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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 9 May 2013

Session 4

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 9 May 2013

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

General Question Time

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): Question 1, from Murdo Fraser, has not been lodged, but an explanation has been provided.

Scottish Court Service (Meetings)

2. Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when the Cabinet Secretary for Justice last met the chief executive of the Scottish Court Service and what issues were discussed. (S4O-02096)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): I meet the chief executive of the Scottish Court Service regularly. The last formal meeting was on 26 March, when I was given an update on SCS plans. I also met Eric McQueen informally at a courts reform bill event for stakeholders on 30 April.

Duncan McNeil: Did the cabinet secretary discuss the recent progress in enabling SCS to access information held by the Department for Work and Pensions and other Whitehall departments in order to pursue Scotland's 150,000 defaulters on fines? Does he agree that, in order to make real progress, we need to increase the number of dedicated fines enforcement officers to pursue the nearly 6,000 people who need to be pursued each year?

Those officers sometimes operate with a hand behind their back, and they have their job made more difficult by sheriffs and fiscals who continue to impose fines on people who have already defaulted. What action will the cabinet secretary take to address that issue in Scotland?

Kenny MacAskill: Yes, I discussed the issue at the recent informal meeting, following the DWP's indication that it would allow the Scottish Court Service access to information. I have welcomed the DWP decision, as it will allow the Scottish Court Service easier access to details not simply on benefits but—perhaps more importantly—on the national insurance numbers of those who default while they are in employment. That will make it easier for the SCS to discover where those people are, trace them and take the appropriate action, which the SCS welcomes.

I do not wish to be grudging about the delay in progress, and I thank the DWP for its decision, which will improve the situation. I assure Duncan McNeil that Mr McQueen and those who work

under him, and the fines enforcement officers, will take the appropriate steps to move things on.

The imposition of fines on those who have already had imposed on them a penalty that they have not paid is a matter to which judicial independence applies. However, such a factor would be, should be and almost certainly is taken into account by the presiding sheriff.

Dave Thompson (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that a new justice centre should be built in Dingwall to replace the Inverness and Dingwall courts? Does he agree with Brigadier Hugh Monro that Dingwall should be considered as a location for a replacement for the Porterfield prison? Brigadier Monro thinks that that may well be a good idea in providing justice for the north.

Kenny MacAskill: First, I put on record my thanks and gratitude to Brigadier Monro for his service. He has been an outstanding inspector of prisons, and I would like that to be formally recorded.

Obviously, the building of a new justice centre is a matter for the Scottish Court Service to progress. It has a long-term vision for Scotland that includes justice centres, and the areas that have so far been identified for such centres include the Borders, Fife, Lanarkshire and Highland.

There is merit in what Dave Thompson suggests—as Brigadier Monro has highlighted—with regard to ensuring that prisons and courts are at least proximate, if not co-located. I am sure that the matter regarding Dingwall that the constituency MSP has raised is of interest to the Scottish Court Service and to the Scottish Prison Service.

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): Did the cabinet secretary discuss with the Scottish Court Service why it has reached conclusions on court closures without completing an equality impact assessment? Court closures are likely to impact disproportionately on women, children and the disabled, as the main users of public transport, because much more complex journeys will be involved. Will the cabinet secretary ensure forthwith that the equality impact assessment is finished?

Kenny MacAskill: The equality impact assessment will be dealt with. The Scottish Court Service is addressing matters, taking into account a variety of factors such as the impact on court users and on those who work there, the cost of transport to alternative venues and the availability of transport. All those issues have been factored in and are mentioned in the documentation that the Scottish Court Service has provided.

The Scottish Court Service, the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service and Victim Support Scotland will ensure that those who have difficulties with or worries or fears about accessing a court are able to access a court, whether such concerns relate to a current court or a future location for a court to which they may have to travel.

Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route (Cap on Costs)

3. Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con):

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will cap the cost of the Aberdeen western peripheral route project at the current estimate. (S4O-02097)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities (Nicola Sturgeon): The Minister for Transport and Veterans announced earlier this week that each council's future contribution will be capped at £75 million.

Nanette Milne: I thank the cabinet secretary for her very welcome response. I am pleased that the Scottish Conservatives' pressure has paid off and helped to win a better deal for the north-east and to protect north-east taxpayers by delivering the cap that was announced this week.

Can the minister give an assurance that north-east councils will not have to fund any future maintenance costs for the Aberdeen western peripheral road once it is built?

Nicola Sturgeon: Obviously, the maintenance of the road network will be dealt with in the normal way. We will continue to discuss with both councils involved all issues relating to the western peripheral route during its construction and thereafter, when it is in use.

I hope that all members would agree that the fact that we are now able to press ahead with what is an extremely important piece of infrastructure in the north-east, serving Aberdeen in particular, is a hugely positive development and that the focus now should be on getting on with it and ensuring that the road is available for use in Aberdeen on time and on budget.

Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab): I agree with the cabinet secretary that the focus should be on making progress. Given that within the WPR project there are a couple of discrete sections—one connects to the airport and the other is from Balmedie to Tipperty—can the cabinet secretary indicate when she expects progress to be made so that at least those discrete sections of the project will be completed and ready to use?

Nicola Sturgeon: As Lewis Macdonald will be well aware, the dualling of the Balmedie to

Tipperty section is included in the overall non-profit-distributing contract for the western peripheral route. We have also given a clear commitment to carry out improvements at Haudagain, which will be taken forward separately from the AWPR as soon as its construction and the Balmedie to Tipperty section are completed.

The key point is that we want to press ahead as quickly as is reasonably possible with the main project and its different component parts and, when that is all constructed, with the much-needed improvements around the Haudagain roundabout. We have an absolute commitment to ensuring that that whole project stays on track.

Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Given the delays that the AWPR project has already faced, does the cabinet secretary agree that it is irresponsible of Councillor Young of Aberdeen City Council cynically to object to the agreed funding split and that he and his colleagues should honour the funding agreement that was made in 2003 and allow this vital infrastructure project to be progressed in a spirit of co-operation, as Aberdeenshire Council has done?

Nicola Sturgeon: Yes, I do. I absolutely and thoroughly agree with that. As I said in my response to Nanette Milne, the people of the north-east have, frankly, waited long enough for this project and it is time to stop arguing over these matters and have an absolute focus, as the Scottish Government does, on working together to get the project delivered without further delays. That is the priority, and anybody who seeks to divert from that is not doing justice to the people of Aberdeen.

Bus Services

4. Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how it supports bus services. (S4O-02098)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities (Nicola Sturgeon): The Scottish Government's commitment to supporting bus services is clearly demonstrated by the £0.25 billion expended every year in the bus service operators grant, concessionary fares reimbursement, the Scottish green bus fund and the bus investment fund.

Ken Macintosh: I am sure that the cabinet secretary will be aware of the bus reorganisation by FirstGroup in Glasgow and the surrounding area. Is she aware of the impact that that is having on many vital services, which are now being cut for communities in places such as East Renfrewshire? First's motivation seems to be to prioritise services that make a profit while

abandoning the rest. Does the minister now believe that it is time for tougher regulation? Will she give her support and the Government's to the member's bill being introduced by my colleague Iain Gray?

Nicola Sturgeon: First, I reiterate the scale of the financial support that the Scottish Government gives to the provision of bus services around the country. I hope that members on all sides of the chamber would welcome that.

Secondly, I am very aware of bus issues in Glasgow, where my constituency is. I know that Ken Macintosh will be as involved in discussions on those issues in his constituency as I am in mine. I appreciate the public's understandable concern about proposals to change bus services on which they depend.

We will carefully study Iain Gray's proposals, and it is important that we do so in the right spirit. However, it is important to point out that local authorities have the ability right now to contract for services to meet social needs. Local authorities can enter into agreements with operators for quality partnerships or statutory quality contracts. Therefore, local authorities have powers, and of course the key responsibility for ensuring that bus provision across their areas meets the needs of the populations that they serve lies with them.

We will continue to be as constructive as we can with anybody who makes proposals about how bus services across the country can be even further improved.

Air Pollution (Cities)

5. Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to tackle air pollution in cities. (S4O-02099)

The Minister for Environment and Climate Change (Paul Wheelhouse): The Scottish Government is working closely with local authorities, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and other partners to improve air quality in cities. We support a number of measures, both local and national, to tackle air pollution successfully. They include the establishment of a statutory framework and clear strategic aims for both air quality and transport; the provision of grant funding for local authority actions; and the provision of advice and information through the Scottish air quality website and Scotland's environment web.

Marco Biagi: The minister will be aware that, under the statutory framework, additional areas in central Edinburgh have been designated as air quality management areas, because they no longer meet the standards. What support can Edinburgh—the local authority and citizens—

expect from the Scottish Government in addressing the problem?

Paul Wheelhouse: I am certainly aware of the point that Marco Biagi makes in relation to Great Junction Street, Inverleith Row and Glasgow Road in Corstorphine, which have been added as air quality management areas.

We are committed to improving air quality across the country, and there have been significant reductions in pollution emissions over recent decades through tighter industrial regulation, improved fuel quality, cleaner vehicles and an increased focus on sustainable transport.

The City of Edinburgh Council has produced a comprehensive air quality action plan, and it is working to implement it, with support from the Scottish Government and other bodies. The council is required to report annually on the progress of implementation. In particular, the Scottish Government has provided financial support for air quality monitoring, with specific actions to support the action plans.

In addition, through the future transport fund and other measures, we aim to reduce the impact of transport on our environment. That will support a range of initiatives around sustainable transport, including cycling infrastructure and low-carbon vehicle technology. The Scottish green bus fund, which the Deputy First Minister has mentioned, will also support the transition to low-carbon public transport.

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Does the minister believe that the planting of trees in and around cities can help to mitigate the levels of some pollutants?

Paul Wheelhouse: Absolutely. I praise the work that is being done by the City of Edinburgh Council and neighbouring authorities, including Fife Council, to plant 500,000 trees in Lothian and Fife as a means of combating emissions. I recognise the important role that tree planting in urban areas can play in that regard.

Currency

6. Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on comments by the chairman of the yes Scotland campaign that a separate Scottish currency would give "more flexibility, more freedom" and "a wider range of economic levers" than its plans for a currency union. (S4O-02100)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities (Nicola Sturgeon): The Scottish ministers have made clear our intention to retain the pound. The first report of the fiscal commission working group—a group of renowned experts including two

Nobel laureates, Professors Joe Stiglitz and Jim Mirrlees—proposes a macroeconomic framework that retains the pound and gives the Scottish Government maximum economic policy flexibility. It should be remembered that control over economic policy comes only with independence.

Given Scotland's contribution to the sterling area, it will be in the overwhelming interests of the United Kingdom, post referendum, to agree to continued shared use of the pound. In the words of Alistair Darling, if Scotland is independent,

"a currency union is logical"

and

"desirable".

Kezia Dugdale: I note that the cabinet secretary has chosen to ignore Dennis Canavan's remarks. We all know that she is dancing on the head of a pin. Given that her currency policy is in complete disarray, is she surprised by today's poll, which shows support for independence at its lowest point since the yes campaign launched?

Nicola Sturgeon: I am surprised that Kezia Dugdale accuses me of ignoring Dennis Canavan, which I never do. Labour is the party that managed to lose Dennis Canavan from its own ranks, going on to lose the seat that he held.

Let me explain for the benefit of Kezia Dugdale and her colleagues what will happen in the referendum. People will vote on the propositions in the white paper that the Government will publish in the autumn of this year. Parties in elections thereafter will be entirely free to argue their own position, as in any democracy, and, of course, if they gain sufficient support—Labour has struggled with that in recent elections—they will be elected and have the ability to implement their policies.

The proposition that is at the heart of Kezia Dugdale's question is absolutely absurd. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Nicola Sturgeon: If Kezia Dugdale is saying that there must be complete policy agreement between different parts of the yes campaign, does that mean that she agrees with her Tory partners in the no campaign about economic policy, welfare cuts and bringing the UK out of the European Union? We need to be told. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Nicola Sturgeon: The big benefit of independence is that the ability to determine our own policy direction will come to the Scottish Parliament instead of being left in the hands of Westminster Governments that all too often we do not vote for.

OKI Electric (Workforce Reduction)

7. Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to OKI Electric's plans to reduce the size of its workforce at its Cumbernauld plant by around half. (S4O-02101)

The Minister for Local Government and Planning (Derek Mackay): We share the member's concern following OKI's announcement about its Cumbernauld operation. This is an anxious time for the affected employees and their families, and the Government will continue to do everything that we can to help to establish the most positive outcome.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth met the OKI management team shortly after the announcement to begin to establish what can be done in that respect. Mr Swinney is visiting Japan this week and he will meet the president and chief executive officer of OKI Data to discuss the range of issues further. We are also maintaining close contact with the company through our partnership action for continuing employment—PACE—initiative, which stands ready to provide a tailored package of help and support for any employees who may be facing redundancy.

Jamie Hepburn: When I met representatives of the workforce at OKI, they made the point that many of the workers there have only ever had the one job and one interview. What specific support might be available to help those who are made redundant in those circumstances to re-enter employment? What support might there be from the Scottish Government to ensure that OKI remains in Cumbernauld for some time to come?

Derek Mackay: The Scottish Government will explore the reasoning behind the apparent decisions in order to ensure that there are as few job losses as possible. Our agencies are working on that as we speak. If job losses cannot be avoided, our PACE initiative, which is led by Skills Development Scotland, will engage to ensure that a tailored package of support is available and that—recognising the points that the member has raised—there is a comprehensive package that will support those who are affected by redundancy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 8 has not been lodged, but an explanation has been provided.

Air Passenger Duty

9. Colin Keir (Edinburgh Western) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding devolving air passenger duty. (S4O-02103)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities (Nicola Sturgeon): The UK Government is very well aware of the Scottish Government's position on devolving air passenger duty, and we are continuing to make the strong case for its devolution as soon as possible so that we can develop a regime that makes Scotland more competitive.

Colin Keir: Given recent reports, does the cabinet secretary agree that APD causes enormous damage to competitiveness, investment, connectivity and business opportunities, and that, with events such as the Ryder cup and the Commonwealth games coming to Scotland, that damage is something we can do without?

Nicola Sturgeon: Yes, I very much agree with that. The report entitled "The economic impact of Air Passenger Duty", which was published in February this year, underlined the damage that APD is doing to our airports, our tourism industry and the economy.

Scotland will welcome the world in 2014, courtesy of homecoming, the Commonwealth games and the Ryder cup, but we are in the absolutely absurd situation of increasing costs for people who want to visit Scotland. We believe that the devolution of air passenger duty would enable the development of a regime that supports more direct international air routes, reduces the costs of flights for passengers, and encourages more visitors. That is a good example of why we need powers in the hands of the Scottish Parliament to do what is right for Scotland.

Gavin Brown (Lothian) (Con): The Scottish Government wants APD to be devolved. Is there a formal commitment or policy to reduce it?

Nicola Sturgeon: If Gavin Brown had heard the speech that I made at Renfrewshire Chamber of Commerce yesterday, he would have heard that question being asked and answered. We want the power for a purpose: so that we can do something about APD, which means reducing it or abolishing it completely so that there is a competitive situation in Scotland. That is our position. It would do Gavin Brown more good if he argued the case for devolving the tax to Scotland with his UK Government colleagues, so that we can do something about it.

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-01368)

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

Johann Lamont: In February, I asked the First Minister about the case of 84-year-old John McGarrity who, having been admitted with chest pains, was left for eight hours on a hospital trolley in a corridor. At the time, the First Minister said that these things happen in the national health service and his Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing said that it was "not a true reflection" of the NHS. Can the First Minister tell me whether the number of people left on trolleys is getting better or worse?

The First Minister: That is not what I said at all. I remember very specifically saying that this Government takes seriously any individual case in which treatment is less than satisfactory. That is what we should do and what we do. I made the point that there are very substantial indications that overall treatment in the national health service and patient satisfaction are improving. There is also the point, which we should all be aware of when we quite properly raise such cases, that everyone should be proud of our national health service in Scotland.

Johann Lamont: I think that the First Minister did say that, but he has clearly not reflected on it.

I do not dispute that we all love and care about the NHS, and the First Minister and I agree that it is a disgrace that pensioners such as John McGarrity wait for eight hours on a trolley in a corridor for treatment. I presume that when I raised the matter with him in February he investigated such occurrences, so I will try again. Can he tell me whether the situation is better or worse?

The First Minister: I call tell Johann Lamont that the situation in terms of treatment in the national health service overall is improving. It is improving despite the great pressure on all public services, and it is improving because of the commitment and effort of our nurses, doctors and ancillary staff in the national health service. I can give her a range of statistics that indicate as much.

Of course, individual cases in which treatment is less than satisfactory are looked at seriously and taken into account, but in pursuing such cases

Johann Lamont should not be deflected from the fact that, overall, treatment is—in terms of waiting times for treatment, the efficacy of treatment and the number of people who are being treated—improving in the national health service. I think that that is an enormous tribute to the staff and their commitment to our national health service in what are, inevitably, difficult times.

Johann Lamont: I have absolutely no doubt whatever that the First Minister can give me a long list of answers to questions that he was not asked, but he has not answered the question that I asked him.

This is not about anyone running down the NHS; it is about taking our job seriously. I can only presume that the reason why the First Minister does not know the answer to my question is that he does not care. He has not even asked. *[Interruption.]* He has not even asked. Perhaps he does not like to ask in case the answer breaches his perfect view of his world.

Let me tell the First Minister what is happening in the NHS that he is supposed to be running, while deciding what currency a fantasy Scotland will have in his fantasy world. In the real world, the number of people who are languishing in accident and emergency departments is increasing; we know that, thanks to a freedom of information request on our health boards.

In John McGarrity's area of Glasgow, the number of patients who waited over four hours to be seen has more than trebled—up from 10,100 in 2009 to 31,700 this year. Looking across Scotland, I note that in NHS Lanarkshire—the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing's own backyard—the number of patients who are waiting more than four hours in A and E has also more than trebled and that in NHS Grampian, which is the First Minister's own backyard, there was an increase of 1,300 in the number of patients waiting more than four hours in A and E, compared with last year. Now that the First Minister knows what is happening in the NHS on his watch, will he tell us what he is going to do about it?

The First Minister: Is not that exactly why the health secretary announced the plan for reinforcing the staff and resources at accident and emergency units across Scotland, so that the NHS can be sustained under winter pressures and the position improved? *[Interruption.]* That is what the health secretary announced, because that is the correct response to the pressures that we have seen over the winter.

The capacity of our accident and emergency units has substantially increased under this Government, and the number of diagnoses and treatments in hospital A and E departments is up by 6 per cent since 2007, under this Government.

That has been possible because the resource budget of the national health service in Scotland has increased under this Government, despite the extraordinary financial pressures that have been imposed on us from Westminster.

We know that that would not have happened had the Labour Party been in power. We know that because the Labour Party would not, in the run-up to the elections either in 2007 or in 2011 commit to protecting the budget of the national health service. We also know it because in the only place where Labour is in power in these islands there has been a real-terms decline in national health service funding. That is a reality.

Let us answer the question in this sense—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): Order.

The First Minister: Where there is pressure on the national health service, this Government responds by devoting additional resources to accident and emergency services, so that we can treat real patients with real conditions and sustain the health service against winter pressure. I do not think that a party that was unable to commit itself to the health service in the election campaigns, and which is unable to commit itself to the health service in Wales now, is in any position to pose as a defender of the national health service, when it wanted to spend the money elsewhere.

Johann Lamont: We would settle for the First Minister answering the question in any sense whatever. That answer certainly does not qualify.

The First Minister talked about Wales, but he is in power here. He is responsible for the NHS. I am sure that he understands that he has been in power since 2007, dealing with the national health service.

On the point about winter pressures, the winter pressures this year were less than they were in 2010, so the explanation simply does not stack up.

If the First Minister ever made it out of Bute house to the real world and met a patient who was waiting on a trolley for treatment, we can assume that he would say to the person who was lying in front of him, "Listen. You are more satisfied with the NHS than ever before." He would tell the person on the trolley that things are better under his area of responsibility.

The First Minister is simply not serious. When will he understand that patients need medical treatment, not slogans? He has been in charge of the NHS for six years—

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Thank goodness.

Johann Lamont: It is not “Thank goodness” for the people who are lying on trolleys. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Johann Lamont: The First Minister tells people that they should be grateful for that. It is not “Thank goodness”, at all. The number of people who wait more than four hours in A and E is increasing, but what does the First Minister do? Instead of cutting times—we can hardly believe this—he cuts the target.

I have raised the issue with the First Minister time and again. Is it not the case that the reason why things have got worse, the reason why he has done nothing to improve the situation, and the reason why he does not even know, is that he does not care about NHS patients and cares only—[*Interruption.*] Scottish National Party members also care only about SNP slogans. [*Interruption.*] You might want to ask your own guy for an answer occasionally. That would be encouraging. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. Please speak through the Presiding Officer.

Johann Lamont: Then we would really know that we were in a new place.

Here is a phrase that sums up this country, and the First Minister should reflect on it: in this country, under Salmond, Scotland is lying on a trolley while his referendum is in intensive care.

The First Minister: It struck me, as I was listening to that, that folk who are being treated now in Monklands or Ayr hospital accident and emergency departments will know that their hospitals would not even be there if they had been left to the Labour Party. Not content with not securing the budget, the Labour Party was going to cut the hospitals.

Perhaps what is more important than Johann Lamont’s view of the national health service is what the people think about the national health service. Eighty-five per cent of Scottish in-patients reported in the in-patients survey that their overall care and treatment was good or excellent. In 2011, 88 per cent of people were very satisfied or satisfied with their local health services—up from 81 per cent in 2007. Those issues were tested at the 2011 election, which is why people vindicated the SNP’s stewardship of our national health service and left the Labour Party languishing in opposition.

Johann Lamont says that we should not talk about what is happening in Wales. Why should we not talk about what is happening in Wales? It is because it shows what actually happens when the Labour Party is in power. We are in a position where fierce cuts from Westminster are affecting both the Welsh and Scottish budgets. In Wales

they decided to cut the health budget in real terms. They were under financial pressure and could not see the commitment to maintain the health service budget in Scotland. In Scotland, this Government decided to maintain and sustain the resource budget of the national health service in real terms.

When it comes to political commitment, the record of this Government on the national health service, which was vindicated by the people in the 2011 election, and the financial commitment that has been made, show that the national health service being in our hands is, above all, the reason why we are in government and the Labour Party is in opposition.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

2. Ruth Davidson (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister. (S4F-01369)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I have no plans to meet the Prime Minister in the near future.

Ruth Davidson: This week, a diagnosed psychopath and triple axe murderer who killed a fellow patient in Carstairs, a nurse and a police officer was set free. Thomas McCulloch was told that he would spend the rest of his life in jail but, thanks to a human rights appeal, he is once again walking our streets. I know that nothing can be done retrospectively in this or any other historic case, but what has the First Minister done to ensure in future that, as in England, when such violent and vicious people are given a whole-life sentence, it will actually mean life?

The First Minister: The terms of the release of prisoners are a matter for the Parole Board for Scotland under legislation from 1993—if I remember correctly—and it is not for ministers to intervene in the decisions of the Parole Board. The Parole Board makes these decisions; its decisions and independent status are protected by a statute that, incidentally, was passed while the Conservative Party was in power. I am glad that Ruth Davidson acknowledges that retrospective decisions could not be made anyway, but I am sure that she understands and is not suggesting that we should compromise the independence of the Parole Board. If she has a specific proposal, let her come forward with it and the Cabinet Secretary for Justice will of course consider it.

Ruth Davidson: I note that this time the First Minister is saying that it is the Parole Board that is the reason. The problem is that, when I put the same question to the First Minister in November 2011, he used European Union human rights law as an excuse for not having whole-life tariffs in Scotland. Last January—16 months ago—the European Court of Human Rights ruled on this and upheld the principle of whole-life sentences for the

most dangerous offenders. Since then, we have seen William Kean get just 22 years for the brutal murder of an 80-year-old woman in Perthshire, and Saima Gul and Fazli Rahim given only 23 years after attempting to decapitate their murder victim in front of a 12-year-old girl. Had the Scottish National Party acted in its first term in government, we could have been certain that Colin Coates and Philip Wade, who tortured Lynda Spence to death, would never be freed.

The SNP has had six years in which to take action. Whole-life sentences are clear and unambiguous, yet they were absent from last year's Criminal Cases (Punishment and Review) (Scotland) Bill, which was described by Professor James Chalmers as

"a tortuous system which is barely intelligible to lawyers, let alone to the general public".

It is simple: life should mean life. Will the First Minister give an assurance today that he will finally take action to give the public the protection that they deserve? Will he ensure that, in the most extreme cases, when the most violent criminals are taken off the streets they will never return?

The First Minister: Ruth Davidson seems to think that I am bringing the Parole Board in as a defence. I have just looked at the 1993 act, and I was right. The act, which was passed by a Conservative Government, states that all life sentence prisoners are entitled by law, including those convicted of murder, to have their suitability for release on parole considered after expiry of the punishment part of their sentence. The act also states that Scottish ministers are required by law to accept any direction of the Parole Board to release a prisoner.

The justice secretary and I are perfectly willing and able to consider suggestions that come forward constructively. However, it does Ruth Davidson ill to complain about the law and the relationship of the law and the Parole Board to the release of prisoners when it turns out that the exact provisions under which the Parole Board has acted were carried into law by a Conservative Government. At some point, if there are complaints about the judicial system of Scotland—which ignore the extraordinary success of our having the lowest level of recorded crime for more than 30 years and having the best public satisfaction for many years in terms of people's feelings of personal safety—will the Conservative Party acknowledge that the things that it is complaining about are the very things that it enacted when it was in government?

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-01356)

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

Willie Rennie: The Deputy Prime Minister is in Essex today, promoting the United Kingdom Government's expansion of nursery education to thousands of two-year-olds. In Aberdeen, the First Minister is restricting plans to around 40 children. Under the affordable plans that I put to him, 1,040 children would secure a nursery place in Aberdeen. Is it not a shame that so many two-year-olds in Essex will get help but those in Aberdeen will not? Is it not a shame that he cannot go anywhere in Scotland and make that sort of commitment?

The First Minister: Willie Rennie has surprised me. It has taken him a considerable time, but he has surprised me. When I was wondering about his question today, I thought that the one thing that he would not ask about was childcare, because I heard the reports about Nick Clegg on the radio this morning. As members will know and recall, for some time I have cautioned Willie Rennie against telling us that what is happening south of the border is fantastic and ideal. He has said that no, that is the thing that we should aspire to. He has accused me of being "the road block" to achieving that in Scotland, but it turns out that the road block in England is Nick Clegg. Nick Clegg has said—and has indicated to the Conservatives—that

"he will block government reforms to adult-child ratio limits for childcarers".

It is said that his veto will jeopardise the entire childcare package.

Nick Clegg has finally paid attention to the points that I have been making to Willie Rennie over the past few weeks, when I have warned him that the dilution of ratios poses a severe danger to the quality of provision. I am now in the position of having converted Willie Rennie's party leader to the points that I am making. At some stage, I shall manage to convert Willie Rennie.

Willie Rennie: I anticipated that the First Minister would think that I would not ask that question—[*Laughter.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Willie Rennie: I wonder whether there will ever be a week in which the First Minister does not use an excuse to do absolutely nothing for two-year-olds. The First Minister seems to be taking a leaf out of Homer Simpson's book. Homer Simpson said:

"If something's hard to do, it's not worth doing."

It is quite remarkable that, while the UK Government battles to improve the life chances of

two-year-olds, the First Minister does nothing—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Willie Rennie: He does nothing but raise the white flag. He has excuse after excuse for doing absolutely nothing. It is good enough for two-year-olds in Essex, so why is it not good enough for two-year-olds in Aberdeen?

The First Minister: This is kamikaze. The point that Nick Clegg is making is that he thinks that lowering the quality of childcare is not good for two-year-olds in Essex. At the moment, UK ministers are not battling to expand childcare; they are battling with each other. Nick Clegg has said that he will block the changes because he is concerned—rightly so, I think—that the diminution in quality will involve danger to the childcare system.

I understand that mumsnet has been campaigning on the issue and that Nick Clegg has paid particular attention to the views of mumsnet. I myself could claim the credit, but perhaps mumsnet has been influential as well. At some stage—whether it is through myself or through mumsnet—perhaps we can get through to Willie Rennie that there is a problem in England that his party leader has identified. It might be wise, for a time at least, for Willie Rennie to reflect on that before he tries that particular line of argument again.

Queen's Speech

4. Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the implications for Scotland are of the Queen's speech. (S4F-01364)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Yesterday, we were looking for an indication in the Queen's speech that the Westminster Government realises the seriousness of the economic situation facing the country, given the lack of growth in the economy, and that there would be new measures to deal with that. Not only was that not in the Queen's speech, but progressive measures such as minimum pricing for alcohol were dropped and there was no legal commitment to overseas aid, despite repeated promises. Overall, that speech indicates why this country needs good government from this Parliament as opposed to bad government from Westminster.

Annabelle Ewing: Certainly, yesterday proved that Westminster is not working for Scotland. Does the First Minister agree that, particularly in the tough economic times that people are facing, we need to see a United Kingdom Government that is focused on delivering jobs and prosperity for Scotland rather than one that is pandering, in a blind panic, to the threat of the United Kingdom

Independence Party after last week's local elections south of the border?

The First Minister: That analysis about the UK Government's response is widely shared among political commentators and, indeed, politicians at Westminster. Such a response would be unfortunate, because the real issues that are emerging were not those that were contained in the Queen's speech yesterday but those that will be in the new spending review that is currently being prepared at Westminster.

Yesterday, the Institute for Fiscal Studies said:

"The current government plan"—

at Westminster, that is—

"is for eight successive years of tax increases and spending cuts".

It seems that the choice facing Scotland is clear. We have heard so much from the no campaigners, on the Labour and Tory sides, about the uncertainty of independence. Here is a certainty of UK Government: there will be eight successive years of tax increases and spending cuts on the Scottish people.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Gavin Brown with a brief supplementary.

Gavin Brown (Lothian) (Con): Presiding Officer, allow me to cheer up the First Minister and his back benchers just a little bit—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Briefly, please.

Gavin Brown: The national insurance contributions bill that was in the Queen's speech yesterday got a big thumbs up from the Federation of Small Businesses, which said that it will be a shot in the arm. What is the First Minister's view on the national insurance contributions bill?

The First Minister: I support measures that bring people back into employment. The point that I was making is that, for an economy that is suffering severely from a clear deficiency of demand with huge unspent resources and many skills and people lying idle, not to address that fundamental question seems to me to be a failure of leadership and of stewardship.

Given the real-term cuts—as the member well knows—of 8.2 per cent that are already in the Scottish budget, to anticipate eight successive years of tax increases and spending cuts is a dismal prospect, which I think will encourage many people to think twice about continuing Tory rule from Westminster when we could mobilise the resources and people of this nation to build a prosperous and socially just future.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Also briefly, Neil Findlay.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): Yesterday, the UK Government dropped plans to regulate the lobbying industry. Does the First Minister think that that was a mistake and does he support plans to regulate the industry in Scotland?

The First Minister: If the member brings forward ideas or plans, we will see how they are appropriate to the work of this Parliament. It should be said that, in general, this Parliament operates with a greater degree of transparency than the Westminster Parliament. Having served in both, I am in a reasonable position to judge that. If the member brings forward suggestions in a positive fashion, they will be treated in a positive fashion by the Government.

Ageing Population (Scottish Government Policy)

5. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): To ask the First Minister whether the reported comments of the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing that “we are still going to need the same number of beds, the same number of hospitals, the same number of doctors and nurses just to stand still” in relation to an ageing population reflect Scottish Government policy. (S4F-01367)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I have the full quotation here, which Jackie Baillie has not used. The cabinet secretary was talking about the population of over 75-year-olds being set to double, and he made the arithmetic point that

“if we are able through better treatment at home to reduce by 50 per cent the level of hospitalisation”,

the automatic calculation then follows.

Yesterday, the cabinet secretary announced development of the new bed planning tool, which will draw on the expertise of national health service staff and planners to ensure that health boards have the right type of specialist beds in the right places at the right time to meet patient demand.

Jackie Baillie: The First Minister should be advised that the bed planning tool has already been renamed the bed cutting tool. Alex Neil made the promise about

“the same number of beds, the same number of hospitals”

and

“the same number of doctors and nurses”

to a Unison conference just two weeks ago. The following day, his civil servants were running around, forced to clarify and reinterpret his comments. Yesterday, not one back bencher defended his comments. Did Alex Neil actually mean what he said, or was he simply expressing his view “in terms of the debate”?

The First Minister: I heard an interview with Jackie Baillie on the radio yesterday. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order, please.

The First Minister: I pay close attention to Jackie Baillie’s interviews. Even in the context of the statement about the hospital-acquired superbug capital of Europe, her claim yesterday that, under Labour, we did not need a confidential helpline in the NHS because it was not necessary was absolutely extraordinary. When the Labour Party was in government, the number of acute beds in the national health service fell every single year. That happened, irrespective of Jackie Baillie’s inability to remember what happened when Labour was in power.

As the then health minister, Andy Kerr, said:

“There are good reasons for reductions in acute bed numbers:

Medical advances continue to reduce lengths of stay associated with many planned procedures, and some are now routinely carried out”—*[Official Report, Written Answers, 19 March 2007; S2W-32254]*

[Interruption.]

I see that Andy Kerr has been reduced to invisibility in the lexicon of the Labour Party. In that case, let us talk about Richard Simpson, who is still here, and who pointed out in 2011 that he was exceptionally pleased with the cabinet secretary’s recognition that the balance of care

“could result in a reduction in the number of acute beds.”—*[Official Report, 8 June 2011; c 430.]*

[Interruption.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Smith!

The First Minister: It ill behoves the superbug expert of this Parliament to come along and forget entirely what happened under the Labour Party, sweep to one side the changes in the balance of medical care and ignore entirely that the Scottish National Party committed itself to—and has delivered—a real-terms increase in health funding. No doubt because of Jackie Baillie’s inability to convince her colleagues, the Labour Party never promised that in Scotland and it certainly has not delivered it in Wales.

Foreign Affairs Committee (Report on Consequences of Scottish Independence)

6. Margo MacDonald (Lothian) (Ind): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government’s response is to the recent Foreign Affairs Committee report on the consequences of Scottish independence. (S4F-01370)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I thought that some of the committee’s report was eminently sensible. For example, it states:

"We do not doubt that Scotland, as an independent country could play a valuable role in Europe".

However, it should be said that not everybody was convinced by the Foreign Affairs Committee. The Tory MP Douglas Carswell said:

"I can think of lots of good reasons"—

from his perspective—

"why Scotland might want to vote to remain part of the United Kingdom. But the Commons' Foreign Affairs select committee report today is not one of them."

Margo MacDonald: I am surprised that the First Minister was surprised. I do not know what he expected from such a committee at such a time.

It struck me that, far from having an interest in Scotland—which it was meant to have—the report ended up being fraught with anxiety about what would happen to the reduced status of the rest of the United Kingdom when Scotland becomes independent. It talked about the reduced post-independence position in relation to the United Nations Security Council, the G8 and the European Union.

Does the First Minister agree that that should not influence us when we come to vote in the referendum? Our job is not to prop up an ailing power but to secure the future for our children.

The First Minister: That is a solid point. I clarify for Margo MacDonald that I was not surprised by the overall negative tone of the no campaigners who wrote the report. One would expect that no campaigners would write a negative report about Scottish independence. However, it was interesting that, within the overall volumes of negativity, there were one or two nuggets of common sense. That is the bit that surprised me.

Actually, Margo MacDonald is quite right. On the radio, Menzies Campbell said:

"I heard on your news bulletin a moment or two ago that it's been dismissed as if it were in some way partial. That it was written by people whose interest was to argue against the independence of Scotland. That's quite true in my case."

As a member of the committee, he seems to agree with her analysis.

The other point that Margo MacDonald makes is equally substantial. The report focused, virtually entirely, not on the interests of Scotland but—this is what the major points that it seemed to make were about—on what would happen to the UK's prestige in the world.

There, the committee makes a fundamental mistake. Prestige and influence in the world are not based on size or even on military intervention—the military intervention in Iraq, for example, did not enhance the UK's place in the world. The UK's or Scotland's place in the world to

be will be governed not by size or military intervention but by the quality of our ideas, the strength of our social services, the health of our economy and our ability to make a positive contribution to humankind.

Those are the things that matter, not the baubles of prestige on which the Foreign Affairs Committee concentrated.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time. I will allow a short pause to enable members who are not participating in the next debate to leave and for the public gallery to clear before we move to members' business.

Reducing Reoffending (Prisoners' Assets)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-05789, in the name of Mary Fee, on using prisoners' assets to reduce reoffending. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the decision of the Scottish Prison Service to invest £70,000 in a pilot throughcare service in HMP Greenock to tackle reoffending and assist offenders in settling back into their communities; considers that reoffending costs the Scottish economy £3 billion per year; understands that there is no single solution to tackling reoffending; regrets that 61% of prisoners with a sentence of less than one year will reoffend within two years of release, and hopes that using prisoners' assets to reduce reoffending by engaging the prisoners with their families, by working with their skills, hobbies, employment history and educational outcomes will provide better rehabilitation and educational programmes.

12:34

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): I am delighted to hold my first members' business debate on a topic that I have raised on numerous occasions in the Parliament and about which I feel strongly.

Before I move on to the substance of my speech, I will thank a couple of people for their assistance in researching the debate: Dr Nancy Loucks; Charlie Martin; members of the cross-party group on families affected by imprisonment; and the offenders and families I have met. I also say a special thank you to Gareth Brown, Dan Cairns and Lucy Connelly for their tireless research and support in these matters. Without the support and help of all those people, I doubt that we would be having the debate, which brings a focus to supporting families and offenders and aims to develop new ideas about reducing reoffending.

As the title of the motion suggests, I have a different ideology about how we can reduce reoffending. All prisoners have assets other than financial or material assets, which can be anything from educational qualifications and work experience to hobbies and interests, family and friends. As one prison officer pointed out to me, someone—a mother or a father—will have loved and cared for the offender at some point. How do we recreate that bond? I accept that, for different reasons, some families break down, which leads to bonds being broken, but when there is still a chance for the relationship to work, we must utilise that asset in the interests of the offender, their family and society.

Research shows that supporting the family, as well as working with the offender, helps to break the cycle of offending. As well as keeping the offender out of prison in the future, it can support the children of offenders who, statistically, are more likely to end up in a life of crime. The children of prisoners are a group in society that is often overlooked, even though more children will face a parent's imprisonment than will face their parents' divorce. They are silent victims who—I repeat—are more likely to enter the criminal justice system.

A study by Joseph Murray of the University of Cambridge in 2007 found that the imprisonment of a parent predicted that a boy would be involved in antisocial behaviour and would suffer from mental health problems during the course of his life—in some cases, that continued well into adulthood and even up to the age of 48. The same study found that 48 per cent of boys who were separated from a parent because of imprisonment between birth and the age of 10 ended up in prison as an adult. Therefore, looking at families as an asset and maintaining bonds can play a crucial role in reducing reoffending.

The motion welcomes the investment of £70,000 in a pilot throughcare programme in HMP Greenock. Effective and well-established throughcare is an essential service if reoffending is to be tackled. At a recent meeting with ex-offenders in Glasgow, I heard about the lack of joined-up working among different agencies that should be better at supporting newly released prisoners. One of the men said that throughcare should start as soon as someone who has been sentenced enters the prison estate.

Another major issue that came out of the time that I spent with ex-offenders was the lack of meaningful activity in prison. Over the past month or so, I have highlighted concerns that I have on the issue, which are to do with incentivising activity, joined-up working and the purpose of the activity that is undertaken. Crucially, that is what my motion aims to address and highlight. Are prisoners being offered work or educational courses that suit their needs, that utilise the skills that they possess and which improve on the knowledge that many prisoners have?

It has been said to me more than once that some prisoners are among the most entrepreneurial people that one could meet. I do not doubt that for a minute, but the issue is how we can use that lawfully and for the benefit of the offender. Creating a system of meaningful activity around the assets of prisoners is seen as a costly process, but we should look at what reoffending costs Scotland socially and economically.

One ex-offender whom I met who had previously worked in finance ended up in an art

class, as that is all that was on offer. How is that the best way of rehabilitating prisoners? I am sure that that was not an isolated case, but given that the offender in question had financial qualifications and that the majority of the prison population have trouble with reading, writing and numeracy, would not utilising his assets have benefited other prisoners as much as it would have benefited the offender himself?

While I am on the subject of mentoring, I would like to welcome the funds that the Scottish Government has announced to establish a national network of mentoring schemes. I have witnessed the work that the Wise Group carries out through its routes out of prison project, and I am delighted that it can carry on with its good work. On my visits to prisons, I have seen at first hand the terrific work that is undertaken to give prisoners work experience. In Greenock prison, I was interviewed for the prison radio station by a young man who had never previously thought about sitting in front of a microphone. I was extremely impressed by the questions that he posed on the spot and how he took to questioning a politician. Taking part in the course had started a passion for him. As I listened to that bright young man, I could hear how he wanted to change and better himself, yet had never thought that he could.

Projects that give confidence to an offender are required and essential for someone to turn their back on offending, as long as all the other dots are joined up. Everyone has a history and a story to tell. How we tap into those positive aspects of someone's background can offer change to that person and their community. A greater holistic approach is essential for a population with all manner of mental health problems. I can imagine that the right-wing types and their press will view this approach as a "hug a hoodie" type of soft justice, but we know that the current system is not working. When the country spends £128 million per year on reducing reoffending, which costs us £3 billion, we have to look at other means of tackling the crisis, which affects families and communities across my region and the country as a whole.

I hope that the points and concerns that I have raised can feed into our justice system, and I look forward to hearing from other members. The debate is only a small part of what the cross-party group on families affected by imprisonment set out to achieve. I hope that many members will consider coming and feeding back to the group ideas on how we support families on the outside.

12:41

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I congratulate Mary Fee on

securing this debate. I know that she has a special interest in the issue and I pay tribute to her tenacity.

As I mentioned in last week's debate, reoffending and rehabilitation are something that I, too, feel very passionately about. Mary Fee mentioned the throughcare service being piloted at Greenock prison. That is, indeed, a fantastically innovative project. I would like to quote from a meeting at which Mary Fee was also present, where the prison services said:

"It is widely recognised that offenders frequently find it difficult to successfully return to their communities and avoid reoffending when released from prison. The SPS is continually exploring ways to additionally support prisoners after their liberation, for the benefit of both offenders and the communities which they return to."

That is very important: it is not just the prisoners but their communities and society as a whole who benefit from these fantastic, innovative ideas. The goal of HMP Greenock is to sustain the unique relationship between prison officers and prisoners—an important subject that I also raised in last week's debate. I believe that they know each other best. That is what is stated in the innovative project—that prison officers get involved in the attempt to build the lives of prisoners when they are released into their communities. I am delighted that a number of the agencies mentioned by Mary Fee, in both the Government and the third sector, are working together on this fantastic project.

Mary Fee mentioned the mentoring service, which is something that I also feel passionately about. To tackle reoffending, £7.7 million has been spent on a network of mentoring schemes throughout the country. I want to give an example from one of the projects, called Includem, in my own area of greater Glasgow. I will not give any personal details; just a couple of soundbites about what has happened.

This story is about a chap called Andrew and how for many years he had been in and out of prison, almost as though there were a revolving door. The first thing he said was,

"If I hadn't had Includem, I'd probably still be fighting and picking up charges."

Andrew came from the sort of situation that Mary Fee has just described. I will not call his background dysfunctional, but he had a home life that was not the norm as we would probably see it, and his family relationships really suffered because of that and the young man got involved in gangs and alcohol and was on the wrong side of the fence and the law—whatever we would want to call it. Once he was in prison again, Includem became involved and involved him in a mentoring scheme. Since he has been released from prison, he has had no further charges; he has been in no

trouble at all. His family have all been helped to get on with their lives. Andrew says now that he is really looking forward to the future.

We in this Parliament should be proud of the introduction of those innovative types of rehabilitation. As I have said on many occasions, we can lock everyone up, but it is no good for them or for society outwith.

I thank Mary Fee for lodging her motion and I congratulate her on her first members' business debate, which is very worthy. I hope that we can all work together, no matter what our political party. This is not about parties; it is about making sure that young people and others have a life when they come out of prison and that communities benefit from that life.

12:45

Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab): I, too, congratulate Mary Fee on bringing this important debate today. She is right to highlight the importance of breaking the cycle of reoffending, for offenders and their families, and to put that challenge in a wider context. Mary Fee is also right to say that there is no single solution to the problem of reoffending, which remains relatively static and far too high. Using the interests and experience of prisoners and engaging with families have to be part of the way forward.

There has rightly been concern about the lack of enough purposeful activity in Scotland's prisons. An average of 21 hours a week is simply not acceptable, and Hugh Monro was right when he said that the purpose of sending offenders to prison in the first place is being undermined. That needs to be addressed.

It is equally vital that work continue after an offender has been released. Every prison governor and every third sector organisation that I have met has made the same point: whether released prisoners are sent back to prison for reoffending will depend most on what they do, where they go and what company they keep in the first few days and weeks after their release. That is why Prison Service support for throughcare services is vital and to be welcomed, and why agencies such as Includem and Families Outside are important, too.

Engagement with families is equally critical, as Mary Fee said. The charity Families Outside found that offenders are six times more likely to reoffend if they lose contact with their families. Therefore, support for that contact and linking it to resettlement are clearly of wider benefit.

In my area, achieving that engagement with families will be much harder because of the

decision to close Aberdeen prison and replace it with a prison an hour away from the city, at Peterhead. HMP Grampian is supposed to be community facing, and I have no doubt that its first governor, Jim Farish, and his team will work very hard to fulfil that remit. However, it is hard to be community facing from the other end of the A90. If we are serious about engagement with families, it is not enough to say so, or even to fund pilot projects. The strategic decisions about Scotland's prisons have to reflect that priority too, and in Aberdeen's case an opportunity has been missed.

If family contacts are critical for offenders in general, that is even truer for young offenders. The lack of purposeful activity has been a particular issue for young offenders at Polmont and Cornton Vale, and I hope that this week's announcement on Polmont will produce a significant increase in investment from the Scottish Government. I welcome the engagement of Education Scotland.

When I visited Polmont last year, I was struck by the commitment of staff and the work that was being done to address the poor communication skills of many young men in prison. Research suggests that 60 per cent of young people who come into contact with the justice system have communication problems. Extra education classes will not work if young offenders are not first enabled to take advantage of them by improving their communication skills.

The work done at Polmont is such that it has earned prison officers and national health service staff the giving voice partnership award from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, yet only 15 hours a week of one-to-one speech therapy are available at Polmont, and that is simply not enough. This debate is about offenders getting support during and after their imprisonment, in order to resettle in their communities. I believe that speech therapy is one tool that can play an important role in enabling that to happen, and I hope that the minister will indicate that that is also the view of the Scottish Government.

12:49

Jackson Carlaw (West Scotland) (Con): Mary Fee's first members' business debate is on a cause well chosen, and I congratulate her on it. I welcome the opportunity to participate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. Her Majesty's Prison Greenock deals with the majority of offenders sentenced in the west of Scotland, so I am interested in many of the projects that are designed to tackle reoffending and to help reintegrate offenders into the community.

It is clear that much more needs to be done to tackle reoffending. As the motion states,

“the problem costs the Scottish economy £3 billion per year”

and although the Scottish Government is able to say truthfully enough that reconviction rates are at their lowest level for a decade—that may indeed be true—the minister will know that the rates have barely dropped in that time and that more than 45 per cent of all prisoners go on to reoffend within a year.

The Scottish Government spends £128 million a year on reducing reoffending, compared with nearly twice that amount on punishing offenders. In that context, we must all recognise that a £70,000 pilot, although welcome, is a drop in the ocean. Nevertheless, I welcome the pilot and commend the Scottish Prison Service for placing greater emphasis on throughcare services.

It is widely acknowledged that offenders find it challenging to return successfully to their communities, and it is perhaps unreasonable to expect an individual who has been marginalised from society and subsequently locked up to immediately adapt to the realities of finding housing—getting a roof over their head is crucial in the first instance—before applying for benefits and, one would hope, securing employment on release. In addition, we know that many offenders have drug and alcohol problems, which create additional challenges that they must face.

The pilot strikes me as common sense. It establishes a point of contact between an offender and a named individual and, importantly, it manages the transition from prison to release into the community. Throughcare is routinely available only to offenders on longer sentences, meaning that short-term prisoners who are often in and out of prison for the equivalent of a longer sentence slip through the net. I understand that the pilot will provide support for prisoners who volunteer for the scheme, regardless of their sentence.

In some ways, Scotland has some catching up to do. In England and Wales, Chris Grayling has said that the United Kingdom Government wants all but the highest risk prisoners to have a dedicated mentor on release from prison. Interestingly, that will see the use of private and voluntary sector groups, who are funded on a payment-by-results basis, which is something that I hope the Scottish Government will explore. As we heard yesterday during the Queen’s speech, the UK Government intends to introduce such a scheme in England. A good place to start would be to listen to a detailed interview that I heard this morning on Radio 4 with the voluntary project in England that has been doing just that and whose initiatives have been evaluated as a success.

We will see further legislation to tackle reoffending south of the border. That will mean that all offenders released from prison will receive at least 12 months’ statutory supervision. That must not be dismissed as a “hug a hoodie” strategy. Anything that ultimately integrates people back into society and reduces reoffending is what we hope will be a consequence of the system.

We must look at providing throughcare services to all prisoners. Yesterday, we heard—as Lewis Macdonald said—about an Education Scotland programme to be rolled out at Polmont, which is to be welcomed. However, those projects should be offered across the prison estate alongside other measures to tackle reoffending.

On other measures, the Scottish Conservatives have been calling for the introduction of a working week for prisoners to better tackle illiteracy and the lack of employable skills among offenders. We have also talked about the end to automatic early release—irrespective of whether we at one time introduced it, albeit that we were set to repeal it—which my party has long campaigned for. That would mean that offenders spend more time in prison being punished but, de facto, they would also spend more time being rehabilitated before the post-prison mentoring programme that we advocate. More needs to be done, and I welcome the Scottish Government’s acknowledgement of that point.

12:53

Colin Keir (Edinburgh Western) (SNP): I congratulate Mrs Fee on securing the debate and on her thoughtful speech. There is certainly much in the motion that is commendable.

Mary Fee has identified one of the major problems in the justice system: reoffending by short-term prisoners. The almost revolving door of entry into and exit from prison is not an easy nut to crack and, as the motion concedes and Lewis Macdonald mentioned, there is “no single solution” to the problem.

I have been in the fortunate position of sitting on the Justice Committee and the Public Audit Committee when reoffending has been discussed. I have also had a couple of tours around HMP Edinburgh, where I have talked to staff and prisoners and sought their views.

It is rather sad that for re-education, working on life skills and preparing prisoners for life on the outside generally, the prisoner needs to be inside for quite a bit longer than six months or a year to see results.

The lifestyles, when they have their freedom, of many people who serve short-term sentences are chaotic. Drug and alcohol dependency—as

Jackson Carlaw pointed out—and lack of literacy and numeracy skills are impediments to prisoners who would benefit from some form of education and training. Time is needed to work with those prisoners on their underlying problems before we even think about such things as vocational courses, either within or outside prison.

That is where the problems with short-term prison sentences come in. Nowhere in the prison system—as far as I have seen—is anyone saying that effective training can be provided for someone who is serving a sentence of six months. That is not just because there may in some cases be a resource issue in the prison, but because there is not enough time to work effectively with the prisoner.

Another issue is that some prisoners have no interest in attending educational courses because they hated their schooldays. The staff at HMP Edinburgh have had real difficulties in engaging with those prisoners and getting them into classrooms, which reminds me of the old saying, “Better one volunteer than 10 pressed men.”

On my trips around HMP Edinburgh with David McLetchie, we saw some excellent examples of training and education opportunities, but prisoners will lose the skills that they gain if there is no opportunity for them to expand their knowledge and skill set when they walk through the gates to freedom.

Prisoners require help when they are released. There is no point in releasing a prisoner at 5 pm on a Friday afternoon, particularly if they are not local to the area and have nowhere to sleep. They are likely to be met by the local drug dealer at the prison door, or to end up looking for help from the so-called friends who were part of their life before imprisonment and most likely encouraged them into crime. The chances are that they will be back inside the cell by the end of the weekend, and no amount of retraining or education will help that situation.

In the opinion of many people, the answers to those questions lie not just inside prison, but outside, too. Local authorities, the third sector and voluntary organisations all have parts to play. Many of the problems that short-term offenders face can be dealt with by using nothing more than common sense. On release, a prisoner should have access to accommodation and be registered with a general practitioner’s surgery, and know whom to speak to for information and advice.

If prisoners are to be reintegrated into society, they need self-respect. I have met people in my constituency who have followed a path to prison since their schooldays. If that is not a depressing thought, I do not know what is. Education at an appropriate level for each prisoner will always be

the key, otherwise we will endure a situation in which there is an ever-revolving door for prisoners who look on an 18-month sentence as nothing more than an inconvenience.

12:57

Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak in today’s members’ debate on reducing reoffending, and I congratulate Mary Fee on bringing the debate to the chamber.

The Audit Scotland report, “Reducing reoffending in Scotland”, which was published in November 2012, states with regard to reoffending that

“Rates have remained relatively static ... over the past”

decade. I felt very uneasy when I read that, because it suggests that there has been no improvement in the past decade. The report also states that 30 per cent of offenders reoffend within one year. The fact that the rate has been static for a decade and that 30 per cent of offenders are reoffending must lead us to ask where we have failed them.

One of the most striking comments in the Audit Scotland report is that

“there is a mismatch between what is currently being delivered and what is known to be effective.”

We know what is effective, but we are not doing anything about it. That rings alarm bells about why we have failed so far.

One of the report’s major recommendations calls for

“more flexibility to meet local needs and priorities”.

I hope that the project in HMP Greenock will go on to meet the local needs of prisoners and their families. Engagement with families is important, because many families abandon offenders due to shame, stigma or other issues.

The cost of reoffending to Scotland’s economy has been estimated at approximately £3 billion a year. However, the real costs can be calculated not in money, but in social deprivation and the shortcomings of society that result.

The use of prisoners’ assets to fund programmes is a way of getting extra resources, but I believe that the quality of the programmes is much more important. Mary Fee was correct to highlight the role of family and friends in ensuring that ex-offenders get the kind of support that they might not have had for a long time.

I want to make a point about offenders from minority communities. Historically, people from such communities who have been in prison have far greater stigma attached to them. Their families are usually in denial and will not accept the fact

that a member of the family has been in prison. The usual excuse for a person not being around because of that is, "Oh, he's gone home to visit relatives," which could refer to anywhere in the world. Although that may seem like a good excuse at the time, it does their kin no justice.

A person who finds themselves in difficulties, who offends and is prosecuted and incarcerated, needs support. I suggest that we emphasise that not only families but appropriate agencies support those people—in particular, people from minority communities and first-time offenders—in order to try to ensure that they re-engage with society and can play a full role in it.

I am grateful to Mary Fee for the debate today. I knew some prisoners when I was a councillor and I found that they benefited from receiving support. I wish the project in HMP Greenock and everybody involved in it the best of success.

13:01

The Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs (Roseanna Cunningham): I congratulate Mary Fee on obtaining her first members' business debate. Appropriately, it is on a subject that she pursues tenaciously. I know that she will quite soon meet the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and that she will meet the chief executive of the Scottish Prison Service, so I expect her to be back in the chamber with further comments on the issue. She has raised important issues in a thoughtful way, which is helpful. I also thank other members for their thoughtful contributions.

In her motion and speech, Mary Fee rightly welcomed the £70,000 investment for HMP Greenock this year to pilot a new approach to throughcare services. Sandra White and Hanzala Malik also acknowledged and welcomed the good work that is done there. I therefore know that members will be delighted to hear that that investment will increase to £1.3 million next year for the construction of two new community integration units: one for men and one for women. The existing work is being built on, which is very important because we know that purpose, meaning and positive family relationships, which are important assets for anyone, are particularly important for shaping and supporting new beginnings for people who leave prison.

Mary Fee referenced the debate around meaningful or purposeful activity for prisoners, and one or two other members also referred to it. I agree with the Justice Committee's report on its inquiry into purposeful activity in prisons, which was published on 28 March 2013, that purposeful activity in prisons is an important part of rehabilitation because it can provide a work ethic and give structure to the prisoner's day, it can give

them a chance to build and enhance existing skills and hobbies, and it can better prepare them for rejoining our communities in a way that gives them the best chance of making a positive contribution and staying away from crime. I do not have the statistics to hand, but I think that we know that people who leave prison and go on to find work form the group that is least likely to reoffend. It is important that we see that link all the way through.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to reducing reoffending, because we are all individuals. Our approach to offenders' rehabilitation, whether it is while they are in custody or in the community, needs to be person centred and linked to individual need, and it must build on offenders' strengths and assets. Mary Fee is right to remind us that the word "asset" does not always have to refer to money—it is also about the assets that an individual can bring, which are often overlooked in this debate.

The vital work that is required cannot be the sole responsibility of the criminal justice system, as the wider services that are required are not just in the criminal justice system. It is crucial to work with offenders as soon as they are in custody, but Lewis Macdonald and other members, including Jackson Carlaw, raised the problem of the services that are available after a prisoner's release. Much of the support and many of the services that require to be in place were mentioned by Jackson Carlaw. They include suitable housing and timely access to addiction services, which is of particular concern to me, as the minister who is responsible for drugs policy. That has to be planned, and needs must be met by services on the other side of the prison gates.

Historically, there has been a joining-up problem that needs to be overcome, which is why it is important for us to begin to highlight the whole issue of throughcare. Services in our communities will be vital, and communities should understand that they have a broader role to play.

Hanzala Malik spoke about the stigma attaching to people from particular minority backgrounds; stigma can attach to all people leaving prison and can make it difficult for them to be reintegrated into their communities. There needs to be a bit of community learning about that. The discussions about that might be difficult in some areas, but they are important.

People who work in mental health services, addiction services, employment and housing all have fundamental roles to play, and they have to open their doors. It is crucial that the whole public sector accepts its part in the rehabilitation of offenders—I will return to Jackson Carlaw's comments about what is happening south of the border.

Lewis Macdonald asked specifically about speech therapy. Some work is taking place on that at Polmont. The Government recognises the need for specialist interventions where they are appropriate, and those form part of the approach that is being developed to create a skills and learning environment in Polmont.

Colin Keir highlighted some of the challenges around short sentences. It can be difficult to put in place meaningful interventions during very short prison sentences.

We have all heard stories and anecdotal evidence about unfortunate release dates or times. We know that that happens. Those are important things to take on board and address.

I return to the public sector versus private sector point. Jackson Carlaw commended the approach of the UK Government in this regard. As he might expect, we are open to constructive suggestions from elsewhere—wherever that “elsewhere” may be—but I gently point out to members that the payment by results programme was introduced after a consultation of only six weeks, and it is receiving widespread criticism. The jury is currently out on it, if Jackson Carlaw will pardon the pun.

Jackson Carlaw: I understand the point—the Scottish Government, too, has been happy to embrace new ideas in public health that have perhaps not had a welter of evidence underpinning them—but the initiative is a new one. Might the minister take the time to hear the interview that took place this morning with the voluntary organisation that has been implementing the initiative down south? It has had the initiative’s evidence base tested, and it believes that it has worked.

Roseanna Cunningham: I have about 35 seconds left in my speech, so I am not able to deal with that now.

A number of members commended the change fund and the financial commitment to it. The mentoring service has been acknowledged and recognised by everybody. We are also working with the Scottish Prison Service in Edinburgh, Perth, Cornton Vale and Greenock prisons to improve the way in which short-term prisoners’ needs are identified, which is important.

As the minister in charge of drugs policy, I regularly discuss the live matter of the prevalence of substance misuse and the particular problems that it creates on exit from prison. We have still not got that completely right. Part of our answer to that is the naloxone programme, but I recognise that it cannot be the only answer.

I commend the work of Jim Kerr, the governor of HMP Greenock, and his staff, who are piloting the

whole new approach for prison officers. Support officers will provide holistic case management for short-term offenders, and will work with them to create a plan for release. We are all behind that project, and we all want to make it work. We all want to see whether we can introduce it more widely. The outcome of the pilot will be extremely important; it will provide lessons for us and it will inform roll-out of the approach across the prison estate.

This has been an interesting and thought-provoking debate. Thank you for your forbearance, Presiding Officer, in allowing me to take a few extra seconds. I thank all members for their speeches.

13:09

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Youth Employment

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

Good afternoon. The first item of business is a debate on motion S4M-06492, in the name of Angela Constance, on young people: supporting Scotland's economy today and tomorrow.

The Minister for Youth Employment (Angela Constance): Scotland's economy needs the energy, fresh ideas and skills of the young to remain competitive. Young people are absolutely essential to our economy, today and tomorrow.

The monthly and quarterly publication cycle of the various labour market surveys gives politicians, economists and media commentators much to consider. Although statistics are always subject to interpretation and qualification, regardless of how we choose to interpret recent figures, a number of things are true: youth unemployment in Scotland has dropped in each of the past five months, and the latest annual population survey figures show a decrease in 2012 compared with 2011; Scotland's youth unemployment rate is lower than the United Kingdom average and the rate in each of the other home nations; and only five countries in the European Union—Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Malta and Denmark—have a lower youth unemployment rate than Scotland does.

The relentless efforts across Scotland by councils, employers, voluntary organisations and others are testimony to our call for an all-Scotland approach to tackling youth unemployment. Those efforts are making a difference and need to continue.

Although the recent downward trend in the youth unemployment rate and level is welcome, there are still 65,000 young people in Scotland who want to work but have not been able to secure employment. For young people who are in work, underemployment is a growing concern. Last week's research paper by Professor David Bell and Professor David Blanchflower reminds us that underemployment is particularly concentrated among the young and that, last year, 30 per cent of 16 to 24-year-olds who had jobs wanted longer hours. That adds to the challenges that young people face in today's labour market. I welcome the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee's report on underemployment, which was published last month and to which the Government will respond soon.

Although there has been a welcome decrease in the headline youth unemployment figures, the increase in long-term joblessness among young

people is worrying. Schemes to support young people, such as the wage incentives of the youth contract and the work programme, are the responsibility of the UK Government. It is a source of deep frustration to me that I cannot be confident that the young people concerned are receiving the support that they need and that we do not have the ability to adapt those resources to better support young people who are in danger of being trapped in a cycle of long-term unemployment.

The latest youth employment report from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development is called, "Employers are from Mars, young people are from Venus". Based on research with employers, it highlights a mismatch between employers' expectations of young people during the recruitment process and young people's understanding of what is expected of them. On the one hand, many young people are struggling to find their first job. On the other, some employers are finding it hard to get the skills that they need. We need to address that mismatch to reduce youth unemployment and ensure that businesses are equipped with the right talent for their immediate and future needs.

Making young people our business means changing the way in which we do business. For employers, that includes acknowledging what young employees bring to the workplace and adapting their recruitment methods so that they do not act against young people. For young people, it means gaining the skills that are valuable to employers and demonstrating how they can put them into practice. Government and others who support young people and employers need to help young people and employers to understand one another. We are making good progress on each of those fronts.

Last month, Gordon MacDonald MSP hosted a parliamentary reception for third sector employers and young people who are supported by our successful community jobs programme. In the past three years, more than 3,000 young people have had high-quality work-based training opportunities through the community jobs Scotland scheme. The young people and employers at that reception were definitely on the same planet and understood how to support one another's aims.

Last week, at Cumbernauld College, I presented a number of young people with the new certificate of work readiness. What is different about that qualification is that half of the time required to complete it—around 190 hours—needs to be spent in the workplace and assessed by the employer. It is endorsed by business organisations such as the Scottish Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses, as well as by employers such as Diageo, Scottish Power and Burn Stewart Distillers. Achieving the certificate

will help young people to prove that they are ready for the world of work.

The reforms that are under way in the college sector will ensure that the skills that people develop at college help to grow the economy. Regional colleges and outcome agreements will make it easier for employers to influence learning provision. The commission for developing Scotland's young workforce, led by Sir Ian Wood, will advise on what further improvements might be needed to our education and training system to make it even more responsive to the needs of the economy.

I want more employers to accept the business case for investing in young people and to look at how they can create new youth jobs, offer apprenticeships or offer high-quality work experience for young people. That is a big ask, but I know that there is a large appetite among employers to respond. In return, through modernising our careers service, preparing young people better to make the move from education into work, and making our education and skills system more responsive to industry needs, we will help to ensure that their workforce needs are better met.

In responding to the needs of key growth sectors, we are providing a wider and better mix of skills. One example of that is the energy skills action plan, which has led to significant collaboration with industry and Scotland's colleges and universities, as well as other key delivery partners. Since 2010 the low-carbon skills fund has provided more than 2,000 training places for small businesses across Scotland. Last year, we supported a further 1,000 flexible training places in the energy and low-carbon sector by continuing that fund and introducing the new energy skills challenge fund. In addition, 500 modern apprenticeship places a year have been ring fenced for the sector.

My world of work includes a specific energy section that has attracted 5,000 internet hits in 18 months, helping to attract young people to the sector. Initiatives such as careerwise will improve collaboration between schools and businesses and encourage more girls into science and engineering careers.

As well as making our education and skills system more responsive to industry, we are supporting businesses to develop their own solutions to meet workforce needs. For example, the Nigg Skills Academy will provide general training for 3,000 by 2015. Building on all that, the Scottish energy skills academy will support our existing business base and attract further energy investment in Scotland.

Our approach to tackling youth unemployment is more in tune with the European countries that are introducing youth guarantees than with the UK Government. We agree with intervening early to prevent young people from becoming unemployed in the first place.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I do not disagree with much of what the minister has said, but the contrast that she appears to draw between the approach of the Scottish Government and that of the UK Government strikes me as slightly odd, given the £1 billion of funding for the youth contract that is available to employers in Scotland. Indeed, that funding mirrors what is taking place in Germany, which the minister acknowledges has been very successful in tackling youth unemployment.

Angela Constance: I hope that Mr McArthur is fully aware of the European youth guarantee, which the European Commission proposed, and that there is a political agreement between member states—although only the UK Government and the Czech Republic have exercised their right to decline to participate in that guarantee.

The European youth guarantee is about intervening early and not waiting until young people are long-term unemployed or claiming jobseekers allowance for six, 12 or 18 months. It is about giving a guarantee of work, apprenticeship, education or training to every 16 to 24-year-old, or in European cases, 15 to 25-year-old, within four months of their either leaving education or becoming unemployed. That is a very progressive, significant commitment that we should implement in this country.

I discussed the European youth guarantee with UK Government ministers and I regret that they are not convinced by it. They seem to object to Europe coming up with such proposals in the first place. We all know of the challenge of rising youth unemployment across Europe, with the exceptions of the countries that I mentioned earlier. I hope that Mr McArthur will look at the European youth guarantee. Liberals are often very pro-European, so I hope that he can persuade his coalition partners to think again on it.

Employment services are essential to implementing such a European youth guarantee. Although this Government does not have the necessary powers over employment services, we are doing everything that we can to make progress. For example, in education we have prioritised college places and supported more higher education places for young people. We are offering high-quality paid traineeships and work experience opportunities through, for example, community jobs Scotland and the certificate of work readiness. We continue to achieve our target

of 25,000 new modern apprenticeships each year, and 77 per cent of last year's modern apprenticeships were taken up by 16 to 24-year-olds. Very soon, we will announce a package of financial support to help businesses create 10,000 jobs for young people.

I will continue to look at how other countries in Europe and elsewhere are tackling youth unemployment and learn from that good practice, which I will be glad to share with Parliament. As well as looking at the impact of our actions, it is very important that we look at what others are doing and the impact of their actions. Next week, I will join other European youth ministers at the Education, Youth and Culture Council. While I am in Brussels, I will meet the rapporteur who is leading on the European Parliament's Committee on Employment and Social Affairs' youth unemployment report.

Last month, *The Economist* painted a bleak picture for young people across the planet. With 75 million young people unemployed and youth unemployment rates in Spain and Greece racing towards 60 per cent, it is not surprising that the article was called "Generation Jobless". However, despite the negative headline, the article finished on a more hopeful note and acknowledged that Governments are trying to address the mismatch between education and the labour market and that companies are beginning to take more responsibility for investing in the young.

Our focus should not just be on avoiding a lost generation. Our efforts need to be on helping young Scots to be part of an aspiration generation, an ambition generation and an innovation generation, in which all our young people are encouraged and nurtured to play a full and productive role in Scotland's economy, both today and tomorrow.

With all that in mind, I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the drop in youth unemployment by 29,000 over the last year, as outlined in the April 2013 *Labour Force Survey*; commends the efforts made by many employers in Scotland to offer job, training and work experience opportunities to young people, helping them to play a vital role in the current and future workforce; further welcomes the achievement of 25,000 modern apprenticeship starts for the second year in a row; agrees that the Certificate of Work Readiness, backed by business and developed by Skills Development Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority, helps young people demonstrate to employers that they have valuable skills for the workplace, and further agrees that efforts should continue to support employers to invest in youth jobs, including through the recruitment incentives funded by £25 million in Scottish Government and EU funds and delivered by local authorities.

14:44

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): When my colleagues and I saw the terms of the motion for today's debate, we were torn about whether to offer our support. On the one hand, as members can imagine, all of us in the Labour Party welcome the opportunity to keep employment at the top of the political agenda, not just because of unemployment's damaging effect on individuals and their families, but because of its divisive effect on society as a whole. The flipside of that argument is that, by creating or working towards a full employment society, not only do we rebuild the self-esteem of those very individuals, but we increase the prosperity of our society and improve our national wellbeing. That is how to tackle the many problems that ail our country.

The downside to the motion is that it reads in a rather self-congratulatory style. That is a weakness that all Governments are prone to. There is a risk that the Scottish Government has latched on to one good set of quarterly employment figures and read into them perhaps more than it should. Everyone who deals with statistics is advised to look at the long-term trend; they should not overreact to one set of figures, particularly if they look anomalous and should therefore be treated with caution.

Angela Constance: I appreciate the complexity of labour market statistics, which must be understood and studied carefully. Does Ken Macintosh acknowledge that the quarterly and monthly statistics for the past five monthly releases have shown a downward trend in youth unemployment in Scotland?

Ken Macintosh: Indeed they do. The minister will be well aware of the caution with which we should treat all figures. Although there is a clear trend, I was worried about the use of the 29,000 figure in the motion. If the minister bears with me, I will expand on my comments.

What worries me is that the minister may infer—she has not done so in the motion, but she did so in answer to my question last week—that somehow the fall in unemployment is directly due to actions taken by her Government rather than the cumulative effect of a number of factors. I will return to that point. However, on balance, we agree that any fall in unemployment is welcome, even if we are not entirely sure what is behind it. Similarly, the employability measures that the Government has outlined, although by themselves not necessarily transformative, are to be welcomed.

We have had several debates on employability. Employability measures are important, but when the problem with our economy is employment and not employability, we must be careful not to put

the problem back on to individuals and to blame them for their misfortune. I will return to that point, too.

I make those remarks partially to put my speech in context and partially to appease what I call the paranoid tendency on the Scottish National Party's front and back benches, which I suspect assumes that Labour starts every debate on the basis that it wants to prove the SNP wrong no matter what it says. I assure SNP members that that is not the case. *[Interruption.]* I see that the paranoid tendency has just woken up. We simply want to test which policies are working and which are not.

I will put the unemployment statistics in context. We welcome the fall in the most recent employment figures. However, it is interesting to note that the fall in one set of figures in the previous month was unfortunately offset by another increase in the number of long-term unemployed, particularly in long-term youth unemployment. I am sure that I do not need to tell anyone here, let alone the minister, about the scarring effect that a prolonged period of unemployment has on people when they are young.

It is equally sobering to look at the performance of the Scottish economy in relation to employment and unemployment over the course of the recession in the past four or five years. Between 2008 and 2012, Scotland experienced a fall in unemployment significantly worse than in other regions in the UK. Similarly, Scotland's growth in unemployment over that same period was far greater than that in any other UK region, with only Northern Ireland coming close to the problem and the levels that we are experiencing here. If we look at economic inactivity, we see that levels have increased in Scotland, whereas they have reduced across the UK.

Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Ken Macintosh seems to be arguing that the Scottish Government is due no credit when the statistics look quite good, and is due blame when the statistics are bad. Surely he cannot have it both ways.

Ken Macintosh: I am not making that point at all. I thought that I was explaining myself quite well. I am trying not to blame the Government; similarly, I am anxious that the Government does not take praise when it is not due.

It is difficult to see evidence of Government interventions making a difference. That is clear in the way that the Scottish Government expresses itself. Just yesterday, it put out a press release that led with new sets of statistics that showed that youth employment was down again. However, it did not highlight the figure of 33,000 16 to 19-year-olds who are not in education, employment or

training—an increase of 1,000 in a year—which those statistics also contained.

Stephen Boyd from the Scottish Trades Union Congress has provided an excellent analysis of the Government's claims that youth unemployment has fallen by a third. He highlights that, within those figures, there is a very worrying increase in unemployment among 16 to 17-year-olds, which is much higher than in the rest of the UK. Stephen Boyd's point, which I repeat here, is that, if the Scottish Government wishes to take the credit when things are going well, it must also take responsibility when the figures do not reflect so well on it and tell a different story.

Angela Constance: The strength of our policies lies in our offer to 16 to 19-year-olds. I always read the blog posts by Stephen Boyd and the STUC, and they are usually very well informed. On this occasion, I take issue with them because the cohort of 16 to 17-year-olds in the labour force survey is so small, whereas in the annual population survey, in which the cohort is larger, unemployment among 16 to 17-year-olds has actually fallen.

Ken Macintosh: That would be a good point, but I did not want to go into the difference between the annual population survey and the labour force survey because the minister's motion is based on the labour force survey. I was not going to raise that point, but the minister has now raised it by giving an example that is against the labour force survey. For information, those figures have to have the word "experimental" added to them when they are quoted. I am not trying to do down that trend, but we should be wary. The whole picture is not a rosy one.

The difficulty is that we are not in a period when we can relax—or, for that matter, take credit—and assume that everything that the Government is doing is working. There is very little evidence to show that it is working, and it is difficult to know what is making the difference.

I assure every Scottish National Party back bencher that I want Scotland to outperform the UK on every measure. I have no wish to see the Scottish Government fail on those measures, and I want Scotland to do better. We simply need to know the facts so that we can work out which interventions work and which do not, what more we can do, and what pays dividends for the Government, the private sector and the third sector.

It is clear that the world is suffering from an economic downturn, and Europe still has its own difficulties. On the UK economy, I may find some common ground with the SNP back benchers, although perhaps not with the Conservatives and Liberals in the chamber. I hope that we can agree

that we are suffering from the wrong-headed austerity approach of George Osborne and the Tories.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I hope to find common ground, too. With regard to the wrong-headed austerity measures that are being implemented by the Conservative-Liberal coalition at Westminster, does Mr Macintosh think—as I do—that it would be better if we had all the levers of power in order to come up with different policies that would help our young people and others in our population back to work?

Ken Macintosh: I was offering consensus, but I am not sure that my offer was responded to. It is clear that I do not agree, and interestingly the yes campaign does not seem to agree either. Half of the members of the yes campaign want control of some of the levers of power, and half of them want to give the power back to Westminster and have no control over it whatsoever. I have never quite understood that—they want control of the levers of power, but they want to give that control to the Westminster Government and the Bank of England. That is a bizarre policy, if I may put it that way.

However, there are some points on which we can agree, such as the backdrop against which we are asking the Government to intervene. In some ways, I am asking the Scottish Government to be more realistic about the difference that it can make, and to focus its attention on the measures that are making a difference.

I welcome the certificate of work readiness, which is a focus of today's debate and which could, by all accounts, provide some young people with useful work experience. It is good that we provide employability at its best, and those programmes can give confidence and boost young people's preparedness and esteem.

However, as I mentioned earlier, there is a downside. The focus on employability can give too many young people the impression that their lack of employment is their own fault and that their employability, rather than the lack of available jobs, is the problem. Such programmes should never be viewed as an alternative to real and substantial investment in youth unemployment, and more concrete action is needed if we are to address that problem in the short and the long term.

The First Minister was keen to bring up Wales today. I mention in passing that just last week the Labour Administration in Wales announced a £75 million investment package to support jobs and growth in the economy. That is the sort of measure that I would welcome from the Scottish Government.

We need to be mindful of some of the decisions that the Scottish Government has taken that are contrary to the focus on employability and will be detrimental to young people's chances of getting the training that they require to enter work. To refer to the most obvious example of those decisions, the minister may think that further education is an easy target for cuts, but £25 million of cuts this year and the same next year will have a real impact on colleges' ability to deliver training and education, and a lasting effect on the young people who will miss out on a college place as a result.

I look forward to discussing what further measures we can take to tackle the very real problems facing young people in Scotland today.

I move amendment S4M-06493.2, to insert at end:

"and, while welcoming any support that can be given to those finding themselves unemployed, recognises that youth joblessness remains too high; cautions against any complacency at the difficulties faced by young people seeking work in Scotland; notes in particular the extremely worrying continued rise in the number of long-term unemployed, and is concerned that a further £25 million cut to colleges will restrict opportunities for many to gain skills or retrain".

14:55

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I put it on record that we are happy to agree with the Scottish Government's motion and the Labour amendment.

I think that there is universal acceptance on all sides of the political divide that the economic problems, both domestic and international, of recent years have had a profound effect on the whole country, but perhaps the greatest impact has been felt by our young people. Although the youth unemployment rates in Scotland and in the UK as a whole have not reached the exceptionally high levels reached in some parts of Europe, they remain too high. Notwithstanding what I think we should see as encouraging signs in the most recent statistics, the unemployment level for young people aged 16 to 25 is twice as high as that for the rest of the working population.

If we are to ensure that Scotland's economy is stronger in the future, there is an onus on us all not only to help to boost the jobs market, but to better equip our young people with the skills and training that they and their employers need. We need to ensure that those skills are more flexible, and to tackle the problem of large numbers of our young people not being in any form of employment or training because they became disengaged from education. Mr Macintosh gave us a sharp reminder of the fact that we have the highest proportion of disengaged groups of any of the

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries—the figure has increased significantly in the past decade.

Figures from the Scottish Government's own youth unemployment strategy show that failing to move our young people into stable employment can cost the economy up to £2 billion, so we welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to creating 25,000 apprenticeship places. We also welcome the discussions with the UK Government and the European initiative. I think that we must complement such work rather than work against it, and in that respect we need to bring together all Governments, whether in Scotland, Westminster or Brussels.

If our young people are to gain employment, they must first be employable. That still presents significant challenges, not least because the skills that the workforce of tomorrow will need are hard to predict with any certainty. We need to accept that the job market is much more fluid these days and that applicants require a host of transferable skills if they are to be wholly successful. We know that employers too often express considerable concern about the significant numbers of our school leavers and, indeed, graduates who do not possess the right skills to adapt to the workplace. Therefore, last week it was encouraging to see that problem being confronted by Skills Development Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority, which will soon offer a work-ready qualification. Although I am sure that some will argue, with some justification, that that should not be necessary, anything that can help to place more focus on the problem is to be warmly welcomed. We need only listen to the policy executive of the Confederation of British Industry or to the Scottish Chambers of Commerce to understand how prevalent the problem is.

Angela Constance: I appreciate that some people with significant needs are very far away from the labour market, but evidence from the UK Commission for Employment and Skills shows that employers who recruit young people are satisfied, by and large, with their work readiness. What young people lack is experience, which is just down to their youth.

Liz Smith: I thank the minister for making that point because I am just about to come to it. Members in the chamber who attended the meeting today of the parliamentary cross-party group on colleges and universities will know that that exact point was made at the meeting.

The cross-party group considered work that is being done at Robert Gordon University, Edinburgh Napier University and Queen Margaret University, and college representatives made the point that there is improvement on the whole, although there remains a very significant number

of employers who do not feel that young people or graduates have the right skills for the workplace. We have to treat that issue very seriously.

Also raised at today's cross-party group meeting was the issue that the onus of finding a work placement very much falls on the individual, rather than provision being made by schools, colleges and universities. Some wonderful initiatives were discussed at the cross-party group. If there are models that breed success, with youngsters not only finding a suitable placement but being able to find a regular job after it, we must consider them seriously.

Unquestionably, schools are the institutions that lay the foundations for work experience. Foremost is the need for good standards of literacy and numeracy, which are too often absent in too many youngsters. By no means does that apply to all—far from it—but, for too many, there is a problem. Scotland is not performing nearly well enough, and I make the case again that the curriculum for excellence—for which there is firm support—can only be part of the process.

We need to ensure that curriculum for excellence is complemented by greater rigour in the basic skills, particularly in primary school. Those two things do not work against each other—they are complementary. There is a strong message for us all, which has increasingly been coming through from colleges and universities: in too many cases, the basic skills are lacking, and we need to do something about that. It is incumbent on us all to ensure that we put forward positive policy suggestions as to how we make things work. The Scottish Conservatives put that point firmly on record.

Colleges and universities are playing their role, but they will be constrained if we cannot send them more articulate pupils. Those institutions clearly recognise the need to collaborate effectively. According to a CBI report, those with the strongest links are delivering the best opportunities.

We have seen a lot about modern languages in the press recently. Modern languages are crucial to our youngsters' success. The trading statistics make it very clear why our youngsters need modern languages. At the moment, we have a problem, which we rehearsed last week and which comes down to what is on offer in our core subjects and the support that we can give through colleges and universities.

I repeat that we are happy to support the Government's motion and the Labour amendment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now come to the open debate. Speeches should be six minutes—with a bit of leeway for interventions at this stage.

15:03

Mark McDonald (North East Scotland) (SNP):

It was interesting that Liz Smith finished on the subject of modern languages. I recently visited Danestone primary school in Aberdeen, which is in my former council ward, and I learned about the positive work that is being done there around the teaching of Mandarin Chinese to primary school pupils. Visa restrictions are a difficulty for the scheme to introduce Mandarin, as the system does not allow Chinese teachers to come and teach in Scotland on two to three-year secondments. They are only being awarded 12-month visas, with the potential—but no guarantee—of a 12-month extension. I hope that the work that I know the Scottish Government is doing will help to persuade the UK Government to consider that scheme sympathetically for a possible relaxation of the visa restrictions. I hope that we can count on Liz Smith's support—perhaps she can use her influence over the UK Government.

It was my great privilege to be invited to speak at the launch of the Prince's Trust get into energy event at the Marcliffe Hotel in Aberdeen on 22 April. At the event, we heard moving testimony from a Prince's Trust ambassador, Marie Cope—a young Aberdeen mum whose life turned around through work with the Prince's Trust programme. Marie began skipping school at a very young age, and quickly fell into bad company, finding herself involved in abusive relationships and substance misuse. She became a single mother saddled with significant financial debts and in constant fear of visits to her home from debt collectors, which led to her developing a severe fear of opening the door when someone knocked at it. Thanks to the Prince's Trust's get into retail programme, Marie was able to remove herself from some of the negative influences that she was surrounded by. She was able to turn her life around and is now a youth ambassador for the Prince's Trust and a strong testimony to the success of the Prince's Trust programmes in helping vulnerable young people to turn their lives around and get into work.

That is what the focus of the get into energy programme was about. The event was held during north-east business week and served as a good example of how large local employers—particularly in the oil and gas sector, which, as we know, is extremely prominent in the north-east of Scotland—can use their influence and expertise to make a difference to disadvantaged young people and use their corporate social responsibility budgets and departments to best effect by investing in young people, who may become their staff in the future.

There is a clear correlation between youth unemployment and mental health issues, and

between youth unemployment and growing up in some of the more deprived communities under the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. By investing in schemes such as get into energy and other Prince's Trust schemes, companies can make a targeted difference and try to mitigate the effect of austerity—and we know that austerity hits hardest those who were vulnerable before a recession. Through promoting those programmes and companies' involvement in them, we can make a targeted difference to those people, who probably most need targeted support and assistance to gain access to the workforce.

The energy leadership group is currently of particular interest in the north-east. It is a group of energy companies that come together to provide opportunities to disadvantaged young people, mostly from the north-east of Scotland. The scheme works by companies paying money to the Prince's Trust and, in return, the young people go on to their training and mentoring programmes and potentially go on to work for them. The companies provide internships and training schemes for young people who are interested in the sector and issue development awards. It is clear that not everybody who goes into the scheme will subsequently find employment in the company with which they are involved, but the fact that they get an opportunity to develop as an individual will stand them in far better stead when they go into the jobs market than perhaps would be the case if the scheme did not exist.

I want to mention the work of the young Scotland's got talent campaign, which is for young people with learning disabilities and young people on the autistic spectrum. The campaign helps them to access the employment support services that they need—specifically, it is for those who are able to take part in employment and want to do so. It takes the form of a roadshow at various venues across Scotland and is organised jointly by the Scottish Consortium for Learning Disability, Enable Scotland and Values Into Action Scotland. It gathers together young people with learning disabilities and young people on the autistic spectrum, their families, professional bodies and public bodies, including colleges and Government agencies, to share ideas, experiences and opportunities for gaining employment and further skills. The fact that it brings together individuals who would benefit from supported employment schemes and organisations that have the capacity to provide them helps to make links and connections for people who can often find it difficult to access the jobs market.

The next event is to be held in the Grampian region, at the Aberdeen arts centre, on Wednesday, 5 June. I hope that the minister considers this an invitation to go up to Aberdeen, visit the event and see for herself the work that is

being done. I know that the Glasgow event in 2010 was attended by 350 young people and that almost 400 more wanted to attend it but were not able to do so because of the size of the venue. That demonstrates the capacity and appetite out there.

In Aberdeen, my colleague Gordon Townson, who is in the Aberdeen City Council Scottish National Party group, has promoted a youth employment strategy for the council through a notice of motion to the council. Aberdeen's youth employment rate is well above the national average, but it is quite clear from the debate and the Government's actions that we cannot be complacent.

The schemes that I have highlighted plus the actions that the Scottish Government and other agencies are taking demonstrate that we are taking the matter very seriously.

15:09

Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab): The Government's motion refers to the fall in youth unemployment over 12 months and in my Central Scotland region there has been a drop in unemployment consistent with that trend. However, we must remember that the levels of youth unemployment in places such as Falkirk and Lanarkshire have remained above the national average for some time now and that the national average itself is still too high. Many of the communities that I represent are not just trying to cope with the rise in unemployment that came after the banking crash; they are still dealing with the legacy of unemployment and industrial decline over 30 years. Too many families and communities have experienced two or three generations of worklessness and, with levels of long-term unemployment remaining stubborn, this Government must work even harder to prevent a fourth.

This afternoon I will talk not only about how we can raise employment levels but about how we can use training to help young people enter the labour market and secure continuing employment as—we hope—the economy recovers. I also want to stress the role of two different groups that, although absolutely crucial in responding to youth unemployment in Scotland, can often be overlooked: training providers and local authorities.

The challenges confronting our universities and colleges have been well documented and others have spoken about the difficulties facing further education, in particular the impact of the Scottish Government's disproportionate cuts to college budgets. According to Government statistics, however, more than 5 per cent of all those young

people who reach positive destinations when they leave publicly funded secondary schools actually go straight into training, and many of those who become unemployed or go down other routes will also participate in some kind of training programme later in their lives. Although, historically, the Scottish Government and Skills Development Scotland have maintained a good relationship with Scotland's training providers, that relationship appears to have become strained with the transition to the new employability fund, which effectively replaces get ready for work, training for work, the new college learning programme, targeted pathways to apprenticeships and the third sector challenge fund. That is a wide-ranging set of changes and my concern—and, as I understand it, the concern of many training providers—is that the change has been introduced without enough preparatory work or adequate consultation with the sector. Our young people deserve more than a rushed job.

I am also concerned that the allocation of the employability fund is creating duplication and complications that need not exist. Training providers find the procurement process difficult enough and can all too easily be swamped when contracts go out to tender. At a time when the Scottish Government is trying to simplify public procurement, I cannot understand why it appears to be replacing a single funding agency with 32 different set-ups for 32 different authorities.

Further to last week's debate on the voluntary sector, the Scottish Government agreed that there is a case for three-year funding and longer-term contracts, given that annual contracting can create uncertainty and make it difficult for charities to plan budgets. I must stress to the minister that extending the length of training contracts would remove a substantial and recurring administrative burden from training providers and help suppliers to budget for, say, property, training equipment and staffing costs. Surely we all want our training providers to be given the space to concentrate on what they do best: training.

I must also stress the importance of local authorities, which play a crucial leadership role in developing their areas' economic potential and boosting employment and training opportunities. We can learn a lot from best practice and partnership working at a local level. Indeed, there is no shortage of good examples from the three local authorities that my region covers and their key strategic partners. My future's in Falkirk, North Lanarkshire's working and South Lanarkshire works 4 u are three vital economic development initiatives that assist young people and local people more generally with job seeking and training.

I emphasise the importance of wage subsidy by highlighting South Lanarkshire's youth jobs fund, which provides a 50 per cent wage subsidy for up to 50 weeks for 16 and 17-year-olds; indeed, where it can, the council will even help employers with training costs. That great example has already been taken up by 80 different companies and we can learn from it if we are serious about intervening in the labour market and turning community jobs Scotland into what it should be—a new future jobs fund for Scotland.

The minister talked about a very welcome decline in youth unemployment but we have some way to go if we are to bring those levels down further, learn from best practice and give young people the skills that they need to take advantage of the upturn when the recovery eventually comes.

15:15

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands)

(SNP): Scotland's young people are the key to our country's future prosperity, which is why, from 2012 to 2015, the Scottish Government is harnessing more than £80 million of funding to support youth employment. The money will support a range of initiatives, including opportunities for all, the employer recruitment incentive, the use of European structural funds to support business growth and youth employment, a fund to support young people into opportunities that are linked to major cultural and sporting events that are hosted in Scotland, graduate recruitment schemes and loans to young entrepreneurs.

At the beginning of this month the Scottish Government announced that Scottish business is backing the certificate of work readiness. The Federation of Small Businesses, CBI Scotland and large companies such as Diageo and Scottish Power have endorsed the scheme, which Skills Development Scotland piloted. The scheme targets 16 to 19-year-olds and consists of college-based learning and 190 hours of real-life work experience. Training and educational maintenance allowances are available to young people who take part. The certificate will help to allay the concerns of employers who might otherwise have no way of knowing whether a young person is fit for work.

The modern apprenticeship scheme again passed the Government's target of 25,000 apprenticeships, and nearly 3,000 more 16 to 24-year-olds started a modern apprenticeship than did so in the previous year. A survey of Scottish employers' views of modern apprenticeships reported high levels of satisfaction. Some 83 per cent of employers were satisfied with the quality of training and 85 per cent were satisfied with the relevance of the training. Some 75 per cent of

employers viewed modern apprenticeships as vital or important to their businesses, and 96 per cent reported that apprentices were better able to do their job after completing their training.

The skills and experience that modern apprentices gained meant that 92 per cent of apprentices were in work six months after completing their training—79 per cent of those people were in full-time employment.

In the briefing that it provided for this debate, the Construction Industry Training Board said that it continues to support the modern apprenticeship scheme, despite the downturn in industry. Last year there were 1,300 new apprentices—that is up 15 per cent on the previous year.

Difficulties still face the construction sector, which is not helped by the UK Government cutting Scotland's capital budget by 25 per cent. There is recognition that the industry faces a retirement time bomb, because the number of construction workers who are under 24 has nearly halved in the past 20 years. Companies continue to recruit apprentices into a variety of roles, to develop skills and gain experience—if they do not do so, there will be a skills shortage when the industry returns to growth.

The Scottish Government's employer recruitment incentive scheme will operate in partnership with local authorities to help small and medium-sized companies to develop and expand, providing jobs and experience for young people as they do so. The £25 million scheme, which is supported by EU funding, will offer an incentive to recruit young people aged between 16 and 24.

The FSB's report, "Micros Untapped: Realising the employment potential of micro-businesses", which was published in November 2012, noted:

"Micro-businesses (businesses with fewer than 10 employees) make up nearly 94% of Scottish businesses and provide 27% of the private sector jobs in Scotland."

The FSB went on to say:

"Over 40% of unemployed people who find work in the private sector go to work in a micro-business or become self-employed."

The report noted that small businesses face a range of risks and difficulties, from lack of recruitment experience to a lack of knowledge of employment law, many of which can be resolved if national agencies, small business bodies and local agencies provide support. I hope that the Scottish Government's employer recruitment incentive scheme and the certificate of work readiness will encourage many microbusinesses to start recruiting and growing.

The Scottish Government's make young people your business initiative highlights what young people can bring to an organisation. The

development of young talent can help in relation to succession planning, unplanned retirement and skills shortages.

By employing a young person and supporting them through a modern apprenticeship, employers can gain skills tailored to their needs. Young people bring creativity, innovation and a willingness to learn and will support business growth.

Scotland continues to perform better than the UK in headline youth measures, with lower unemployment, higher employment and lower inactivity. Over the past year there has been a drop of 29,000 in youth unemployment in Scotland. The labour force survey published in April identified the youth unemployment rate at 16 per cent compared to a UK rate of nearly 21 per cent. Although we continue to improve and outperform the UK, our youth unemployment figure is still too high and we need to learn from our European neighbours such as Austria, Germany and the Netherlands how they have managed to have relatively low youth unemployment of less than 10 per cent.

The minister said that she supports the proposed European youth guarantee to offer unemployed young people a job, an apprenticeship, a place in education or a traineeship once they reach four months of unemployment.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Gordon MacDonald: I am nearly finished.

The difficulty is that the UK Government is responsible for schemes such as the youth contract and the work programme here in Scotland and has so far declined to take part in the European youth guarantee. We need the full powers of an independent country so that we can devise economic policies to grow our economy and reduce youth unemployment to those low European levels.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): I point out that there is plenty of time for interventions should members wish to take them. That is of course entirely a matter for them.

15:21

Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I had to move desks, so I will just reassemble my papers and gather my thoughts. I should declare an interest: I am a councillor on Fife Council.

I am pleased to speak in the debate and to return to the issue of youth employment—the subject of my maiden speech in the chamber some four months ago. In that speech, I

highlighted some of the work that local authorities are doing to tackle youth unemployment and to provide opportunities for young people. In particular, I flagged up Fife Council's £5 million investment in apprenticeships for unemployed young people. I will now return to the opportunities that have been created by that three-year fund, because we know that youth unemployment spans Scotland in urban and rural areas alike.

Like many regions, Mid Scotland and Fife is a diverse and mixed economy, but traditional, land-based skills and jobs in many rural areas are central to the employment opportunities in the region. A recent report by Scottish Natural Heritage estimated that nearly one in seven of all full-time jobs in Scotland—about 242,000 jobs—are supported by economic activity that is linked to a sustainable development approach.

That is why I am pleased that the latest development from the Fife youth job contract is that 85 training opportunities have been created, which will provide apprenticeships in key rural skills ranging from working on golf courses or core paths to working in timber and landscaping, woodland management and environment conservation. Businesses in rural areas need to be able to employ well trained and highly skilled staff. Equally, young people who live in rural areas need to be able to reach employment opportunities that are accessible, rewarding and of high quality.

What has been central to the successful establishment of such training opportunities is the partnership working of the local authority with a range of training providers, including Fife Golf Trust, the River Leven development, Living Solutions (Scotland), the Centre for Stewardship at Falkland and the Ecology Centre. Many of those rural skills training partners are offering not just apprenticeships but other opportunities. The contribution and central importance of employers to developing opportunities for young people have been highlighted in the debate.

The Ecology Centre, which is based at Kinghorn Loch, is an excellent example of a social enterprise that is making a difference to its community. On a recent visit there I met young people who are gaining work experience through the volunteer placement opportunities that are being offered. Crucially, those opportunities, some of which are provided in partnership with Project Scotland, provide financial support to the young people taking part, with a living allowance and expenses for travel and subsistence available, so that a young person's circumstances do not dictate their ability to participate. For many young people at the Ecology Centre, it provides a route of opportunity and a route out of long-term unemployment.

In many rural parts of Scotland, besides the challenge of finding jobs and training, there are the challenges of remoteness, connectivity and high transport costs—or no transport at all—which must be addressed before young people can even begin to access employment or skills development opportunities. It is not just politicians in the Scottish Parliament who are saying that. Recently elected Fife members of the Scottish Youth Parliament have told me that transport, which plays a key role in giving young people access to college, jobs and leisure opportunities, is one of their key concerns. It was a key part of many MSYPs' manifestos.

I welcome the commitment to deliver 25,000 modern apprenticeships each year, but the drop of 29,000 in the youth unemployment figures in the past year leaves some questions unanswered. We need to know where those young people are. Have they gone to college, taken up a training place or got a job, or have they fallen out of the system altogether? That matters because we need to know which approaches are working and which are not. We need to do the very best that we can for all young people in Scotland.

Last summer, Perth Citizens Advice Bureau carried out a study into the employment issues that young people face in that part of Mid Scotland and Fife. The report of that study, which I recommend to members, highlighted that

“the greatest percentage of people claiming”

jobseekers allowance

“as a proportion of the resident population of the same age are the 18-24 age group”.

The report also found that many of the young people who were in work were in temporary employment and faced greater exposure to poor working practices, the withholding of pay, enforced overtime or unfair dismissal.

We need to look beyond the statistics and at the outcomes that are being delivered. We must ensure that young people get the skills, experience and confidence that will be for them a passport to lifelong learning, satisfying employment and a secure income, which will enable them to support Scotland's economy today and tomorrow.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Stewart Stevenson, who has a generous six minutes.

15:27

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Thank you very much, Presiding Officer. I will try to come in in under half an hour.

I listened with great interest to Ken Macintosh's speech and I take in good heart the preparedness

to make common ground on the essential core of the debate. That is very welcome.

Ken Macintosh mentioned that some of the statistics on which we rely are experimental statistics. It may be of value to look at the Office for National Statistics, which is where the statistics come from, to see what their being experimental means. It is not about their being imperfect or unreliable.

All new statistical series are initially designated as experimental until there is a long enough run of a series to see that the figures are truly reflective and reliable. Therefore, although Ken Macintosh is correct in saying that we should not bet the bank on an experimental set of statistics, it is equally important to realise that what are currently designated experimental statistics are produced by the same method and to exactly the same professional high standard, with an expectation on the part of the Office for National Statistics that we will end up adopting them.

Not all experimental statistics are published. They may be developed and used internally for 12 or 24 months before they escape into the light of day. However, it is recognised that this is such a fundamentally important area of public discourse that the statistics should be published while they bear the formal, but not commonly used, designation of being experimental. I thought that it might be useful to underpin the debate with that explanation from the Office for National Statistics.

The context of youth unemployment is very different from that which I and others of my age experienced when we were youngsters. I studied at university and graduated with an extremely modest degree—my degree is spectacular for its modesty rather than anything else—yet I had three good job offers. Furthermore, when I was a student and looked for a job in the summer, at Christmas or at Easter, I never failed to get one. The economic environment was very different then. Today, students from the university sector who have a second degree may not even get a second look from employers, so we are in a very different position in the round.

In the north-east of Scotland, as Mark McDonald delineated in his excellent speech, we perhaps face different issues that relate more to a lack of appropriately trained staff than a lack of jobs for people to go into. In comparison with other constituencies in Scotland, my constituency has one of the lowest proportions of school leavers who go into tertiary education. The reason for that is a good reason, in that school leavers can go into employment without having to do further training. Nonetheless, it is important that we provide support to people through modern apprenticeships, given that the comparatively easy transition into work that is experienced in the

north-east of Scotland does not necessarily equip people for a lifetime of employment.

Therefore, I very much support Banff and Buchan College and Aberdeen College, which have focused their efforts on providing training that is appropriate to local needs. Largely, that means engineering training. We have had excellent support from local employers, such as Macduff Shipyards and Score in Peterhead, which employ huge numbers of apprentices and, indeed, advertise for apprentices. Like all apprenticeships, those are linked to employment. It is particularly good that a huge proportion of those who complete an apprenticeship remain in employment six months later. Training and employment are closely linked and are very important.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):

The member paints an encouraging picture of the north-east. Does he think that schools in other parts of Scotland should do more to point young people towards engineering and such jobs?

Stewart Stevenson: John Mason makes a very valid point, which I might extend by saying that we should encourage not just young men but young women to go into engineering. It is quite interesting how many of the high-performing apprentices in the north-east turn out to be young women who have acquired mathematical skills in school that they have gone on to apply in college and in employment.

The North Sea oil industry, for example, will provide many decades of employment, which could mean a lifetime's employment for those who so choose. Renewable energy will provide similar opportunities. Therefore, as in the rest of Scotland, the north-east's college sector is very important in supporting increased employment for our youngsters.

Of course, it is more expensive to train someone in engineering skills than it is to train people in certain other disciplines. For example, for health and safety reasons—quite properly—there need to be two people in the room to supervise any activity involving lathes, so the costs are higher. Historically, until this Government engaged with the college sector in a different way, it was difficult to get adequate funding for courses that cost significantly more.

I am pleased that the Scottish Government is almost invariably finding space to support youngsters in apprenticeships through the mechanism of the contracts that it lets. When I was a minister, I was delighted to meet apprentices whose jobs had been created directly as a result of the Scottish Government placing contracts. The Government is doing at its own hand the kinds of things that it should be doing,

and it is creating the educational environment for people to acquire the skills that they will need.

I conclude by noting that, although we have quite properly heard a lot about people in areas of much greater stress that are not as lucky as the north-east, we have pockets of deprivation in the north-east, too. Even in my constituency, which is one of the best-performing constituencies in terms of employment and where the unemployment rate is one third of the Scottish average, we have an area that was included in the top 10 per cent of areas of multiple deprivation. I am delighted to say that some of the initiatives that the Government has taken are starting to make a difference there.

In youth employment, as in so many things, the Government is doing a terrific job with the powers that it has. Would that we had the powers to do more.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Liam McArthur, who has a generous six minutes.

15:35

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Thank you, Presiding Officer, although, like Stewart Stevenson, I had hoped to further burnish my reputation for pith.

I welcome the debate, which has generally been constructive, and I am happy to confirm that we will support Angela Constance's motion and the amendment in the name of Mr Macintosh. Earlier in the debate, I was struck that some of the issues that we discussed in yesterday's debate on early learning and childcare are relevant to what we are discussing today. That is not because such measures offer quick fixes but because the decisions that we take on that now will have an impact in due course on the contribution that young people can and will make in supporting Scotland's economy in the longer term.

On the substance of today's debate, it is right for the Government to highlight the drop in the youth unemployment figures in the most recent labour force study. Likewise, Mr Macintosh is right to enter a few caveats and health warnings, although I do not detect a great deal of complacency about the figures. There is also a need to acknowledge that the long-term unemployed figure is stubbornly going in the wrong direction. As Liz Smith said, all of us agree that the youth unemployment figures are still too high.

The reasons why progress is being made are many and various. Many of them relate to the targeted interventions that have been mentioned and which are in the motion but, as Ken Macintosh said, there are other wider factors. The approach absolutely must involve employers offering job training and work experience opportunities. The

Scottish Government can take satisfaction from the way in which the modern apprenticeships programme is working, although it would be interesting to know the breakdown for modern apprenticeships in the private, public and third sectors.

The certificate of work readiness looks like a positive initiative and seems to offer the opportunity for individuals to demonstrate their potential while gaining experience. That chimes with something that the cross-party group on colleges and universities heard at lunch time about practice-based learning. Professor Stonehouse, the dean of Edinburgh Napier University business school, illustrated the point by asking us to imagine what it would be like if we went to college or university without being able to swim and were learning to swim through a class-based course that set out the key components that are necessary to swim. The experience of immersion in the place of work is critical and helps individuals to develop the skills that they need.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): On that point, does the member accept that, traditionally and for as long as anybody can remember, employers have had to accept some responsibility, too, so that the young people whom they take into their employment learn what is required of them by doing the job? Does he agree that employers should still have that responsibility today?

Liam McArthur: That is a fair point. Whatever initiatives we put in place, we cannot shift the onus too far away from that. However, in the current economic circumstances, we need to recognise that it is in nobody's interests for employers to shed workers or not take on people in apprenticeship and training roles simply because finances are tight.

I take exception to the Government's slightly churlish attempt in the motion to ignore the UK Government's role. The motion rightly draws attention to the contribution of the Scottish Government, EU funding and local councils, but it makes no reference whatever to the UK Government's youth contract. That is unfortunate, because there is £1 billion of investment to help young unemployed people in the 18 to 24-year-old category to get a foot on the ladder.

That scheme, which is targeted at the longer-term unemployed, provides wage incentives to allow employers to claim up to £2,275 to help to cover costs such as national insurance and to fund extra training and supervision. That dovetails well with many initiatives by the Scottish Government and others. As I said in an intervention earlier, the scheme has similarities to the approach in Germany, which, as various members have acknowledged, has a particularly good track record in the area.

I have touched on those who are furthest from the job market in previous debates. I appreciate that they include a wide number of different groups—Mark McDonald reflected on that well in his thoughtful speech—but the figures that we have are not encouraging.

I note that Barnardo's, for example, says that 36 per cent of looked-after children are still looking for employment six months after leaving school. That is almost four times the average for school leavers as a whole. The figures for further education are similarly poor.

Barnardo's argues strongly for third sector involvement at a local level in initiatives such as opportunities for all and youth action plans. It also points to

"a serious gap in long term, nurturing and supportive provision for care leavers".

Clearly, work is under way and there are programmes that are working well, but we should not lose sight of the specific needs of care leavers and the more intensive engagement that they require.

In preparing for the debate, I was also struck by the briefing from the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, which said:

"Young people are expected to work in new environments and sectors for new and changing organisations, and to do so with greater flexibility. The younger generation needs the skills relevant to a changing economy, and the Scottish Government can help to address this need by continuing to invest in youth enterprise and entrepreneurship as part of its skills strategy."

Like Iain Gray, I was involved in earlier initiatives such as determined to succeed. They are now far better embedded in education, but the Carnegie UK Trust seemed to indicate that, although that effect is reflected well at primary and secondary levels, it is perhaps more dilute in colleges. That is surprising, given that much of the collaborative approach in energy and hospitality, about which we heard at the cross-party group at lunch time, seems to contradict the trust's findings.

I will touch on the college cuts that Mr Macintosh's amendment mentions. I and my party have taken a strong interest in that issue over the past couple of years. In its briefing for the debate, Colleges Scotland talks of

"a growing disparity of esteem"

that is leading to a reduction in funding. That chimes with something that Professor Stonehouse from Edinburgh Napier University talked about: the false divide between more vocational and academic streams of education. We must also recognise the impact that the cuts are having on outcomes for older learners.

The minister drew attention to the recent *Economist* article on the phenomenon of youth unemployment worldwide. She was right to point out that it concluded with some encouragement. The news of the recent downward trajectory of youth unemployment is part of the pattern and gives some cause for optimism, but there can be no let-up in targeted interventions, particularly practice-based learning and opportunities to develop skills in the workplace, which are delivering results.

Collaboration by both of Scotland's Governments, our whole education sector, councils and the business community is an essential part of what the minister referred to as an all-Scotland approach. There are areas—such as college funding, support for those who are furthest from the labour market and even early learning—where more attention is needed, but I am happy to support the Government's motion and Labour's amendment.

15:43

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I welcome the debate and thank the Scottish Government for securing it, because it is vital to ensure that Scotland's youngsters have the opportunity to make their way in the world of work.

We are all acutely aware of the economic circumstances—the economic difficulties that we have experienced in Scotland and elsewhere over the past few years. Young people in many countries are bearing the brunt of that downturn. In Spain and Greece, for example, there are dramatic levels of youth unemployment.

Therefore, it is good that the figures in Scotland are moving in the right direction. The claimant count figures for March 2013 for young people aged 18 to 24 show a decrease of 5,500—some 12.6 per cent—over the year. The labour force survey for the period from December 2012 to February 2013 shows that youth employment in Scotland was at 56.7 per cent as opposed to the UK position of 49.7 per cent.

Youth unemployment in Scotland is 16.1 per cent. That is still too high, but it compares favourably with the UK rate of 20.6 per cent. It is clear that far too many young people in Scotland are still not in employment, and we must do what we can to assist them into work. However, it is important to record the good news—the figures are going the right way. The context is that youth employment is higher in Scotland than it is across the UK and youth unemployment is lower. As the minister pointed out, our youth employment rate is bettered by only five other European countries.

However, it is important to do what we can to help those who still need assistance, and I want to

take a look at what the Scottish Government is doing in that regard. I turn first to the modern apprenticeship scheme, which comes in for criticism from some quarters. We need to acknowledge that the target of providing 25,000 modern apprenticeships has been met for the second year in a row. In 2012-13, there were 2,126 modern apprenticeships in North Lanarkshire—of which my constituency is part—alone.

Looking beyond the headline figures, we can see that the scheme is being targeted at the young. It is, of course, available to older people, but it is being focused on the young. In 2011-12, 16,791 modern apprenticeships were for 16 to 24-year-olds; in 2012-13, the figure was 19,681, which represents an increase of nearly 3,000 in a year. Some 77 per cent of modern apprenticeships were for the 16-to-24 cohort in 2012-13. Therefore, it is clear that the scheme is being more effectively focused on the people whom we are talking about today—the young people of Scotland.

It is important to look at the quality of the scheme. In a survey that was carried out in 2013 of Scottish employers' views of modern apprenticeships, 96 per cent of employers reported that MA completers were better able to do their jobs. Employers reported high levels of satisfaction with the relevance and the quality—the figures were 85 and 83 per cent respectively—of the training that is provided, and 75 per cent of employers viewed modern apprenticeships as being important or vital to their business. Of those employers who currently offer MAs, 83 per cent plan to do so in future. Research by Skills Development Scotland shows that, of those people who complete modern apprenticeships, 92 per cent are in work six months later and 79 per cent are in full-time employment.

That is not to say that there are not issues with modern apprenticeships. Colleges Scotland suggested that one of the principal barriers to increasing interest in them is

“the lack of knowledge of young people, parents/carers and school teaching staff and a historical view that apprenticeship should not be a young person's first choice.”

It would be interesting to hear the minister's perspective on that but, by any assessment, it is clear that modern apprenticeships are being focused on the right people and that their quality is held in high regard by those employers who take part in the scheme.

Liam McArthur: Mr Hepburn will have heard my remarks about modern apprenticeships. Does he accept that there are some concerns about the age profile for them in particular sectors and in particular parts of the country, where the age

profile might not sit as well with the focus on the under-24 age group?

Jamie Hepburn: I reiterate that, in 2011-12, 16 to 24-year-olds comprised 63.5 per cent of young apprentices, whereas in 2012-13 they comprised 77 per cent of them, so it is clear that the figures are moving in the right direction.

I want to focus on the college sector, which Mr Macintosh mentioned and which has been prone to being the subject of much comment of late—although not so much, I noticed, by the Labour candidate for the forthcoming Aberdeen Donside by-election. We should celebrate the good record of the college sector. In 2011-12, colleges delivered nearly 120,000 full-time equivalent places, which was 3 per cent above the level of the Scottish Government's commitment. There has been a 36 per cent increase in the average hours of learning per student and a 1 per cent increase in funded FTE places between 2006-07 and 2011-12.

This issue was raised with me when I was engaged with a college in my area. There was always concern about certainty of budgets for colleges, although we know that there is certainty for colleges for the next two years. There is stability in funding from this year to the next. The closest comparable budget in England is down by 15.7 per cent, so once again we can see that much good work is being done in the college sector.

Ken Macintosh: Although I am anxious that the debate does not descend into an exchange of statistics, I cannot let Jamie Hepburn's picture of the Scottish college scene go unchallenged. Does he recognise that there has been a huge drop, measured in the tens of thousands, in head count—the number of people attending college in Scotland—over the past five years? Is he aware that part-time students have lost their places, a third of people with learning difficulties have lost their courses, and people are queueing up to get into Scotland's colleges? Mr Hepburn makes a virtue out of stability of funding, but that stability is a £25 million cut this year and another £25 million cut next year.

Jamie Hepburn: We all know about the funding situation across the UK, which has clear consequences for the funding that is available in Scotland. It is a set of circumstances that Mr Macintosh is presently engaged in a campaign to ensure remains the case. I reiterate my point that the closest comparable budget for colleges in England is down 15.7 per cent. That has clear consequences for the money that is available for colleges in Scotland. I also reiterate the point that I made about the number of places at colleges. I referred earlier to "nearly 120,000" places, but let me give you the exact figure: colleges delivered

119,448 full-time equivalent places in 2011-12, which was 3 per cent above the commitment that was given. That is a good record.

I had hoped to focus on a number of other initiatives that the Scottish Government is taking forward. However, I will conclude by saying that there are many good examples of what is happening on the ground. There is still a challenge out there, but I am confident that the minister is up to that challenge and I look forward to seeing her take her work further in the future.

15:52

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. These issues are some of the most important problems with which we have to contend. I know that the minister shares my passion for this subject, because—although I do not want to give away a lady's age—like me, she grew up in the Thatcher years and watched as devastation happened in many parts of the country. At that time, youth unemployment rates were very high indeed in many areas, including in the north-east. Some of the initiatives that came about—and which, it could be said, were frowned on by central Government at that time—still thrive in the north-east today.

As my colleagues Mark McDonald and Stewart Stevenson have said, in the north-east we are in a slightly different position from many other parts of the country in terms of youth employment. However, Mr Stevenson and Mr McDonald rightly pointed out that there are still difficulties in areas of social deprivation and for folks with special needs. We need to counter some of the difficulties that still exist.

Recent research for north-east business week 2013 that was conducted by the Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce, the FSB, the Scottish Council for Development and Industry and Enterprise North East Trust, said that 71 per cent of businesses were going to expand and grow within the next three years. We need to be able to match the skills to the growth that is going to take place.

Stewart Stevenson: Is the member aware that *Aberdeen Business News* reports today that, in the past year, 50 per cent of all of Scotland's new office lettings were in the north-east?

Kevin Stewart: I did not know that. I have not read all of today's news, but I am grateful to Stewart Stevenson for that. It shows again that the economy of the north-east is growing.

Businesses in the north-east have looked very carefully at how they are going to staff up in these years of expansion. The survey that I mentioned

says that, in the north-east, on average 8 per cent of operating budgets are being spent on learning development. That is a healthy sign, although in some areas businesses could probably spend a little more. Beyond that, I know that those companies are very grateful for the support that the Government is providing.

At the outset of her speech, the minister said that we must have

“the right talent for ... immediate and future needs.”

I could not agree more. Many initiatives in my neck of the woods and elsewhere are trying to ensure that we do have the right talent. In my constituency, ITCA training, which I communicated recently with the minister about, is one of the organisations that are making sure that the right talent is in place. We have also heard from Mark McDonald about the energy leadership group and the Prince's Trust, which are doing the same. I am very pleased that the Government has a commitment to the energy skills academy, which will also ensure that that right talent is in place.

At this moment, in the city of Aberdeen there are four applicants for every 10 jobs. Aberdeen is the best place in the whole of these islands in which to get a job at the moment. We must also be able to allow young folk the flexibility to move to those jobs. That is not a case of Norman Tebbit's “Get on your bike”, which was nonsense. We must create opportunities for people to go and study and take up work in areas where there are those jobs.

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Would Kevin Stewart recognise that, as rehearsed in the chamber before, a lot of barriers in the north-east that young people face are about trying to get a bus to their work? That was raised by my colleague Jayne Baxter. People across the north-east, in areas such as Aberdeen and Dundee, are finding it very difficult, because bus services and frequencies are being cut, and the Government has no regulatory system in place to help with that.

Kevin Stewart: In the great city of Aberdeen, the main problem with buses is not services being cut but services being changed and very high bus fares being charged by a company, First, which was born in Aberdeen and seems now to use our city as a cash cow. I would be quite happy to campaign with Ms Marra in Aberdeen to try to get First to change its current charging policies and other ludicrous ideas that it has come up with.

Iain Gray: Will the member take an intervention?

Kevin Stewart: Not at the moment. Let me finish please, Mr Gray.

Frankly, First is doing a disservice not only to the young people of Aberdeen but to all

Aberdonians. It would increase patronage if it listened to some the campaigners who are calling for that decrease in bus fares. While I am on my feet, I have to say that it is not as if First is not making huge profits out of Aberdeen and elsewhere.

I will move on. We have to have the right business case for investing in young people. There should be public-private partnerships to ensure that we provide the right flexible training to allow folk to get the jobs that are out there so that they succeed in the industries of today and tomorrow.

I am convinced that we are helping in all the ways that we can from this place. However, I wish that we had all the levers of power. With that power we could change the tax and benefit system to ensure that we could do even better.

16:00

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab): With a consistently high rate of unemployment in my constituency, it will come as no surprise to colleagues to hear that I take the issue particularly seriously. The situation facing young people is critical. If we do not prepare our young people, there will be no one to take up the jobs that will come along when the economy eventually revives. That is why training places at our colleges remain so important, and why the Scottish Government should be investing more money, not less, in Scotland's colleges.

We must also look at other ways of getting young people into employment. We must be creative and adventurous, reward those projects that succeed and recognise good practice and learn from it. For most projects, funding is key and many struggle to maintain the momentum of schemes even when they have a proven track record.

A project that has worked and which has been recognised for its success is Royston at work. Last year, the Rosemount Development Trust, which is based in the Royston area of my constituency, told me about an idea whose aim was to encourage young people into employment. The trust had never undertaken such a project before, but its enthusiasm, its record in the community and the research that it had undertaken led me to believe that the project had the potential to be successful and was one that I was delighted to support.

The project, which became known as Royston at work, involved partners such as North Glasgow College. It took a group of 12 young people through a six-month-long intensive programme that gave them the skills, confidence and discipline to enable them to apply for further training, jobs and apprenticeships. The programme was not an

easy option for the young people, many of whom had been unemployed since leaving school and who would be considered to be in the cohort described as being furthest from work. It was also a challenge for those most closely involved in delivering the project, such as Maureen Flynn of the Rosemount Development Trust and her board, who took the initiative because they recognised a distinct need in the community. Nicola Connolly, the imaginative and dedicated project co-ordinator who guided the project through to its completion, also deserves to be mentioned.

What has the project achieved and what has happened to the trainees? Of the 12 original participants, 11 have successfully completed the course. That high number of graduates was the result of the project co-ordinator never giving up on the trainees, even in situations where other less resourceful leaders might have lost heart. The 11 trainees completed the national progression award in construction and 10 achieved the PASMA—Prefabricated Access Suppliers and Manufacturers Association—tower scaffolding qualification. Four trainees have entered full-time employment, another four have secured apprenticeships and one has a full-time training place. Another trainee is hoping to be offered an apprenticeship soon, and the eleventh is in a full-time volunteering post. Two trainees have completed their Duke of Edinburgh bronze award; eight others have only one small element left to complete.

All that was achieved in spite of there being little or no support from the Department for Work and Pensions. All but one of the trainees lost their rights to benefits and to travel and subsistence costs simply because they took up a place on the project. For year 2, there are further funding problems, as neither Jobs & Business Glasgow nor Skills Development Scotland has, as yet, confirmed funding for the year.

I very much regret that the DWP takes such a narrow view that such young people, who should be given every possible help and support, are deprived of their benefits even when they are actively taking part in such a project. Organisations such as Skills Development Scotland and Jobs & Business Glasgow should be falling over themselves to help such projects and not putting bureaucratic obstacles in their way.

A number of the young people on the project were, shall we say, known to the police. However, as members might expect, they have—in the words of the police—“fallen off the radar” and are now people with a future whose families are proud of them and who are making a positive contribution to their communities.

I know that I am, to a large extent, preaching to the converted today, as the young people whom I

am speaking about were recognised by the minister when she participated in their awards ceremony a few months ago. I ask her today to use her influence to encourage Skills Development Scotland and Jobs & Business Glasgow to work with the Royston at work project and explain to them that it is well worth investing in. I would also be grateful if the minister would agree to meet me as the constituency MSP, together with the project co-ordinators, to see what other support might be available.

The next year of the programme is now open to applicants, and I want another 12 people to be given a chance to succeed. Twelve more young people who are able to realise a productive future for themselves and their families may not sound like a lot, but for a community the size of Royston it is a significant number, which can grow year on year if we allow it to.

I look forward to a positive response from the minister this afternoon.

16:06

Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands)

(SNP): It is necessary, when considering youth employment, to place the issue in the context of the deepest recession that any of us has ever known. In fact, the economist Stephen Boyle recently told a group of MSPs that it was the worst recession since 1870. Although we are now technically just scraping out of recession again, the economy has at best been flatlining for several years.

Against that background, the ONS statistics, which show a decrease in youth unemployment in Scotland of 29,000 over the year and an increase in youth employment, are a cause for optimism. They represent a heroic effort on the part of the minister and the Scottish Government.

Of course those figures do not give any cause for complacency, but they reveal an achievement that even the most grudging members on the Opposition side of the chamber should recognise. Even those most grudging members should recognise the effort that it represents on the part of all those young folk who are struggling to get a start in their careers in these most difficult times. Not to recognise their achievements is an affront not just to the young people, but to everyone in Scotland who strives to give the next generation the best start to their working lives.

Ken Macintosh: I happily join Mike MacKenzie in paying tribute to young people and their efforts to secure work.

Six months ago, unemployment among young people in Scotland was higher than in the UK, and it is currently lower than the UK average. What

intervention has the Government made in the past six months—which did not exist six months ago—that has made the difference?

Mike MacKenzie: I think that Mr Macintosh will agree that we do not make those interventions and then see an immediate result. Interventions of any type take time to begin to work, and we are now seeing the results of those interventions in the current statistics.

There are those who will argue—quite correctly—that unacceptably high youth unemployment predates the current recession, and that it is a UK problem and not purely a Scottish problem. It is a long-term structural problem that has a lot to do with the long-term mismanagement of the UK economy; with de-industrialisation, deregulation and overdependence on banking; and with steadily growing inequality over the past 30 years.

Inequality is important because it has a disproportionate effect on younger people. It reduces the incentives of work and fosters the belief that normal aspirations are outwith the reach of many people, thereby reinforcing the cultural belief that celebrity and perhaps the lottery offer the only realistic routes out of poverty and undermining the belief that the steady application of effort in a career is worth it. A culture that seems to suggest that some careers are glamorous and exciting and others are drab and unrewarding is not helpful. Unhappily, our education system has sometimes reinforced that view by offering educational courses that are not as well aligned to job and career opportunities as they could be.

In its recent inquiry into underemployment, the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee heard from UK Oil and Gas that it currently faces significant skills shortages and that it anticipates a demand for around 100,000 young people over the coming years. The renewables industry suggests that it has similar shortages and a significant growing demand for young people. That indicates the importance of the Scottish Government's collaboration with industry in initiatives such as the Nigg Skills Academy, which aims to train at least 3,000 younger folk in energy industry skills by 2015. Not only is it immoral that young people are consigned to unemployment when some industries are crying out for new recruits, it is economically inefficient and will stifle those same industries, which offer the greatest prospects for growth. That indicates also the importance of modern apprenticeships, which re-establish the link between training and employment in areas where real career opportunities lie. It is a cause for satisfaction, but not complacency, that 25,000 modern

apprenticeships have been created for the second year running.

Opposition members should have a care when they talk down Scotland's oil industry and our renewable energy potential and when they daily talk down Scotland's future economic prospects, for in doing so they most discourage our younger folk, who deserve much better than that from Scotland's politicians across the political spectrum.

16:12

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): We are asked in this debate to consider the issue of young people supporting Scotland's economy today and tomorrow, but I hope that members will indulge me as I turn first to the past. I recently attended an exhibition at the National Library of Scotland on 11 notable women scientists. The curator, Catherine Booth, said of the event:

"Most of these women are virtually unknown today, but their work is still influencing a new generation of scientists. They are representative of a much bigger group of female Scottish scientists whose achievements we are proud to celebrate."

I will mention just two of the 11 women: Mary Fairfax Somerville—one of our committee rooms is named after her—who was a notable mathematician and astronomer and the first woman elected to the Royal Astronomical Society; and Williamina Fleming, an astronomer who discovered what I believe is one of the most beautiful visions in our heavens—the horse head nebula—as well as many other stars.

I refer to those women of the past to show that Scotland's traditions and reputation in the area of science and technology belong as much to our young women as to our young men. Today, we have notable trailblazers in the same area, including Scotland's Anne Glover, chief scientific adviser to the European Commission.

I turn now to the future of our young people, who are choosing their careers. It is important that our young women are as informed about the skills gaps—especially in our technology markets—that many of my colleagues have identified and discussed in the debate and are as able to take advantage of the opportunities as our young men are. The Royal Academy of Engineering forecasts that the UK will need 104,000 science, technology, engineering and mathematics graduates between now and 2020 to meet demand. A recent article in *The Daily Telegraph* on the EEF report stated:

"One in five young people will need to become an engineer".

The article quotes Terry Scuoler of the EEF saying:

"There is no getting away from the fact that women are substantially under-represented in manufacturing at a time

when industry needs to be tapping into every potential talent pool to access the skills it needs”.

He went on:

“We need a huge national effort to make this happen and government, education, and industry itself all have a major role to play.”

On that note, I commend to the Parliament the work of the Scottish resource centre for women in science, engineering and technology, based at Napier University, which supports young women who are studying in those areas.

There is no doubt that we need young women to recognise the potential of the STEM subjects. However, the system has been described as a broken plumbing system, in that, although we are creating many talented women graduates, they are not staying in their professions. We cannot continue to feed that system without fixing the leaks. The Royal Society of Edinburgh’s “Tapping all our Talents” report explores in some detail the reasons why women are not staying in the science professions.

If we are going to address the barriers that exist for women, we must get very serious about the pay differential. Women are underpaid in many of these areas. There must be a fundamental change, in industry and in academia, to ensure that remuneration and career progression are fair for women, while the overwhelming evidence continues to point to persistent discrimination in that regard.

We have received a great number of briefings for this afternoon’s debate, and they are very welcome. Liam McArthur mentioned a few of them in his speech. I draw members’ attention to the Universities Scotland report, “Taking Pride in the Job: University action on graduate employability”. Mr Macintosh mentioned that he likes to see Scotland outperforming the other parts of the UK, and this is another area where we are doing so. The report says:

“93 per cent of graduates from Scotland’s universities are in the positive destinations”,

which is

“the highest rate of positive destinations in the UK”.

The report is not complacent, however, and it goes on to recommend areas of good practice including work placements—which we have discussed in some detail as being so important—career services and global skills.

Opportunities in science and engineering are open to all young people, whatever stage of their education or training they are at. Modern apprenticeships offer a great opportunity, especially when it comes to the energy skills academy. That is a welcome package, which delivers new employer recruitment initiatives and

which will create more than 10,000 opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises, the importance of which Gordon MacDonald highlighted earlier. Small and medium-sized enterprises can recruit young people, and there will be 290 modern apprenticeships there alone.

There is a lot to be very thankful for in Scotland, although we cannot be complacent. Our modern apprenticeships show that we are delivering for Scotland’s young people, and I am very happy with the movement in Scotland at this time.

There has been a lot of criticism that the data in this area are not giving us all the information that we need. I highlight the “Report of the NEET Workstream”, published in 2005 by the Scottish Executive, which stated, in paragraph 11:

“Overall, a much better understanding of these NEET ‘flow’ issues is essential. Only through this is it possible to develop a truly sophisticated and targeted policy response. But the NEET work-stream has encountered significant limitations with the current information on these issues. As a result, action on improving intelligence about the group is itself one of our key recommendations.”

Despite that being a key recommendation, it has taken the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Bill to bring in the data sharing that will allow us to have a full understanding of what is happening in this area. I am disappointed that the Opposition parties did not support that measure when the Government introduced it.

16:19

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): I am always grateful to have the chance to participate in debates on youth employment, as I believe that there is no issue of greater importance confronting us. I am always happy to see the Minister for Youth Employment in her place on the front bench. I feel that I deserve a little of the credit—or blame—for her being there, given that her appointment followed our demands for such a post some 18 months ago. Although I might have some concerns about some of her policies, I know that this debate on young people and supporting Scotland’s economy today and tomorrow reflects a profound belief that we share: that this country’s economic success and its capacity to drive social justice will be defined by the degree to which we ensure that the boundless potential of our young people is both understood and harnessed.

Therefore, although we should acknowledge recent improvements in the youth unemployment position, we are obliged to examine rigorously the reality behind them. We must follow the advice of Jack Welch to

“Face reality as it is, not as it was or as you wish it to be.”

The reality is that the annual population survey, which is described in the Scottish Government’s

own papers as the more reliable estimate of economic activity, shows that, for 16 to 24-year-olds, unemployment fell last year, but by less than 1 per cent, and that economic inactivity in that age group rose by 2.5 per cent. Some 33,000 16 to 19-year-olds were not in employment, education or training last year. That figure is an increase from the year before. Ken Macintosh was right to point out that the labour force survey, from which the figures in the Government motion are drawn, shows unemployment in the 16 and 17-year-old age group at 38 per cent. For young men, the figure was 46 per cent last year, which is massively high.

Angela Constance: Does Mr Gray accept that although the annual population survey has a larger survey base, the labour force survey figures are reliable, can be used and are the most recent figures? Does he accept that the annual population survey figures do not accommodate the more recent, up-to-date, positive figures?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): I will give Iain Gray his time back.

Iain Gray: The converse of that, of course, is that the annual population surveys allow for blips in short-term figures to be evened out and therefore give more accurate figures over the longer term. However, my point was that the figures for 16 and 17-year-olds are from the labour force survey that the minister extols, and that reflects the reality in my constituency. The 2012 unemployment rate for 16 to 19-year-olds was still twice the figure in 2008. Between 2007 and 2012, long-term youth unemployment in East Lothian increased an unbelievable fifteenfold. That is the reality.

That means that we must redouble our efforts and re-examine the measures that we take. For example, 25,000 apprenticeship starts is great, and it is absolutely right that every one of those in Scotland is attached to work—that is a good thing. However, the programme requires a rather more rigorous critique than Mr Hepburn has previously suggested, because with 10,000 of those places going to those who are already in work, the programme's capacity to address youth unemployment is simply undermined.

Angela Constance: I will be brief. Does Mr Gray accept that it is welcome news that 77 per cent of modern apprenticeship starts last year went to 16 to 24-year-olds? Does he also accept that, under our programme, more modern apprenticeships are going to new starts than they did under Labour? What is his position on the 10,000 places? Will Labour commit to the 25,000 target? What is being proposed?

Iain Gray: The minister really needs to investigate rebuttals when her special advisers

give them to her. The figures that she has from the time when Labour was in power were based on an extremely small survey. The point is that, even if what she says were the case, long-term youth unemployment did not exist in Scotland in those days and the core purpose of the apprenticeship programme was to upskill people in the workforce. We are in a different situation now. That is why the apprenticeship starts need to be used to take young people off the unemployment register.

It is true that too many of the 25,000 apprenticeships are shorter level 2 frameworks, and there is not enough of a match with long-term job opportunities. Members should consider the oil industry, which ministers say is in a boom. Mr MacKenzie said that the industry has said that it will need 100,000 young people. Last year, there were just 133 apprenticeships in the oil and gas framework. Surely that cannot be right.

That, of course, is the key, as employability is probably not the biggest problem right now; rather, the biggest problem is a lack of job opportunities—or demand, not supply. That is why the Scottish Government's new certificate worries me, although I accept that it has been introduced with the best of intentions.

There is an old Springsteen line:

"Is a dream a lie if it don't come true, or is it something worse?"

What is a certificate of work readiness for someone in a world in which there is no work ready for them, if not a dream that is not going to come true? I do not accept that our young people are not fit for work or are somehow from another planet. It is the economy and employers who are, for whatever reason, unavoidable or not, failing to provide opportunity for them.

I know that the First Minister understands the importance of the job supply because he talked yesterday about opportunities for young people when he welcomed the announcement of 400 call-centre jobs. On the same day, however, the construction industry revealed that it had shed 62,500 jobs. That is why youth unemployment remains stubbornly high and why the best thing that the Scottish Government could do for our young people is to stop talking about shovel-ready projects and actually get the shovels digging.

We know what works when it comes to work experience. The Government's community jobs fund works well, with placements of reasonable length and pay, and a 40 per cent positive outcome rate. Why do we not invest more in that fund, expand it into the private sector and commit to more than one year of funding at a time? Why do we not revisit the project Scotland model, which had similar success but for which funding was abolished in 2007?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I must ask you to conclude soon.

Iain Gray: None of this is easy; nor is the situation unique to Scotland. Yesterday, the International Labour Organization reported on the global youth employment crisis and suggested that young people are giving up hope. That is all the more reason for us to redouble our efforts and re-examine every measure that we take. We must refocus programmes such as the apprenticeships for today's reality; we must invest in demand as well as supply; and we must confront the long-term trends as well as celebrate any welcome short-term improvements.

16:27

Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP): When we are talking about good and bad employment statistics, it is imperative that we remind ourselves at all times that the statistics in question are not just figures, but people.

Today, as we discuss young people and their contribution to the economy, I am sure that at least most of us would agree that young people are probably the most important demographic in employment. What happens to them now will determine their lives and Scotland's economic strength for many decades to come.

The Scottish Government has recognised the importance of young people and has placed them at the heart of its economic strategy. Scotland was the first nation in these islands to appoint a dedicated Minister for Youth Employment and the first to launch an holistic strategy for youth employment. The 25,000 modern apprenticeships—which include more than 1,600 in Fife—must be welcomed; they are a definite plus. As Iain Gray has just said, the community jobs fund is also really worth while.

We know that youth unemployment is lower and that youth employment is higher here than in the rest of the United Kingdom. Youth unemployment in Scotland has fallen by 6.8 per cent over the past year, while the UK rate fell by only 0.7 per cent. We will have to see where the rates go over the next 12 months; we will then be able to see just how true the statistics are.

I accept that the rise in the number of people who are claimants for over 12 months is a matter of concern, but as the Minister for Youth Employment said in the foreword to "Scotland's Youth Employment Strategy",

"this is no time for complacency".

That must be right—there remains much to do. New initiatives are always needed, such as the new links between universities and small and medium-sized enterprises, and the proposed

youth guarantee. I listened with interest to what the minister said about that earlier in the debate.

It is right that we recognise the problems that long-term unemployment causes for young people. There is a problem throughout Europe, so we need to avoid creating a lost generation. The UK is the fourth most unequal country in the developed world. We also know that a key causal factor of inequality is high unemployment. There is no doubt that Scotland could—as a small, adaptable and more equal European nation—go further in the right direction and could certainly aspire to the lower rates of youth unemployment that some of our neighbours in Europe have. Even then, the rates are quite high: in Denmark youth unemployment is at 14.2 per cent and in Norway it is currently at 9.7 per cent.

Let us look at the Norwegian example more closely. The Norwegian education minister, Kristin Halvorsen, has repeatedly identified that one of the key reasons why Norway's youth unemployment is, relatively, so low is that the Norwegian Government has managed to maintain low drop-out rates from secondary school. Scotland's secondary, further and higher sectors clearly differ from those in Norway, as do the ages at which young people in our two nations commence the various stages of education. However, as is often the case, there is no doubt that we can learn from the country that the United Nations has described as the best country in the world to live in.

We take for granted that low youth unemployment and high employment are good things. It is certainly a good thing for a young person to have a paying job, especially one that is matched to their skills. It is also of immeasurable benefit to society as a whole; the more young people we have working, the more we develop a strong, confident, skilled and experienced workforce, which in turn helps to build and maintain a vibrant, diverse and strong economy.

We therefore need to do all that we can do to help young people to get a good start on the career ladder. That is no small task. All members will know of at least one person—a family member or a constituent—who has hit an invisible brick wall and said, "I can't get a job because I lack experience, and I can't gain experience because I can't get a job." Those words of frustration are uttered all too often by the younger generation.

I am therefore pleased that the Scottish Government has introduced the new employer-assessed certificate of work readiness, which will go some way towards helping young people to break out of the experience-versus-work cycle, by offering a meaningful record of employability, even when an employer cannot offer a more permanent position, which is a disadvantage, although a

period of employment is certainly better than nothing.

The certificate of work readiness will fulfil a key aim of the Scottish Government's skills strategy, "Skills for Scotland: Accelerating the Recovery and Increasing Sustainable Economic Growth", and will help companies to provide work experience. I hope that there will be a structured template for the process, with tangible results. The approach will certainly make it less complicated to offer a placement, because there will be a generally accepted procedure throughout the country. Testament to the scheme's importance is the welcome that it has received from business; CBI Scotland, the Federation of Small Businesses Scotland, the Scottish Council for Development and Industry and many others have expressed support.

As I said, and as other members have said, there is no room for complacency. Despite Scotland's advantage over the UK, youth unemployment remains much higher than any of us would like it to be. As Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands show, wealthy countries like Scotland do not have to suffer from very high youth unemployment, even in times like these. With the right strategies, we can do better. With the powers that are currently held elsewhere, the Government and this Parliament could do better still and deliver more for the young people of Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

We move to closing speeches. We still have a small amount of time in hand for interventions.

16:32

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I am pleased to wind up in the debate, which has been mainly constructive. I hope that the Government will respond to Margaret McCulloch's positive call for three-year funding for training contracts.

Ken Macintosh talked about the inactivity rate. We should not lose sight of that, given that the inactivity level rose by 12,000 in the past 12 months in Scotland—the figure for the rest of the UK was 2,000. I hope that the minister will explain that when she sums up.

I suggest that Mike MacKenzie should amend his critical speech in light of the contributions from Opposition parties. I can say quite honestly that I did not hear anyone being "grudging". I think that we have all been fulsome in our praise and that we have welcomed the reduction in youth unemployment. I will continue in that spirit.

I look forward to hearing the Government wind up. In previous debates I have asked ministers

several questions and got no answers. In one debate I got answers to questions that I had not asked. In the previous debate, I was told that my figures were all wrong, and then I got a letter from the minister to say that they were right. I hope that we can get on to a better footing today, because the issue is important and we want to work with the Government on it.

I say again that we very much welcome the drop of 29,000 in youth unemployment over the past year, and we commend the many employers who have helped to achieve that reduction. The inactivity rate also fell by 1,000 over the same period—and by much more in the UK. Some 45 per cent of 16 to 20-year-olds were enrolled in full-time education—2 per cent more than in the UK—and if we exclude the people in full-time education, we find that the unemployment rate in Scotland is 21.4 per cent, compared with 19.3 per cent in the UK. The figures for Scotland change quarterly and annually, but they are comparable with UK figures. We welcome young people getting the opportunity to enter the routine of work and a career.

Before I speak about the certificate of work readiness, I highlight that over the past year there was no change in unemployment among 50 to 64-year-olds, and that unemployment in other age groups increased. Although we whole-heartedly, fully and fulsomely welcome the reduction of 29,000 in youth unemployment over the past year, it is disappointing that unemployment has increased among 24 to 50-year-olds and that has stood still among 50 to 64-year-olds. We would welcome debates on employment for people of all ages, particularly in respect of women who are trying to get back into work after a break to have children.

The CIPD research report last month highlighted the jobs mismatch between employers and young people. It states that employer feedback is crucial for young people—a point that Roderick Campbell made—yet employers struggle to provide it, particularly during the recruitment process. There has also been criticism from employers about the need for young people to have soft skills and the ability to work in a team. The certificate of work readiness, which has been developed in partnership with business, will help to bridge that gap. There will be college-based learning time and 190 hours of real-life work experience, and the certificate will be awarded only following employer assessment. That is essential and I have no doubt that it will be positively useful for young people who are seeking work.

The certificate, which is approved by the Scottish Qualifications Authority and is backed by industry, employer bodies and companies such as Diageo and Scottish Power, will be a positive and progressive step towards the job market. I hope

that many other employers will work together with further education colleges to help to increase the number of these certificates.

In previous debates I have raised the issue of jobs in the hospitality industry. I take this opportunity to commend Apex Hotels Ltd, which regularly takes part in initiatives to promote a more positive image for the catering and hospitality industry. Apex recently held a jobs fair for third, fourth and fifth year students to highlight the wide range of different jobs and career paths in that business. That initiative was also highlighted in the CIPD research report.

We keep talking about apprenticeships as if they come from nowhere and we just want to get young people into jobs. Liz Smith made a critical point when she talked about looking at the joined-up journey. Whatever job young people go into, whatever training or education they need and whatever certificate of work readiness they get, so much depends on basic skills in literacy and numeracy in primary schools. Let us not all talk about how many highers people have; let us make sure that they have what they need in primary school before they move on to secondary school.

Modern apprenticeships and reductions in youth unemployment should also go hand in hand with training and understanding of entrepreneurship. The Carnegie UK Trust briefing paper for the debate highlights the need for the Scottish Government to work with schools, colleges and universities to eradicate interruptions and inconsistencies in their approach to enterprise in order to ensure that students' enterprise awareness is reinforced at each level, rather than weakened—a point that Liam McArthur made.

I commend the Institution of Civil Engineers for giving free student registrations with the institution for all apprentices at college. That is another good example of a good partnership between the industry and our further education colleges.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I move on, I say to members that, as they know, if they have participated in a debate they really should be in the chamber for closing speeches; otherwise it is discourteous to the Parliament. I am therefore disappointed to note that Mark McDonald has not returned for closing speeches. I call Ken Macintosh, who has eight minutes.

16:39

Ken Macintosh: Like Mary Scanlon, I acknowledge that it has been a relatively good natured and consensual debate in which there have been some good speeches. I thought that Liz Smith and Iain Gray opened the debate in the right tone in recognising that we all view the subject as

being tremendously important, and with a shared agenda to tackle youth unemployment.

There were a number of strong individual contributions. Patricia Ferguson talked about what has been happening in Royston at work. The fact that the DWP rules are still working against young people who are claiming benefits needs to be examined, so there is a chance for joint working to be put into practice.

I was intrigued by Clare Adamson's reference to the horse head nebula. I think that most of us will be flying to our computers later to see what it looks like.

Iain Gray: It looks like a horse's head. *[Laughter.]*

Ken Macintosh: Thank you very much. I suspect that, when it is done in starlight, it is a little bit more glamorous than that. The Al Capone books that my colleague has been reading probably have a different reference.

Clare Adamson acknowledged the inequality that women still face in the workforce and the difficulties that we have in tackling segregation, which are important issues.

I would not say that the debate has been a statistical battlefield, but a number of members—including Jayne Baxter, Jamie Hepburn, Liam McArthur and Rod Campbell—referred to the merits and demerits of different statistics. Iain Gray and Stewart Stevenson were helpful in explaining the difference between the labour force survey and the annual survey. Like Mary Scanlon, I thought that, with the honourable exception of Mike MacKenzie, most members came to a balanced view about the strengths and weaknesses of different statistical approaches.

Mike MacKenzie: Will the member take an intervention?

Ken Macintosh: I will not. I took an intervention from Mr MacKenzie earlier, so I do not feel guilty.

The most important part of the debate was when we talked about the different programmes that have been put in place regionally and nationally. We are all looking to see which programmes have been effective, which are working, what the reasons are behind the fall in unemployment that we are seeing now and where we could invest more money and political energy.

The apprenticeship programme was mentioned by a number of members. I think that all Labour members welcome the apprenticeship programme. A bit like the way that we feel about the minister's Cabinet position, we take credit for it and believe that the only reason why there is such a large target is that we pushed for it. We welcome the 25,000 target and the fact that the Government

is achieving it, but we think that there are weaknesses. Iain Gray and other members spoke about the fact that, because 10,000 of those apprentices are already in jobs, although the programme is very helpful in upskilling and offering training it is not in itself tackling unemployment.

Jamie Hepburn: Will the member give way?

Angela Constance: Will the member take an intervention?

Ken Macintosh: I will take an intervention from the minister.

Angela Constance: I will be very brief. Does Labour want to stop the modern apprenticeship programme for over-25s and for those who are already in work?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can compensate you slightly for the intervention, Mr Macintosh.

Ken Macintosh: My answer is no to both questions. The modern apprenticeship programme is good but it could be improved; it has weaknesses. The fact that 10,000 of those people were already in work is a weakness. The fact that many people on the apprenticeship programme are now at level 2 rather than at level 3 is a weakness. The fact that the Government spends £1,000 per apprentice is a weakness. I am just pointing out that the apprenticeship programme is a very good programme that could be improved and could offer more. It is a way of improving training and education; it is not, in itself, a way of addressing unemployment.

Several members—Jayne Baxter and Margaret McCulloch, in particular—talked about the success of wage-subsidy programmes. That is not just about the previous Labour Government's future jobs fund, but the current community jobs fund, which has been very successful and has achieved a 40 per cent permanent job retention record among its participants.

However, before I go on to that—the issue was raised by Margaret McCulloch and others, including Iain Gray—I point out that we had a consensual debate last week in which we talked about the joint agreement that was reached by the Government, local authorities and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations about securing three-year funding for the voluntary sector. Here we have a good example of a fund that should be supported over three years; I have no doubt that the success of the community grants scheme would improve if it had that certainty. Given the difficulties that face training providers, which Margaret McCulloch highlighted, if the Government was to translate its talk in last week's

debate into action, it would certainly get our support on that.

Having repeatedly pushed for further support for wage-subsidy programmes over many years, we were delighted last September when the cabinet secretary announced the employer recruitment initiative. However, it is disappointing that we are now in May and have yet to see any details. My latest understanding is that a subsidy of £1,500 will be provided. Perhaps the minister can expand on that. More than six months on from the announcement, we still do not know how much the subsidy will be. The £1,500 that has been suggested falls a long way short of the £6,000 that was offered through Labour's future jobs fund. At the very least, we should have some debate in Parliament about this very important matter that would make a concrete difference. We know that such programmes work.

There are many other steps that we could take, such as specific actions to improve entrepreneurial activity in Scotland. For example, Denmark encourages unemployed people to start up their own businesses. There is much that the Government could do without reinventing the wheel, given that Scotland currently underperforms on entrepreneurial activity relative to the UK, which in turns underperforms relative to adjacent European countries. The University of the Highlands and Islands has a programme called create a business, which has been very successful.

Mark McDonald also mentioned the Prince's Trust, which operates in a different context but is a voluntary sector provider with a very good record in promoting entrepreneurial activity. Another fantastic scheme is the Entrepreneurial Spark, which has been promoted in Glasgow by businessmen such as Willie Haughey and has been very successful. However, it is notable that although that programme has three offices in Scotland, it does not have an office in Dundee, Aberdeen or Inverness. The Government could do more to build on the success of such programmes and to support them.

Several members mentioned the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training. The youth guarantee that is provided through the opportunities for all scheme is good as far as it goes, but we can see that the programme has not actually reduced the numbers in that category. Perhaps we need to re-examine whether the programme might be extended to include people who are under 25 or under 30.

Without wanting to go back over the unemployment statistics too much, I think that it is clear that, if we just improved all the regions of Scotland to the standard of employment in the best region, that would make a huge difference.

Over the past year, for example, the unemployment rate has decreased in 19 local authority areas, but it has gone up in 12 local authority areas, with there being no change in only one. Mark McDonald, Kevin Stewart, Stewart Stevenson, Jayne Baxter and Jenny Marra all highlighted good performance in their regions, particularly in Aberdeen and the north-east where the oil economy is booming and unemployment is low—although I acknowledge that several members mentioned that there are pockets of deprivation. However, we know that in Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire, Ayrshire and elsewhere, whole communities are debilitated by joblessness.

Surely there is more that we can do simply in the way of providing affordable transport. At one point, I actually thought that consensus might break out between Kevin Stewart and Jenny Marra on that issue. Kevin Stewart made a welcome contribution, but I was disappointed that he did not take an intervention from Iain Gray, who would have offered him the opportunity to back the proposed bus regulation (Scotland) bill. I would be happy to take an intervention from Kevin Stewart now if he wants to offer his support for that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Actually, you need to finish your speech.

Kevin Stewart: I was willing.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Macintosh, you do not have a lot of time left.

Ken Macintosh: Presiding Officer, I am conscious of the time.

This has been a consensual debate, but we need to focus on what works. We welcome any improvement in the employment statistics and some programmes are making a difference, but it would be good to know exactly what difference they make, particularly to youth unemployment, and what more we can do to tackle the intractable issue of youth unemployment, which is clearly heading in totally the wrong way. We may not be agreed on the market interventions, but I hope that we can unite today on the importance of helping our young people. We should emphasise that we are here to help rather than to blame them.

16:49

Angela Constance: I am grateful to all members who have participated in the debate. It might not always feel like it for members, but contributions from across the political spectrum always influence Government thinking and subsequent action. In the past 12 to 18 months, many members from across the Parliament have made significant and helpful contributions on issues such as long-term unemployment,

additional support needs, women, ex-industrial communities and rural skills, and we are incorporating those into our strategy and day-to-day work.

I also thank members from across the political divide who undertake a lot of activity in their constituencies to support young people and employers and who do everything that they can locally to boost youth employment. Members often invite me to meet local organisations and attend youth job fairs or to meet to discuss a variety of matters. I am always more than happy to do my best, diary permitting, to accommodate members from across the political divide. I am glad that SNP and Labour MSPs take full advantage of that, although I must say that I have never yet received a request from a Tory or Liberal member to support any sectoral events or local activity—I am just saying.

Liam McArthur: The minister might want to check with her private office, but I think that, following the debate before last in which she was involved, I was in touch about the organisation of a local event and I sought more details from her office about how that might be achieved. I simply invite her perhaps to correct the record.

Angela Constance: I will check with my private office. Of course, I am always open to invitations to go to Orkney. Last year, I visited Skills Development Scotland in Orkney.

Patricia Ferguson made a good case about the sterling work of the Royston at work project, which I have visited with local members. To me, the issues there are an example of why we should never abandon welfare powers to Westminster, but laying that political difference aside, I am of course more than happy to meet her, Royston at work and any others to discuss the issues. I will not make any promises, but I can give an undertaking to do my best to look for a solution. In that vein, I am also happy to accept Mr McDonald's kind invitation to the young Scotland's got talent event in Aberdeen.

As Ken Macintosh said, we have explored the labour market statistics. We must all recognise that there is a variety of statistics and that they are complex. We must all strive to get into the guts of the figures so that we understand as best we can what is working and not working and the trends ahead. I welcome the fact that members seem to agree that the youth unemployment rate is falling and is going in the right direction. I wish to emphasise the positive. We have nearly 30,000 fewer young unemployed Scots now than we had at this time last year, and youth unemployment is at its lowest level in three years.

In making that point, I am in no way complacent. I have many faults—too many to list here—but

complacency is most certainly not one of them. We must emphasise the positive movement in the figures so that we increase the resolve to do more. Now is most certainly not the time to take our foot off the gas.

That is a real opportunity for us all to grasp. We can all use the positive movement—the drop in youth unemployment—to persuade more employers that they can and do make a difference and that our young people have an invaluable contribution to make to the economy.

It is important to acknowledge that Scotland is outperforming the rest of the UK, with higher employment, lower unemployment and better activity levels. That, again, is not to be complacent in any way, but it is important to acknowledge that Scottish employers are more likely to recruit young people. That is evidenced by the UK Commission for Employability and Skills. It is also evidence that the distinctive Scottish Government policies—whether the modern apprenticeship programme, opportunities for all, reforms to the colleges or the modernisation of the careers programme—are having the right impact.

Let me also be clear that having better youth employment statistics than the UK is not the limit of my ambition. I look to other European countries large and small that, despite the global economic recession, have youth unemployment rates of less than 10 per cent. That is what our ambition needs to be.

I very much regret the fact that, as yet, the UK Government does not support the European youth guarantee. I say to Mr Macintosh that we will do everything that we can within the powers that we have. I point to community jobs Scotland and the employer recruitment incentive, which is the most ambitious employer recruitment incentive wage subsidy programme anywhere in the UK and will create up to 10,000 jobs.

One of the tasks that I hope to complete imminently is the signing off of grant letters to local authorities so that they can support small and medium-sized businesses in their areas in getting young people into work. Mr Macintosh should be reassured that the £25 million of Scottish Government and European money will be well spent in partnership with local authorities and small to medium-sized businesses with a view to making a difference for our young people.

The challenge of youth unemployment is compounded by an economic downturn and structural changes to the labour market. To address the economic downturn, we need to reinvigorate the economy. We need economic growth. In that regard, I would prefer simply to have a Parliament with a full range of powers than a Parliament with limited powers.

On the structural changes in the labour market, we know that there are fewer entry-level jobs for young people. We also know that word of mouth is still the number 1 form of recruitment, which disadvantages young people. We know that young people are held back not by their lack of qualifications or a lack of talent but by their lack of experience. Their only crime is being young.

Therefore, we need to ask companies large and small to have youth policies—policies in which they go the extra mile to recruit young people. The small and medium-sized companies are our untapped potential. That is why the employer recruitment incentive, which will be delivered very soon, is important.

However, as well as making our ask of employers, we need to change how we deliver education, skills and training. That is what the reform of colleges and the modernisation of careers services are about.

We have achieved good outcomes. We have more young people in full-time college courses, higher retention rates and higher completion rates. That will improve job prospects, but the outcome of education is not, in itself, a qualification; the outcome for any education is jobs and whether our young people are in part-time jobs, full-time jobs or well-paid work. In that regard, it is not the length of courses that matters but the content of courses and the connectivity between the world of work and the world of education.

I welcome the change in tone from Labour members. I have often been more concerned that their focus is on knocking down solutions rather than building them up.

I will end with the words of Harry Burns. He often talks about how we all have to take the responsibility to nurture very young children and treasure babies.

Similarly, we all have a responsibility to ensure that our young people are supported, guided and nurtured, and that they are enabled to spread their wings and to become independent in the workplace. Instead of giving them just one helping hand, I and the Government want to help them with both hands. That is what having the powers of independence is all about—it is about being able to use absolutely everything that we have at our disposal, from tax to welfare. I again call on those who wish to abandon powers to Westminster to think again. That is not in our young people's interests.

Decision Time

17:00

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S4M-06492.2, in the name of Ken Macintosh, which seeks to amend motion S4M-06492, in the name of Angela Constance, on young people: supporting Scotland's economy today and tomorrow, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baxter, Jayne (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Eadie, Helen (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMahon, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)

Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McDonald, Mark (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 Walker, Bill (Dunfermline) (Ind)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 44, Against 61, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The second question is, that motion S4M-06492, in the name of Angela Constance, on young people: supporting

Scotland's economy today and tomorrow, be agreed to.

Meeting closed at 17:02.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament welcomes the drop in youth unemployment by 29,000 over the last year, as outlined in the April 2013 *Labour Force Survey*; commends the efforts made by many employers in Scotland to offer job, training and work experience opportunities to young people, helping them to play a vital role in the current and future workforce; further welcomes the achievement of 25,000 modern apprenticeship starts for the second year in a row; agrees that the Certificate of Work Readiness, backed by business and developed by Skills Development Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority, helps young people demonstrate to employers that they have valuable skills for the workplace, and further agrees that efforts should continue to support employers to invest in youth jobs, including through the recruitment incentives funded by £25 million in Scottish Government and EU funds and delivered by local authorities.

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