by 2030. We should not lose sight of that amazing potential clean green opportunity that Scotland's geography offers us. In the Scottish Government's opinion, wave and tidal power are very much part of that picture.

**Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab):** The estimated 1.9GW of potential in the Pentland Firth is impressive enough, although the technological challenges remain significant. However, in 2008, the First Minister confidently told the world of the Pentland Firth:

"The sort of power that potentially could come from this area is not some hundreds of megawatts, it's not just like one conventional power station, it's 20 gigawatts and more than that, that's like 20 conventional power stations."

When will the First Minister realise that Scotland's renewables potential will in the end be delivered by serious science and not by hysterical hyperbole?

**The First Minister:** The estimate by Edinburgh and Oxford universities is of 1.9GW from tidal arrays, whereas the estimate that we had in 2008 from a Welsh university was of the total potential of offshore power in Scotland. The Pentland Firth is one of the foremost locations for tidal power. We are already looking at a tidal project deploying there that will produce many megawatts of power. That is important research.

Iain Gray should just get on board and accept that the biggest current obstacle to the development of marine resources in Scotland is the uncertainty that is being generated by the UK Government, and that the biggest assets in developing the undoubted potential are the enthusiasm and expertise of our scientists and the solid, consistent and enthusiastic support of the Scottish Government. O, that the Labour Party would get on board rather than try to undermine the industry in terms of Iain Gray's normal performance.

### Community Land Purchases

**5. Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking to strengthen the powers that local authorities and communities have to purchase land. (S4F-01848)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** The Scottish Government wants 1 million acres of land to be in community ownership by 2020. I was

delighted recently that a 10-year campaign on Lewis was successful after a funding package was put in place to allow local residents to buy a 26,775-acre estate. In support of that ambition, the forthcoming community empowerment (Scotland) bill will include a range of measures to support increased community ownership. Local authorities already have extensive powers to compulsorily purchase land in the public interest but, as part of our town centre action plan, we will continue to encourage local authorities to use compulsory purchase powers to bring neglected or abandoned land back into productive use.

**Sarah Boyack:** Last week, we debated town centres. In bringing about the required transformation, the key issues are to do with funding and the powers that local authorities need. Will the First Minister commit to examining the powers in the community empowerment bill to ensure that local authorities have the power to compulsorily purchase land to transform our town centres, particularly in communities where market forces have failed?

**The First Minister:** Indeed, that is what the consultation on the bill is about, and that is our proposal and our objective. We look forward to Sarah Boyack's participation in that process and to the information that she will provide. As she knows, we have a commission that will report on land ownership in Scotland.

We need to remember the practicalities. As Sarah Boyack will remember, when we came into office, we found that the Labour Party had scrapped the land fund in 2005 and transferred responsibility to the Big Lottery Fund's growing community assets scheme. However, we then found that the Big Lottery could not be used to buy out public land. There was perhaps the enthusiasm to do it, but we had no means to support communities in exercising a buy-out. Luckily, the current Administration has restored the land fund and, as a result, we are seeing once again a flow of purchases back into community ownership, as we go towards that million acre target. We will look at the legislation and at the consultation on the proposed bill to see if the powers are there, but a commitment is also required from Government to put up the money to ensure that communities can take land into community ownership.

### Economic Strategy (Inequality)

**6. Fiona McLeod (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister what assessment the Scottish Government has made of recent reports on how the United Kingdom Government's economic strategy is impacting on inequality in Scotland. (S4F-01843)

**The First Minister (Alex Salmond):** The United Kingdom is one of the most unequal societies in the world. It is ranked 28th out of 34 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development nations on income inequalities.

That trend is intensifying under the Tory-Liberal Government, which has delivered a double-dip recession and taken grossly unfair decisions, such as the decision to remove disability living allowance from some of our most vulnerable citizens.

The report from the University of Stirling is extremely welcome, because it makes it clear that the powers that are currently available to the Scottish Government are not enough to substantially reduce inequality. That is why many of us—a growing number—believe that only with independence would Scotland have the control and the full range of policy levers necessary to tackle inequality in our country.

**Fiona McLeod:** I am sure that the First Minister is aware that Professor Tony Travers, of the London School of Economics and Political Science, said in the *Financial Times* this week:

“London is the dark star of the economy”.

That followed similar comments from the UK Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, Vince Cable. Does the First Minister agree that independence is, as he said, the only way that we will be able to rebalance the economy to achieve a fairer country?

**The First Minister:** I do think that what the secretary of state, Vince Cable, had to say should be of some importance. It should be of some importance to the Liberal Democrats, since he is a Liberal Democrat, of some importance to the Tories, because he is in coalition with the Conservatives at the moment, and of some importance to Johann Lamont, who seemed, in a speech last night, to think that the reverse was the truth.

If Vince Cable and, indeed, Tony Travers of the LSE point to the difficulties in terms of the gravitational pull that London exercises in the UK economy, I think that people in the Scottish Parliament should pay some attention to their views.

Fiona McLeod is absolutely correct. One of the great arguments for independence for Scotland is to get the levers—economic, fiscal and in terms of social security—that are required to ensure that 100,000 additional children are not placed back into family and child poverty, as is estimated by the third sector in Scotland. That is one of the key ambitions of this country. I can see that it gathers no support from the Tory benches, but it will gather support from the people of Scotland.

**Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** Those who take the time to read the report that the University of Stirling published this week will see that it completely undermines the Scottish National Party argument that leaving the UK would automatically reduce inequality. After all, the Institute for Fiscal Studies made it clear that a separate Scotland would need to make spending cuts that are twice as deep as those in the rest of the UK. Is it not the case that it is the poorest and pensioners in our country who would be hardest hit by the SNP's plans for an independent Scotland?

**The First Minister:** Only Jackie Baillie, when faced with the bedroom tax and the inequity being placed on Scotland by the Tory Government, would come to the conclusion that social security policy is better run from Westminster.

Jackie Baillie is telling people to read the report. Yes, I have read the report, and I have read—

**Jackie Baillie:** No you haven't.

**The Presiding Officer:** Order.

**The First Minister:** Well, I will quote directly, for the benefit of Jackie Baillie. Quote:

“An independent Scotland would have access to fiscal powers with which it could influence inequality more directly than it can at the moment.”

That is a direct quotation from the report. Perhaps that is the page that Jackie Baillie skipped over in her anxiety to make her point.

## Airlines Discriminating Against Disabled People

### The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):

The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S4M-08266, in the name of Neil Findlay, on airlines discriminating against disabled people. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

#### *Motion debated,*

That the Parliament understands that, although EU law stipulates that airlines must provide assistance for passengers with reduced mobility who want to use toilet facilities, many companies do not carry portable aisle wheelchairs; commends those that do, such as Ryanair, Monarch, Thomsons and Virgin, but is concerned at the number of major airlines that do not; considers this to be a failure in their duty to adequately meet the needs of passengers from Lothian and across the country; sees this as a lack of provision that is discriminatory and can be humiliating; commends the *Sunday Mail* and the Reduced Mobility Rights website on exposing what it believes to be the failure of Jet2 to provide such basic equipment, and notes the view that all aircraft, regardless of the route being served, should carry on board portable wheelchairs to help meet the needs of passengers with reduced mobility.

12:34

**Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab):** My brother is a multiple sclerosis sufferer. He cannot walk because of his condition, so he uses a wheelchair permanently. Like many disabled travellers, he is sadly used to experiencing a wide range of problems when travelling at home and abroad, particularly when he is going on holiday. He could have problems with booking, poor information provision, problems with the hotel or his room, or issues with buses and taxis. The list appears to go on and on, and the problems will be familiar to many disabled travellers.

On his most recent holiday, the experience that he and his partner had was so bad that I felt that it had to be exposed because, without doubt, many other people will have had similar experiences. Since I lodged the motion, and my brother's case was featured in the *Sunday Mail*, many other people have come forward and shared similar experiences.

Last year, John booked a holiday via a Scottish company, Barrhead Travel, and requested the usual adapted room with a roll-in shower and all the other things that he would need on holiday. On making the booking, he asked the adviser whether there would be an aisle wheelchair on board the aircraft so that he could get to and from the toilet while he was on the flight. Of course, that was confirmed.

However, when he boarded the Jet2 flight, he found that, despite previous assurances, no aisle

wheelchair was available. The stewardess he spoke to advised him that they did not have such a thing. Indeed, she did not even know what one was. He then had to board the plane last, in front of everyone else, which he found very embarrassing. As someone with limited mobility, he had to drag himself to his seat, which took a great deal of time and energy. He was then seated in the ninth row from the toilet and told that there was no aisle wheelchair to get him to and from the toilet, and that he was not allowed to move seats because he would be blocking the evacuation route for able-bodied passengers should there be an emergency.

The cabin steward was very defensive—indeed, he was aggressive and unhelpful—and my brother had to endure the humiliation of discussing his toilet requirements and health problems in front of all the other passengers. He was told that the cabin crew could not assist him to move, if needed, as that was against the company's health and safety policy. At one point, the situation became like a "Carry On" film, because the cabin crew suggested that his partner should carry him if he needed to be moved. That ignored the fact that she is small and he is over 6ft tall and weighs 13 stone. It was an utterly ridiculous suggestion.

Customer service seems to apply only to able-bodied passengers as far as Jet2 is concerned. The company seems to be happy enough to take money from disabled passengers while treating them with complete contempt.

I do not know about you, Presiding Officer, and I will not ask you to respond to the point, but I do not think that many of us could last for a four-hour flight without needing to go to the little boys' or little girls' room. Of course, the situation was repeated on my brother's return journey.

How did he feel? He was certainly embarrassed, angry, disappointed, and humiliated. He had been treated very much like a second, third, or fourth-class citizen. He felt that no one was interested and that they did not care about his most basic needs. For other passengers, things can be as bad or even worse. The trailblazers group of the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign has highlighted a number of related problems for wheelchair users travelling on flights. Some people have been unable to take flights because most of the budget airlines will not carry wheelchairs of above a certain weight. Wheelchairs have been damaged beyond repair, and people have said that they have low expectations of airlines' ability to take care of their medical and mobility equipment. I thank the trailblazers group, the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign, and Roberto Castiglioni of the Reduced Mobility Rights campaign for their efforts to improve the rights of disabled travellers.



Things need to change. We need to ensure that airlines provide a decent and dignified service for all passengers at all times. In June 2012, the European Commission issued guidelines to improve and facilitate the application of Regulation (EC) 1107/2006, but they are not legally binding. The guidelines state:

"Under Annex II to the Regulation cabin crew are required to provide appropriate assistance to disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility in moving from their seat to toilet facilities if required. Any particular procedures implemented for the assistance of disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility should neither compromise the performance or the health and safety of cabin crew in undertaking their duties".

The guidelines also state that on-board portable

"aisle wheelchairs should be used for this purpose where available."

However, that is only guidance.

The Civil Aviation Authority suggests that

"providing assistance without the use of an on-board wheelchair should be avoided unless airlines are able to overcome inherent health and safety concerns."

Some airlines are doing very well in that regard and I commend British Airways, Thomson, Thomas Cook, Virgin Atlantic and Ryanair—I know that some people may be surprised by that. However, Jet2, Flybe, easyJet, CityJet and Aer Lingus do not provide on-board wheelchairs and Monarch does only if a special request is made. I say to those airlines: get into the 21st century and get your act together because your competitors are providing those services and you need to, too.

Finally, since the events that I described and the publicity surrounding them, Barrhead Travel has updated its website on accessibility guidance, and I encourage other travel agents to do so because some of them are making poor provision for disabled passengers. New accessibility guidance has come from ABTA for its members.

The reality is, though, that space and cost factors appear to be the only ones preventing airlines from adopting on-board aisle wheelchairs as a standard feature. However, given that Ryanair, one of the lowest-cost carriers, provides aisle wheelchairs on board its entire fleet, space and cost arguments simply do not stack up. Barring the physical limitations on smaller aircraft, all airplanes flying from and to Scotland, the United Kingdom, and all European countries should be equipped with on-board wheelchairs. It is only fair to say that the airline industry now has no plausible argument to further delay adopting on-board aisle wheelchairs as a standard feature on board each and every aircraft that has the ability to carry and use them.

In this year of all years, when the Commonwealth games and the Ryder cup are

coming to Scotland and disabled passengers will come from all over the world to visit Scotland, every aeroplane landing in Scotland with over 60 seats that is capable of carrying on-board aisle wheelchairs should have them. That would allow every passenger to travel with some level of dignity.

12:42

**Colin Keir (Edinburgh Western) (SNP):** I thank Neil Findlay for bringing this important debate to the Parliament. Over the past number of years, we have seen difficulties with the transportation of disabled passengers with special needs. I certainly hope that the companies that dealt with Mr Findlay's relative are responding to the issue in a proper manner.

Mr Findlay raised the issue of disabled people travelling on aeroplanes and, indeed, the whole experience of disabled people travelling through an airport. It is vital that we get that issue right. As Mr Findlay may or may not know, I chair the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on aviation. I asked some carriers for their comments on this issue, and some of them were quite interesting. I was reminded of my days working in the bus industry, because it took Lothian Buses here in Edinburgh—I worked for the company for a number of years—the best part of 10 years to move its fleet from the old Olympian buses, which for various reasons could not be adapted, to the point at which every vehicle in the fleet is now disabled compliant. Making that kind of adaptation is not easy and there is obviously a cost implication in doing so for older aircraft.

I am obviously delighted that companies such as BA and Virgin have done their best in that regard. Such is the seriousness of the issue that Mr Findlay has raised that, to be fair on easyJet, which Mr Findlay mentioned, Mr Andrew McConnell from easyJet has come up to listen to this debate. He is willing to talk to any MSP who has an interest in disabilities and the likes.

**Neil Findlay:** I have two points. First, we are not asking anybody to adapt any plane; we are asking them to purchase a very small piece of equipment and train their staff to use it. Secondly, not one airline has made an approach to discuss the issue with me. I have had correspondence with some of them, but not one person from any airline has made an approach to discuss any of this with me.

**Colin Keir:** I thank Mr Findlay for his comments—I am just saying that, when I saw that there was a debate kicking off on the matter, I thought that I would put a call out, and Mr McConnell from easyJet is here if Mr Findlay wishes to speak to him after the debate.

I am aware that easyJet is commissioning a new fleet. The company has a disability forum that runs independently of it and is chaired by David Blunkett. He will be advising the company in the springtime and the new fleet will apparently deal with some of the issues.

It is vital to consider other issues, such as staff training. It is shocking that anyone can go through the experience that Mr Findlay's relative went through, and it is not surprising that they would view such an experience as nothing less than a damning indictment of the carrier that was involved. It is vital that we get the facilities right for people who are disabled.

My late father had a long-term degenerative illness, and I know that it is vital that people are allowed the dignity to travel on aircraft while they are fit and healthy enough to do so, and to have an enjoyable experience. I know about that from the difficulties that I had in bringing my father back through Heathrow, for instance, where the arrangements that had been made—it was some years ago—were certainly not satisfactory for someone who had a long-term degenerative illness and required transport between terminals. That was not easy to arrange. I have every sympathy with Mr Findlay's relative and there is no reason for that sort of thing to happen.

**The Deputy Presiding Officer:** The member should draw to a close.

**Colin Keir:** As a result of my investigations, companies such as BA, Virgin and easyJet, and the airports that have replied to me, have given me plans of action. I am happy to pass those emails on to Mr Findlay if he wishes me to, and Mr McConnell from easyJet is up in the gallery. I think that the way forward looks a bit better than what we have had so far.

12:47

**Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** I congratulate Neil Findlay on bringing the debate to the chamber, and I commend him for a very personal and thoughtful contribution. I am privileged, as the convener of the cross-party group on muscular dystrophy, to have already had a presentation on many of the issues from the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign's trailblazers network at one of our recent meetings.

The network is a group of disabled campaigners from across the United Kingdom who tackle the social issues that affect young disabled people, such as access to higher education, employment and social and leisure facilities. They campaign tirelessly to fight what they see as obvious social injustices, and there is really nothing like lived experience to inform our debate and highlight the reality of what they face.

The trailblazers network published a report in October 2012 called "Up in the air". I am disappointed that the industry has not rushed to pick up on the report's recommendations. It is only as a consequence of some of the activity that Neil Findlay has spoken about that we are starting to see some change. However, being a generous soul, I will put that to one side.

Neil Findlay highlighted some of the issues that the trailblazers network described at the cross-party group meeting, such as being unable to take flights on most budget airlines because they do not carry wheelchairs above a certain weight. He rightly made the point that space and cost are the excuses that are used, but frankly those excuses can be dismissed—we see that Ryanair has aisle chairs—despite what the other airlines may say.

**Colin Keir:** Will the member take an intervention?

**Jackie Baillie:** I am not sure if I have time—but I see that the Presiding Officer is willing to be generous.

**Colin Keir:** It is commendable that Ryanair has such facilities. However, the airline has had a high level of growth over the past eight to 10 years, which has enabled it to purchase brand new planes. The storage implications of someone having a wheelchair are therefore a lot easier for Ryanair, as the company can have the facilities fitted at the point of delivery.

**Jackie Baillie:** That is helpful, but the point is that action can be taken now; there is no excuse for inactivity and delay. While I am sure that companies can do things that are much more imaginative as they renew fleets, something should be done now.

I am conscious of time, Presiding Officer, but I want to talk about some of the issues that have been highlighted. Those include wheelchairs being damaged beyond repair; holidays or business trips being ruined; people being physically hurt or feeling humiliated when they are carried from wheelchairs to airline seats as staff members ignore advice about best lifting techniques; and people having very low expectations of airlines with regard to understanding—or even beginning to understand—their medical and mobility equipment.

Let me give members some examples from the trailblazers report. Emma Muldoon from Grangemouth said:

"Jet2 refused to take my wheelchair when I was flying to Prague from Newcastle because of the weight of the chair. Jet2 blamed Swissport (the ground staff for special assistance) for refusing the wheelchair. After many phone calls and arguing, they agreed to take my wheelchair as long as the height of the wheelchair was under a certain

height. I've also had to wait up to a week to know if I can get booked on to a flight."

Lauramechelle Stewart from Port Glasgow said:

"Jet2 have broken my wheelchair and are only taking responsibility for £1,000 of the damage. My chair is worth £5,000-£6,000."

Hayleigh Barclay from Prestwick said, in relation to the idea of travelling on a plane in her own wheelchair:

"It would be a lot more comfortable as my own chair has been designed around my scoliosis etc. I also wouldn't have to be transferred so this would eliminate more discomfort and humiliation. I also wouldn't have to worry about my wheelchair being damaged or broken in the luggage bay."

Turning to the future, here are a couple of suggestions that came from the group who were involved in the report. Karis Williamson from Inverness said:

"Stop charging money for things that you can't help, e.g. equipment, wheelchairs and oxygen. Stop making me feel inhuman and like cargo. Take better care of wheelchairs and equipment."

Hayleigh Barclay went on to start a campaign called plane fair to encourage the aviation industry to put in place the new technology that would allow wheelchair users to remain seated in their chairs.

Let us at least have on-board aisle chairs—Ryanair, Monarch, Thomson and Virgin all do it. There is nothing to prevent the other airlines from following suit. Let us get the industry to take action to make travel easier for disabled people. It does not take a lot of effort or money and it is absolutely the right thing to do.

12:51

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

I thank Neil Findlay for bringing this matter to the attention of Parliament. It is, for many of us, an easy thing to get on an aircraft, fly to the other end and get off without thinking about it. However, the difficulties that are faced by those who are physically disabled are often brought home to able-bodied passengers when we have to observe the difficulties that disabled passengers have to put up with on flights—sometimes to our embarrassment. Sometimes we are able to help, but most of the time it makes us realise how difficult it is to travel—even on modern aircraft—for someone who is disabled and in a wheelchair.

For that reason, it is very encouraging to hear that many airlines are extremely successful in dealing with the problem. Ryanair was included in the list of airlines that have on-board aisle chairs. Dare I be the one who makes the joke that suggests that Ryanair will stop at nothing to get an extra seat on an aircraft? However, in this case it

is an example of a low-cost airline that can achieve the objectives within the low-cost business model.

A trend that has occurred in aviation in recent years is that low-cost airlines have been the most successful. We want low-cost airlines to be able to keep their costs down, but, as Neil Findlay has pointed out, he is not asking for expensive conversions or expensive changes to the aircraft. He is simply asking for the provision of basic equipment that allows the job to be done on the aircraft itself, along with appropriate staff training so that they can use that basic equipment for the purpose required on the aircraft.

I also agree with Jackie Baillie's point about people being lifted properly, which also relates to training. The ability to lift properly is taught in our hospitals and through many other organisations in Scotland. Surely it is not beyond the realms of possibility that airline cabin staff can be taught basic lifting techniques, even if for no other reason than to protect themselves from the potential injury that may be achieved by doing it wrong.

We are in a situation in which we have a problem in front of us. We have guidelines in place but those guidelines are not being observed. The suggestion has been made that those guidelines should be incorporated into legislation. I may ultimately find myself supporting that proposal, but in the first instance it would surely be easier to ensure that the guidelines are properly observed. The work that ABTA has already done to encourage travel agents to do proper checks and proper inquiries into the availability of equipment and trained staff is a start.

It is also vitally important that we ensure that travel agents do all that they can to give accurate information. There is nothing more annoying than situations such as the one that Neil Findlay described: when someone checks in advance that the equipment and service is available and then, when they are on the plane, they discover that in fact that is not the case. Inaccuracy of information is one of the largest parts of the problem. People can always book with an airline in the belief that it will provide the service, but if it does not, that is the most difficult situation in which they can find themselves.

I am glad that Neil Findlay has been able to bring the issue to Parliament. He has identified a problem and he has identified a solution, which is inexpensive and can be effectively introduced quickly, without damaging the business model of our most successful low-cost airlines. I therefore think that this is a perfect opportunity for everyone in a position of authority on this matter to get their heads together and get something done at short notice, to ensure that no passenger who boards an aircraft in Scotland, the UK or across Europe

has to suffer such indignity. Perhaps, even with the difficulty of worldwide regulation, we might get this spread across the world.

12:56

**Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP):** I welcome Neil Findlay gaining time for the debate, which has allowed us to discuss what the *Sunday Mail* calls “reduced mobility rights”. The interesting word “rights” on the end is perhaps the nub of the whole matter.

I would like to highlight the experience of one of my constituents a couple of months ago. She suffers from MS and was attempting to fly from Wick to Edinburgh on Flybe. The flight lasts only an hour, but the alternative is eight hours on trains and, when someone is on business, it is obvious that they need to use their time as best they can.

My constituent called the Flybe call centre to book special assistance on that flight but was told not to turn up for it, because as Flybe then knew that she needed assistance, legally she could not travel, as it had met in full its quota of people needing assistance. That situation certainly put her blood pressure up to a great extent, but eventually she got a phone call to say that yes, indeed, she could travel.

It would be excellent if on-board wheelchairs were available, but that is a little less urgent for one-hour flights than the ability to get customer relations correct, so that people know exactly what their situation is with regard to airlines. That flight is the equivalent of a lifeline flight. It is only Flybe’s small aircraft flights that reach many of our north mainland and island airports. A large number of people have MS—the proportion of the population is perhaps higher in the north of Scotland than it is anywhere else—so the need to have a clear set of guidelines that are followed is very important.

It is not a question of whether guidelines will work, because I think that the *Sunday Mail* is right: we should write reduced mobility rights into the way airlines should behave. Airlines are given the chance to collect passengers who need to get to the centre of Scotland for business, hospital appointments and other more leisure-related purposes. It is necessary that we ensure that people such as my constituent are not treated as she was and that we all get together to back the campaign for reduced mobility rights and turn the situation into one of rules rather than privileges.

12:59

**The Minister for Commonwealth Games and Sport (Shona Robison):** Like other members, I thank Neil Findlay for securing the time to discuss this very important issue and for his very insightful speech, which highlighted the challenges that his

brother faced—a totally unacceptable experience. Other members have highlighted other cases.

First of all, we recognise that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities sets an internationally recognised benchmark for disabled people’s human rights, including on accessibility and personal mobility issues, and that our work will be measured against that very important standard. Our “Framework of Action for Independent Living in Scotland 2013 to 2015”, which was published in October 2013, lists as a key output that

“We will actively promote the needs of disabled people and work towards equal access for disabled people to services, housing and transport”,

and we are committed to working with disabled people in the design of those services.

The case that has been highlighted today shows that, despite the existence of European Union regulations that require airlines to provide assistance in moving passengers to toilets and providing information on access limitations prior to travel, the legislation needs to be better understood by airlines and travel agents and better publicised to passengers. Although I understand that there is no legal requirement for an airline to carry on-board wheelchairs, it is essential that the needs of disabled passengers, including assistance in moving them to the toilet if required, are fully catered for during a flight.

The provision of information by airlines and travel agents is clearly of significant importance. A 2013 audit of selected travel agents’ websites assessed that only 10 per cent of them provided sufficient information to disabled passengers. That is a clear marker that a lot of hard work remains to be done to ensure that disabled customers are provided with the necessary information before flying. I understand that the Civil Aviation Authority is considering these issues, which is an appropriate course of action. Although this area of policy is reserved, the Scottish Government will continue to monitor the impacts on disabled passengers travelling to and from Scotland’s airports and work with the relevant parties to ensure we promote best practice. I will certainly pick up with the Commonwealth games organising committee and specifically the transport group overseeing such matters Neil Findlay’s point about passengers travelling to the Commonwealth games and the Ryder cup.

**Neil Findlay:** I am grateful for the minister’s comments so far, but will she consider writing to the various organisations and Governments, the European Commission and the airlines themselves to see whether this proposal could be taken forward on a voluntary basis instead of waiting for legislation?

**Shona Robison:** I am certainly happy to do that and think that the debate provides a useful platform in that respect. We can certainly communicate the Parliament's views in that correspondence.

We need to reach a position where disabled passengers receive a consistently better service and to highlight and act on the many examples of good practice, some of which have already been mentioned in the debate. Many airlines, including the low-cost ones, already carry portable aisle wheelchairs on board and other initiatives include free seat allocation for passengers with disabilities or reduced mobility; unlimited mobility and medical equipment and supplies carried free of charge in addition to regular baggage; and crews trained in moving and handling techniques and disability awareness and communication skills. There is good practice out there, but it needs to happen on all airlines.

As an example of good practice, one transatlantic airline that has recently located to Scotland—Virgin—worked with the family of a severely disabled passenger, healthcare professionals and airport staff to ensure that her journey was safe and comfortable and that the necessary equipment was in place. That might be the gold standard, but there are basic things that all airlines could be doing and which really would not cost them anything at all.

Scottish airports are also doing good work. For example, in 2013, Aberdeen airport launched a partnership with Grampian Employment Opportunities that is designed to allow it to work with disabled users to ensure that the airport experience is as comfortable and stress free as possible. Glasgow international airport employs dedicated help to assist with the estimated 90,000 passengers a year who require assistance with restricted mobility, and its service level agreement with the company involved includes challenging targets for ensuring that passengers do not have to wait for assistance. As for Jet2, which was highlighted by Neil Findlay, I understand that it is now in active discussion with the CAA about the provision of aisle chairs to passengers with reduced mobility. Although that is to be welcomed, we need action from the other airlines.

For our part, we will continue to put disabled people's rights at the top of our agenda. After all, it is our duty to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and to monitor progress. We will also continue to work with the CAA, airlines and airports to ensure that disabled passengers and passengers with restricted mobility have a comfortable and safe experience when travelling to and from Scotland. As I said to Neil Findlay in response to his intervention, I am more than happy to use this debate to ensure that

those organisations, agencies and businesses are well aware of the Parliament's views on this matter. If we can make some progress on that, this debate will have been very worth while indeed.

*Meeting closed at 13:05.*



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