



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Tuesday 28 May 2013

Session 4

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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 28 May 2013

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

Time for Reflection

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

Good afternoon. The first item this afternoon is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Father Gerard McNellis, the parish priest at St Laurence's in Greenock.

Father Gerard McNellis (St Laurence's, Greenock): Presiding Officer, members of the Scottish Parliament, thank you for the opportunity to address you today.

Toast. Pupils at our local school, All Saints primary school, make toast every day. Guided by a classroom assistant and squeezed into 15 minutes of playtime, they sell this toast to their fellow pupils. With the profits—they must clear £11 each week—ingredients are bought to make soup: fresh vegetables, stock and ham hock. Another classroom assistant takes the pupils in groups of four, so that they all get a turn, and teaches them how to make home-made soup—chicken and rice, lentil and, of course, Scotch broth.

Each Friday, the soup is collected by a man from the Inverclyde Homeless Forum, taken away to the forum's kitchens and served to the homeless, who are guests for lunch. They enjoy the soup, and they are delighted to know that it has been provided by local primary 7 pupils.

These pupils, from the east end of Greenock, have not been born with every advantage in life but, through this project, they are learning valuable lessons. The project teaches the pupils something about commerce, something about nutrition, something about cooking and, perhaps most of all, something about caring for others. What we teach our children and what our children learn are important.

I am reminded of the words of Pope Benedict XVI:

"Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary."

A modern Scotland, served by a Scottish Parliament, that tackles the challenges of the present while preparing for the challenges of the future can learn so much from the traditions of the past. It warms our hearts to hear of our young people helping those in need, but their care for others is not isolated. It was evident in our past, it is a reality of the present and, especially with the

encouragement of you, our elected representatives, it will continue in the future.

My prayer for this Parliament is that you will always keep it in mind that

"Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary."

Topical Question Time

14:03

Rendition Flights

1. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what recent representations it has received regarding rendition flights landing in Scotland. (S4T-00377)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): The Scottish Government strongly opposes illegal rendition flights. No representations have been received by the Scottish Government regarding such flights. However, as I said back in 2007, if anyone has any evidence of lawbreaking of this sort, they should come forward with it and help justice to be done. I reiterate that today.

Patrick Harvie: I gather that my colleague Mr Finnie has written to the Lord Advocate on the matter, following reports in the press demonstrating evidence of landings at Wick, Aberdeen and Inverness. Does the cabinet secretary accept that a proactive approach is needed in this matter, that it is not enough simply to wait until evidence of something innately covert is produced, and that, even if flights are returning through Scottish airports for refuelling, for example, without detainees on board at the time when they are at those airports, that is itself complicity, in much the same way that flights taking prisoners through our airports would be?

Kenny MacAskill: The Scottish Government takes these matters seriously and would not condone any such action in any shape or form. Mr Finnie's letter has not yet been received by the Crown, but the Crown has made clear how strongly it would view the matter and has asked that any information be made available to it. The police and the Crown can act only if that information is passed on, and that is what we have always sought to do as a Government.

When Mr Harvie asked me about rendition on 27 June 2007, I said that we treated the allegations very seriously and that we had stated our opposition to rendition flights, but I made it clear that civil aviation is a reserved matter and is, therefore, the responsibility of the United Kingdom Government. Nevertheless, I stated that criminal matters are the responsibility not simply of the Scottish Government but of law enforcement, in particular the Crown and the police. We asked for information to be provided. Amnesty International met me and I passed on the documentation that it had at that stage to the then Lord Advocate, Dame Elish Angiolini, who fully investigated the matter. However, no proceedings could be taken.

I have no doubt that the present Lord Advocate, Frank Mulholland, will give exactly the same assurance in response to the letter that is coming his way from Mr Finnie. We do not support or condone the practice and we would not allow it. However, unless the information is there for our police and prosecutors, there are difficulties with what they can do. Until there is a change in the constitution, civil aviation remains a matter for the United Kingdom Government.

Patrick Harvie: Two years before the exchange to which the cabinet secretary refers, in a debate in the chamber in 2005, Mr MacAskill, speaking from the Opposition benches at that time, said:

"this is not simply a police matter or a matter for law officers, but a political matter ... This comes down to political will: fundamentally, that is what is lacking from the Executive."—[*Official Report*, 22 December 2005; c 22075.]

I regret that we appear to be in much the same position at the moment. Can the cabinet secretary tell me of any other area of serious organised crime in which such a reactive approach would be taken, whereby both police and the Government would not take a proactive approach and investigate vehicles that were suspected of being used for such serious criminal offences?

Kenny MacAskill: I refute any suggestion that the Scottish police would not and do not take action. If the information were available to them, they certainly would act. In this situation, the information that has been provided is historical and could not have been available to them at the time. If people have information, it should be provided and will be investigated, as it was to the credit of the former Lord Advocate, Dame Elish Angiolini.

We do not view the issue simply as a matter of law enforcement. It is for that reason that I met Amnesty International, engaged with it and gave it the assurance that the issue would be fully considered. It is not for the Government to bring prosecutions but, as a Government, we gave the information to the Lord Advocate that was given to us by Amnesty International. Subsequent to that, I have had discussions regarding the issue with a variety of organisations including—because of a personal friendship with Clive Stafford Smith—Reprieve UK.

If the information is there and is provided, we will pass it on. I give the assurance that Police Scotland and the Crown will not hesitate to take the appropriate action, but they must have the information to be able to act.

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): This morning, there were reports that Dundee airport may be linked to rendition. Will the cabinet secretary ask the UK Government whether it has any information on the use of Dundee airport for rendition activity?

Kenny MacAskill: Again, that is a matter for the law officers and the police. I will be happy to pass that on to the Lord Advocate, who awaits Mr Finnie's letter. He will, no doubt, consider these matters given the reference suggested.

The matters that were correctly raised with me by Mr Harvie happened not on the watch of the current coalition Government but when there was a Labour Government in the UK. Going back to the information that was provided to me by Clive Stafford Smith, I think that Jack Straw has a lot to answer for with regard to the complicity in rendition that I understand has been involved in the UK's alliance with the United States.

Proposed Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Bill

2. Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it will introduce the proposed marriage and civil partnership (Scotland) bill. (S4T-00369)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing (Alex Neil): As the First Minister set out in the programme for government on 4 September 2012, we will introduce the marriage and civil partnership (Scotland) bill within the 2012-13 parliamentary year, so the bill will be introduced before the forthcoming summer recess.

Marco Biagi: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer, because the proposed bill offers equality not just for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, but for those diverse faiths that sincerely believe in same-sex marriage and which are currently prevented from holding such ceremonies. However, I recognise that, just as those faiths wish to perform same-sex marriage, many others do not or are divided on the issue. What progress has been made on ensuring that the necessary changes are made to the United Kingdom Equality Act 2010 to safeguard the right of each religion to govern its own internal affairs on this matter?

Alex Neil: We have made substantial progress in co-operation with Maria Miller, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, who is responsible for such matters in the UK Government. When the marriage and civil partnership (Scotland) bill is published, I hope to be in a position to confirm the details of the amendments that will be made to the UK Equality Act 2010 in respect of the Scottish bill.

Marco Biagi: The cabinet secretary will be aware of the claims that Maria Miller has made about the cost and timescales for equalising civil partnership. A key aim of the equal marriage campaign in Scotland has been to secure mixed-sex civil partnerships, and I would be deeply uncomfortable about LGBT people continuing to

be singled out by legislation that emphasises our difference. What consideration has the cabinet secretary given to that issue? Will he order a review or other work to be done to assess the potential impact, should the Parliament express that its wish is to open up civil partnerships to mixed-sex couples?

Alex Neil: As the member will be aware, Maria Miller has ordered a review—indeed, she has built it into the legislation on same-sex marriage down south. As well as covering devolved matters in respect of England, that review will cover reserved matters such as pensions. I am giving consideration to how we should address the issue, and I hope to make an announcement to Parliament fairly soon.

Drew Smith (Glasgow) (Lab): Following last week's vote in the House of Commons, Stonewall Scotland called on us members of the Scottish Parliament to "get on with it" in relation to equal marriage in Scotland, so I very much welcome the cabinet secretary's confirmation that a bill will be introduced before the summer recess. While the progress of that bill will be a matter for the Parliament and the Presiding Officers, could the cabinet secretary indicate whether, under the timetable that he has in mind, he envisages that the first marriages that take place under the bill's provisions will do so before or after the September 2014 referendum?

Alex Neil: I am thinking about the principles of the bill rather than the referendum. After our extensive consultation, we have given a commitment to introduce the bill as quickly as possible, which is what we are doing. It will be up to the relevant committee and the Parliamentary Bureau to timetable the bill, but I hope that the timetabling will be such that we see the bill become law sooner rather than later.

Dave Thompson (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): Marriage is different from civil partnership. I do not believe that this is an equality issue, as civil partnerships provide nearly all the legal rights and obligations of marriage and can easily be adjusted to make the two the same. In the light of the concerns about religious freedom, will the cabinet secretary confirm that the civil liberty and religious freedom of people of faith will be safeguarded not in regulation but on the face of the bill?

Alex Neil: The main protections with regard to what the member refers to will be in amendments to the Equality Act 2010, because much of that relates to reserved matters rather than devolved matters, and reserved matters cannot be dealt with in a bill on devolved matters. However, I think that the key point on which the member will want reassurance is that the civil rights of those who do not wish to carry out a same-sex marriage will be fully protected.

Having and Keeping a Home

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

The next item of business is an Equal Opportunities Committee debate on “Having and keeping a home: steps to preventing homelessness among young people”. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons. There is some time available at this stage for interventions. I call Mary Fee to open the debate on behalf of the committee—14 minutes, please.

14:15

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): I am delighted to open the debate as convener of the Equal Opportunities Committee. The inquiry entitled “Having and keeping a home: steps to preventing homelessness among young people” began before I joined the committee. I thank all the members who served on the committee between September 2011, when the inquiry was launched, and the date when the report was published; they included Stuart McMillan, Annabel Goldie and my predecessor on the committee, Claudia Beamish. I also thank all the organisations and professionals who gave evidence and, most important, the young people who provided life experiences at committee and those whom we met in supported accommodation in Inverness and North Ayrshire and at a community project here in Edinburgh.

As I said, the inquiry started before my time as convener and its remit had already been set. The remit aimed to explore the existing good practice in local authorities and other agencies in and beyond Scotland that is effective in preventing youth homelessness, and to identify the gaps in preventative service provision and establish how they could be closed. I believe that the report, which was launched last October, meets those aims. We found examples of good practice and of gaps in service provision, and we requested the minister at the time, Keith Brown, to report on how the Scottish Government would close the identified gaps. In the Scottish Government’s response to our report, dated 29 November 2012, we heard from Margaret Burgess, the new Minister for Housing and Welfare, how the Government would meet the committee’s recommendations.

In the inquiry, the committee heard about the principal causes of youth homelessness. That allowed us to explore the prevention work that is undertaken and its effectiveness; the particular predicament of care leavers; the role of life skills; and young people’s experience of tenancy. In a round-table evidence session, the committee heard accounts of personal experiences of homelessness services from Yvette Hutcheson of Quarriers, who painted a bleak picture of family

breakdowns, addiction issues and mental health problems—issues that are principal causes of youth homelessness.

We heard from Yvette that young people had remarked that going through supported accommodation was

“like a rite of passage”.—[*Official Report, Equal Opportunities Committee*, 29 November 2011; c 129.]

She also pointed out that some people had secured a tenancy but did not have the knowledge to keep it. Support to enable young people to maintain a tenancy was a recurring theme throughout the evidence sessions.

Financial pressures on families can result in young people having to leave home. That was highlighted by Rhea Nicolson, whom the committee met in supported accommodation in Inverness. Rhea had to move out after she turned 16 because her benefits had ended and her mother, as a single parent working part time, could not afford to keep her. Her story, like others, is a cruel tale of the age that we are in and something that should not be happening in the 21st century.

Research that was done by Heriot-Watt University identified trigger points that emerged among young people aged 14 to 17, which included

“school-related issues like truancy and exclusion, parents with alcohol or drug problems”

and parents who were homeless as children. Suzanne Fitzpatrick of Heriot-Watt also referred to

“a clear evidential link between someone’s displaying a pattern of running away and their becoming homeless as an adult.”

That was backed up by Shelter Scotland, which said that

“the rate of running away among young homeless people is 84 per cent, in comparison with 11 per cent for the general population.”—[*Official Report, Equal Opportunities Committee*, 29 November 2011; c 154, 145.]

Given the clear identification of those vulnerable young people, the committee then looked at the role of the education system for young people.

On the issue of prevention, mediation and respite were clearly identified as tools for tackling youth homelessness. The minister said in her response to the committee’s report that the supported accommodation implementation group had taken into consideration the report’s recommendations on respite, and I am keen to hear how much progress has been made on mediation and respite over the past six months.

Mediation was cited in the report as having an important role in prevention. Janeine Barrett of North Ayrshire Council, Clare Mailer from Perth and Kinross Council and Kate Sanford of

Quarriers each provided the committee with examples of where and when mediation can work to prevent youth homelessness. Kate Sanford said:

“young people have talked about situations in which family members simply got on top of one another and it was difficult to take a reasoned and rational view of what was going on.”

Perhaps with more mediation services available, fewer young people will find themselves homeless.

When mediation cannot work, respite must be made available to give parents and young people space. Respite is an extremely important tool. Young people recognise that, as Kate Sanford backed up when she said that according to young people,

“a break away from the situation for both their parents and them might have stopped the escalation of emotions getting completely out of hand”

and prevented

“the vicious cycle of homelessness.”

Byron Carruthers of Quarriers described a personal experience and added:

“Respite—some time apart—would be brilliant.”—*[Official Report, Equal Opportunities Committee, 12 June 2012; c 512-3.]*

The committee concluded that mediation, education and respite are vital elements, and we noted that although the value of respite was recognised, we heard much less about it in comparison with mediation and education. We believe that respite should be integrated into the mediation approach and I hope to hear more from the minister on that.

I will not say too much on the role of education in the prevention of homelessness, as it took up a good part of the report and I am sure that other members will pick up on it. However, preventing homelessness through education can play a significant role, as long as all children in each school receive the same guidance. During the evidence sessions, we heard that there was inconsistency throughout local authorities. In some local authorities some schools carry out in-school preventative activity, yet in other local authorities all schools do such work.

Concerns were raised about resistance from headteachers. Grant Mackintosh from East Dunbartonshire Council, which is part of the west housing options hub, agreed that there should be “stronger links with education”, although they depend on the reception that is given by school management and whether headteachers view such links as a priority.

It appeared from the evidence that a roll-out might be required in line with the getting it right for every child approach, and as such we

recommended that the Scottish Government work with local authorities to collect data on which schools young homeless people attend; identify what preventative work is undertaken; establish which schools carry out no preventative work and why; and take steps to remove obstacles identified. Given that more than six months have passed since the minister’s response, I am keen to hear how far those recommendations have gone.

For any young person, leaving the care system when they are ready should be a new start that offers an exciting challenge into adulthood. However, we heard that that is rarely the case. Automatic homelessness exists as a result of disjointed care and housing services. Nick Bell from the Scottish Council for Single Homeless told us that

“in some local authority areas, young people are still routinely discharged through the homeless route, rather than with a pathway plan that has been worked out for them.”

Heather Gray from the Prince’s Trust echoed Nick Bell by stating that

“there is a very inconsistent picture of support for young people before, during and after leaving care and we need to manage transitions much better.”—*[Official Report, Equal Opportunities Committee, 29 November 2011; c 131, 130.]*

She added that looked-after children left care “far too early”.

I believe that someone of 16 or 17 is too young to leave the care system, especially given that many looked-after children are vulnerable young people with different levels of maturity who are still developing mentally, possibly as a result of having suffered traumatic life experiences, often through no fault of their own.

Byron Carruthers, a former care leaver, explained why he believes that the age limit is too low. He said:

“It is impossible that people, even if they have lived with their mum and dad, would have the appropriate life skills at that age. The age limit for people going into homelessness should not be 16; it should be 18. That would give people more of a chance to learn skills that help them to look after themselves.”—*[Official Report, Equal Opportunities Committee, 12 June 2012; c 492-3.]*

Concerns surround not only age limits, but the availability of support to ensure that young people cope in their transition. Keith Brown recognised that in his evidence to the committee. Ms Burgess stated in the Government’s response that, following the consultation on the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill, the Government is considering how to improve legislation around throughcare and aftercare. I welcome that and look forward to hearing how that legislation will be strengthened.

As Byron Carruthers pointed out, a lack of appropriate life skills exists not only in care leavers, but across the general population of young people. The committee heard various examples of where the problem lies. Much of it appears to stem not only from education, but from a young person's level of confidence and awareness.

A few weeks ago, I heard from a young constituent who is not homeless but who backs up the report in the sense that they think that schools do not teach the life skills that are required to find and maintain a tenancy. Dr Paul Monaghan and Sharon Munro, of the Highland Homeless Trust and Barnardo's Scotland respectively, said that many young people do not have the life skills, experience or support to make transitions easier, which leads to many of them becoming alienated and having a very dependent outlook. Basic skills, such as budgeting and skills in how to cook, wash clothes and clean the house, could be taught in schools or through other forums, but there is already an issue with the educational attainment of many young homeless people. We heard about the catch-22 for those young people in addressing their education and skills gaps, possibly through college. Losing benefits is not an option for many who are in desperate need of clinging to that financial support.

Great focus was placed on school education in addressing life skills through the curriculum for excellence. We heard about financial education and learning programmes, such as the "tackling debt", "talk money, talk solutions" and "small change" initiatives. Those initiatives are to be welcomed in preventing money problems for young people, but I think that many young people will fall through the cracks, and although the initiatives are preventative, they may not improve life skills if there are already literacy and numeracy issues. As the report asked how the outcomes are measured, I will wait to find that out before I add anything further.

Since the report was launched, community care grants have been devolved to the Scottish Government. There had been issues around the time that was taken to process applications and the amounts that were offered. I hope that those issues have been resolved or, if they have not, that considerable improvements have been made. However, it may be too early to tell, because anyone who applied for a community care grant when those grants were devolved at the start of April may only just have received, or may be about to receive, the support that they need.

Serious concerns were expressed about the amounts that were provided to furnish flats. We heard from Yvette Hutcheson that

"people who apply for a community care grant may get £100 with which they are supposed to furnish their entire property."—[*Official Report, Equal Opportunities Committee*, 29 November 2011; c 136.]

Kate Sanford of Quarriers spoke about people having to sleep on floorboards, because of the timing of the grants. I am sure that that would apply to someone who had to buy beds, furniture, white goods, carpets and curtains on £100. We also heard from Kate Sanford that, given that community care grants are now devolved to the Scottish Government,

"we have an opportunity to look carefully at and do something about a situation that is genuinely setting up young people to fail."—[*Official Report, Equal Opportunities Committee*, 12 June 2012; c 495.]

The committee heard about issues relating to maintaining a tenancy. Accommodation quality and isolation play major parts in young people keeping a home.

I have touched on some areas of the report and placed a great focus on others. I have no doubt that members will pick up on different parts of the report, too. I look forward to a positive debate and to hearing from members across the chamber.

Finally, in one of the evidence sessions, the young homeless witnesses were asked what their ambitions were. Their answers brought it home to members that they are just kids like any other kids, who are being expected to go through a lot and to cope with stuff that other, very similar kids do not have to cope with.

14:29

The Minister for Housing and Welfare (Margaret Burgess): I thank the Equal Opportunities Committee for bringing this debate to the chamber and I thank everyone who gave evidence to the committee. I genuinely welcome the debate and I thank the committee for addressing youth homelessness, which is an important issue for us all.

As the convener said, I wrote to the committee in November with the Scottish Government's response to its recommendations. I will outline some of the action that we have taken forward since then.

The Scottish Parliament's historic 2012 homelessness commitment has been met, which means that all unintentionally homeless people are entitled to settled accommodation. We are keen to continue our focus on the prevention of homelessness, through the housing options approach. Addressing homelessness among young people is an important part of that.

Our approach has contributed to a significant fall in recorded homelessness in recent years, but

young people still make up around a third of all homeless people. The figures reduced from 15,000 in 2009-10 to fewer than 12,000 during 2011-12, but I know that that is not enough and that a lot needs to be done to bring down the numbers further.

We will continue to work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, so that we learn from practice and work to improve homelessness policy in Scotland.

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): Does the minister accept that we have some of the best homelessness legislation in Europe? Even so, more still needs to be done, as she said.

Margaret Burgess: I absolutely recognise that we have what I think is the best homelessness legislation in Europe. That does not make us complacent. The Government recognises that we must work hard on the issue, because too many people, particularly young people, are homeless.

I will talk about the range of partners with whom we are working to prevent homelessness. I welcome the reference in the committee's report to the work of the five local authority housing options hubs and its significant impact on reducing homelessness in Scotland and preventing young people from becoming homeless, which is important. If we can prevent homelessness in the first instance, that is the key.

The convener talked about the benefits that can be gained through family mediation. From my visits to organisations and conversations with homeless people, it has become clear to me that relationship breakdown is often a main factor in someone becoming homeless, whether the relationship is with a family member, partner or someone else. As the convener said, mediation is not the solution for everyone, but it certainly works for some people, particularly young people.

The convener mentioned respite. The steering group is considering the recommendations of the supported accommodation implementation group in that regard. I recently visited a homelessness project and spoke to a young person who was about to be reunited with her parents. She said that the space that the project had provided was all that she had required. I think that she had found that living on her own was not all that it was made out to be, so going home had become a more attractive option. I think that her parents had been spoken to and everyone had sat down and discussed the situation. Such opportunities should be there for everyone, and the steering group is considering the matter.

It is important that all our policies are joined up and that we are clear about the importance of approaches such as getting it right for every child.

GIRFEC is a multi-agency approach, which puts the child or young person at the heart of all policies and service planning in Scotland.

There are no easy solutions to the varied and complex issues that lead to homelessness among young people. One approach is the work of the Scottish Government-funded national co-ordinators, who promote four key issues: employability; rebuilding social networks; service user involvement; and accessing furniture. Those issues are crucial for young people who face homelessness. As the convener said clearly, there is no point in just handing over the keys to an empty house—that is not the solution to the problem, but the start of many new problems. We all recognise that; it is what I find when I talk to people.

I set out to go around and speak to as many homeless people—young and old—as I could to discuss what support they get and the circumstances that make them homeless in the first place. I will continue to do that, because I very much recognise that many young people need support to help them sustain their tenancy, to live independently in their communities and, more important, to prevent them from becoming homeless again. As a result of our concern about the issue, we established the supported accommodation implementation group. Last year, the group issued its final report, which took an in-depth look at housing support for homeless people. Its proposals will be considered by the Scottish Government and COSLA homelessness prevention group, which we have kept going to progress the recommendations in the committee's report.

Another development is the new housing support duty, which comes into force on 1 June. That means that local authorities must assess the housing support needs of certain homeless applicants and ensure that housing support services are provided to all those who need them. We are working with local government and other key stakeholders to develop guidance to help councils to implement the duty. The feedback that we have had so far has been very positive.

The committee report expressed concern about life skills and the resources that are available to teach young people financial management skills from an early age. Education Scotland and its partners are developing a series of half-day workshops for secondary school teachers to discuss financial education in the context of curriculum for excellence. The committee noted that a lot of work has been done by local authorities and their partners to address housing education in schools. The housing options hubs are actively sharing practice in that area.

The availability of suitable accommodation can make a huge difference to a young person's outcomes on leaving care. To look at that issue, we established a throughcare and aftercare activity hub on accommodation for care leavers as part of the looked-after children strategic implementation group. The group has an important role: it is looking to develop a model housing protocol for care leavers based on existing best practice. That issue will be discussed at a national event for care leavers in October, which will be attended by the Minister for Children and Young People.

The committee report highlighted the fact that welfare reform presents a significant threat to sustaining the success of the housing options approach. I am not in any way complacent about the potential impact of welfare reform on the most vulnerable, including young homeless people. The housing options hubs are well placed to address the challenges, and they are proactively engaged in identifying the best options available to help those at risk. That work is crucial, so we have committed to fund the hubs for the next two years so that it can continue.

The committee had concerns, as has been mentioned, about the operation of the previous social fund and, in particular, community care grants. I am pleased to say that the Scottish welfare fund came into force last month and that the Scottish Government has committed an additional £9.2 million to it. The fund has been going only since April, but the feedback on how the fund is operating and the assistance that it is providing has been very positive.

The Scottish welfare fund can help young people by providing a safety net in emergencies, or where there is an immediate threat to health and safety. We are monitoring its implementation to ensure that it is working for those who need it most, including our vulnerable young people. The guidance makes particular reference to that group of people.

Tackling youth homelessness is a priority for me and the Scottish Government. I have highlighted the actions that the Scottish Government, along with local government and third sector partners, is taking and will continue to take to tackle and prevent youth homelessness in Scotland.

I, too, look forward to hearing members' contributions to the debate.

14:39

Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab): Homelessness has been an issue that has concerned the Parliament since its early days, which is why we passed very early legislation to provide people with the right to settled

accommodation by the end of last year. However, as we know, good intentions are not enough, and just passing legislation does not ensure that the problems will disappear.

Individuals and families fall into homelessness for a variety of reasons, but we know from Shelter's statistics—this is borne out by the experience of local authorities and housing associations—that significant numbers of homelessness applicants are single people. In 2011-12, 42 per cent of homelessness applications came from single men and 22 per cent came from single women. As the minister advised, a third of all applicants are young people and I think that around half of single applicants are young people. Of the others, some may be people whose problems that led to homelessness began when they were young. That is one of the many reasons why the Equal Opportunities Committee's report is so important.

The causes of homelessness among young people need to be understood if suitable interventions are to be made. As Mary Fee said, the committee noted a number of causes, including family breakdown, mental health problems and addiction issues, all of which will be familiar to us from our casework in dealing with constituents' housing problems. Such issues are sad when they affect people of any age, but they are particularly sad in the case of young people, who should have a bright future ahead of them. Of course, those causes are further exacerbated by the experience of homelessness. Homelessness does not necessarily mean being roofless and sleeping on the street; it may involve a continued rota of sleeping on the couches and floors of friends and acquaintances.

Sadly, many young people go directly from the family home into homelessness. That can happen for a variety of reasons, such as domestic abuse or substance misuse, or because the young person does not get on with a parent's new partner or because the parent is under stress—for example, for employment or financial reasons—and unable to cope with the young person's behaviour. It was reassuring to read in the committee's report that the housing options hubs specifically address the issues that can create homelessness among young people and that the hubs have been able to record some success in reducing the numbers of homelessness presentations from young people.

As others have said, the committee report notes the role of mediation in giving family members a break from one another to prevent a situation from escalating into breakdown. It also highlights the role that the education system can play in ensuring that young people have a realistic perspective of what homelessness means and

what type of accommodation they might be offered. However, teachers may not have the training to deal with young people in those situations and, as the report points out, social workers and teachers are not necessarily the people whom young people at risk of being homeless might listen to. In that regard, the report makes a number of recommendations to the Scottish Government on data collection, the identification of what preventative work is being undertaken and whether that work is successful and how any obstacles identified might be removed.

The report identifies that young people leaving care are particularly vulnerable to homelessness. Overall, I am sorry to say, we continue to fail young people in care with regard to their future life chances, whether those are measured in terms of educational achievements, employability, homelessness or the likelihood of them becoming an offender and spending a period in prison. We must develop a more holistic and person-centred approach to supporting young people in care and during their transition to adulthood. I believe that the supported accommodation implementation group report came to a similar conclusion.

Managing to get a tenancy is only the beginning of the story. Many young people have difficulty in sustaining a tenancy, whether that is due to problems with budgeting or to behaviour that is unacceptable to neighbours. The curriculum for excellence recognises the importance of building financial capability, and there are many organisations that can support schools to do that. The report notes how the lack of essential life skills can disadvantage young people and asks the Scottish Government to investigate how resources might be made available through the curriculum for excellence. I was interested to hear the minister's comments on how that is being taken forward.

However, education prior to gaining a tenancy can do only so much, and many young tenants will require support when they are first in a tenancy. As the report identifies, young tenants can feel isolated. They are often in poor standard accommodation in the private sector, and they can be vulnerable to being targeted by criminal elements who are involved in drug dealing and sexual exploitation.

The ideal is supported accommodation for young people. Last summer, Dumfries and Galloway Housing Partnership, which is the largest housing association in Dumfries and Galloway, opened a development of 10 self-contained units—I believe that they were opened by the minister's predecessor—which are specifically for young people leaving care. Such accommodation enables young people to work

with trained support staff to develop the skills that they need to live alongside others and to sustain a tenancy either with DGHP or another registered social landlord.

Clearly, as the report identifies, welfare reform will make it more difficult for many young single people to maintain a tenancy. Councils and housing associations have housed single people in two-bedroom properties because one-bedroom properties are in short supply. I know from my casework that the bedroom tax is already having an effect, with tenants who are in receipt of housing benefit falling into arrears. Some of those people will move into the private sector—where rents are probably even higher—and, because there has been no legislative change or further financial assistance to councils and housing associations to address any financial deficit, some tenants could face homelessness through eviction for non-payment of rent that has arisen purely from the bedroom tax.

I hope that the Government will review its decision in that regard, because I know that most housing associations will use eviction only as a last resort. However, given the restricted financial situation in which housing associations find themselves, in part as a result of the reductions in subsidy from the Scottish Government and in part because of the attitude of the banks from which they borrow, many housing associations, particularly smaller ones, will struggle to cope with an increasing burden of unpaid rent. I hope that the Scottish Government will monitor evictions resulting from the bedroom tax, especially those involving young people.

14:45

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):

Like many members who will participate in the debate, I am a member of the Equal Opportunities Committee. I have been a member for some time now—it seems like for ever—but I was not on the committee when the inquiry took place and the report was published. Nevertheless, I welcome the publication of the report, which is an important contribution on the issue of homelessness, particularly among young people.

I will cover a few issues that other members will perhaps not cover. It would be too simplistic to suggest that building more houses is a solution to the problem of homelessness among young people. In fact, given the Scottish Government's poor record on house construction, that is probably just as well.

Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Alex Johnstone: No, not at this stage.

The issue is important because, although the Government boasts that it has done more to ensure that more council houses are being built, the truth is that there has been a significant cut in budget. If we take into account the houses that were previously being constructed by housing associations, the number of houses being built has dropped significantly. In fact, given issues such as the underoccupancy charge, which has been mentioned, the question could be asked whether Government policy is leading to the construction of homes that are suitable for the demand that we expect in years to come.

Every year, many thousands of young people leave the family home to pursue their ambitions, perhaps in higher education, in the armed forces or in some other career, which often means that they share properties with their peers. For the vast majority, the transition is smooth and successful, but a significant number find it challenging and dramatic, for many reasons, including those that have already been described in the debate.

The expectation that giving that latter group social housing and furnishing their new home will be a panacea for their problems has been shown by experience not to be correct, especially as such people are often left in isolation in their new home, which might not even be in the area where they were brought up.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind): Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Johnstone: I am sure that we have plenty of time in the debate, so if members want to contribute, pushing their request-to-speak button and attracting the Presiding Officer's attention might be the way to go.

Too often, young people lack the life skills that many of us take for granted, such as budgeting or cooking a basic nutritious meal, and their tenancy ends in failure. Contributory factors such as drug and alcohol abuse, either by the individual or, perhaps more likely, a member of their peer group, can result in a chaotic lifestyle and ultimately have a catastrophic effect on neighbours and the wider community. That leads to the young person's eviction, and the revolving door of homelessness starts up, which obviously has significant costs for the young person, the community and the public purse. That scenario is played out again and again, which highlights the need for greater support to allow young people to maintain their tenancies and make a positive contribution to the safe and stable communities that we all want, whatever our age.

Allocation policies need to be addressed. For a young person, finding a home can be an immense challenge. Some private sector landlords are reluctant to give a tenancy to a young person,

while others might choose to offer a property that is otherwise difficult to let, perhaps because of its location or condition. That results in a reliance on social housing providers, particularly local authorities. However, I argue that the system is not geared to allow our well-qualified and hugely committed housing officers the flexibility to give young people the best chance of successfully maintaining their tenancy. Add to that the omnipresent threat of the judicial cosh wielded by a certain well-known homelessness charity, and the task becomes increasingly difficult from the outset. That is especially true when we consider the range of short-term options that are available, including the use of bed and breakfast accommodation and hostels. The B and B often proves to be the most inappropriate, and is always the most expensive, for those who need accommodation.

The committee's report refers to variable service availability throughout Scotland. Through contact with constituents, I was already aware of that issue. Some excellent organisations do sterling work helping to provide furniture, starter packs, budgeting advice and simple cookery books; the issue is that the level of service is not standard throughout Scotland. There are additional concerns that available services are not always as joined up as they could be.

I do not always advocate the spend-to-save model of funding services but, when it comes to preventing homelessness for young people, I find the case for doing so to be overwhelming. The Scottish Government's spending choices make that model extremely challenging for local authorities—and, indeed, the third sector, which often provides much-needed services—and will make it even more difficult for all concerned in the future. It is tragic that young people who may already have been let down by the system may ultimately be let down by it again.

The report should act as a wake-up call to the Scottish Government. If we are to level the playing field for all young people as they seek to make their way in the world, we must consider all possible facets, including tenancy agreements, allocations policies, the funding of support mechanisms, social housing construction and the many others that contribute to making the issue as pressing as it is.

As the minister said, the number of people in temporary accommodation has gone down, but that is only after a marked and consistent rise from around 4,000 in 2002 to more than 11,000 in 2012.

The Scottish Conservatives call on the Scottish Government to take cognisance of the report and put in place the bold solutions that we need to combat the issues that it describes. When the

Government does that, we will be delighted to support its actions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now come to the open debate. I ask members who wish to speak in it, particularly those who have intervened, to remember to press their request-to-speak buttons. There is some time in the debate at this stage and members who take interventions can be given time back.

14:53

Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP): Alex Johnstone finished by calling on the Scottish Government to do some things; I start by calling on Iain Duncan Smith, Lord Freud and David Cameron to show a bit of humanity and stop stigmatising people in rented houses.

I declare my fellowship of the Chartered Institute of Housing, albeit that it is a long time since I worked directly in housing.

Even longer ago than that, I worked in Clydebanks Housing Association, which was a new association in the mid-1980s. We began to do shared accommodation for young people, which was innovative some 20-odd years ago. Those who represent that area might like to know that that accommodation was in Alexander Street. I think that it was converted later to mainstream tenement housing and is no longer there.

I use that example to show that, all that time ago, we were worried about how young people setting out could sustain tendencies and felt strongly that it was not as simple as putting someone into a house and saying, "There you are. Get on with it." It took intensive management. I can say that with confidence because I was the sowl who had to manage it. It was not easy.

I have some concerns that the current move to much larger housing associations and registered social landlords will mean that we lose some of the ethos of community-based housing associations and that that will take away from the intensity of management that is sometimes required.

What has changed since 20-odd years ago? We have excellent homelessness legislation and recognition that young people have rights, which is really important. We also have recognition that life has changed and that expectations and aspirations are a bit different these days. That is the backdrop against which the Equal Opportunities Committee's report was written. There are examples of good practice, as outlined by Mary Fee. In my area, South Lanarkshire Council runs homelessness sessions for all fourth year pupils across South Lanarkshire as well as mediation services and housing options services.

However, there appear to be variations in service delivery across the country. It is quite right that the committee has asked the Scottish Government to take an overview of the area. Education is important, but if there is one plea that I would make it is that, as well as the financial education and the stuff that goes on in schools across the board, we need practical education on things such as how to change a plug, what to do if a boiler packs in and how to paint a wall. It is about more than just the financial side. It is about making a house a home. That is the tenet of the report—it is about having and keeping a home.

Over the years, I have found that benefits are always an issue in that regard. I remember one case that I dealt with some years ago in North Lanarkshire. A young lass who had come out of care, who had had hard times in her life, ended up with a lovely wee flat. It was absolutely great and she got her life together. She went to night school and got her highers and then she wanted to go to university, but she could not, because she would not get housing benefit. The choice for her was to get educated with a view to having a career and lose her home, or to stay in her home and look at working in the same kind of job for years on end. We have got that wrong, too. We have to join up some of these services.

That brings me to the bedroom tax. What is happening is absolutely ridiculous. We sit in the Welfare Reform Committee every week taking evidence. This morning, we heard from the chair of the Scottish Human Rights Commission just how pernicious the bedroom tax is. It goes against all the human rights that we stand for in Scotland. He said that he does not believe that this Parliament would have introduced it. I look forward to the other parties in this Parliament—apart from the Tories and the Lib Dems, who obviously support it—standing up and saying, "We would reverse the bedroom tax if we had the ability to do that."

I received some information from Crisis, which is the national charity for single homeless people. It is really concerned by the latest stuff that Iain Duncan Smith and David Cameron are coming out with, which involves cutting benefits for the under-25s. Currently, nearly 35,000 people under 25 claim housing benefit in Scotland, for many different reasons and in many different circumstances. Some 17,000 have dependent children. We must also bear it in mind that quite a lot of the 18 to 24-year-olds who claim housing benefit are also working. It is not the case that those who claim housing benefit are getting their whole rent paid. There are people who work really hard and just need a help up. Eight per cent are sick or disabled and claim employment and support allowance, and 28 per cent are jobseekers.

In 2012, David Cameron said:

“Choice one: work hard. Go to college. Get a job. Live at home. Save up for a flat ... Or ... Get housing benefit.

If hard-working young people have to live at home while they work and save, why should it be any different for those who don't?”

I will tell him why it should be different for some people. It is because they get a rotten chance in life. It is all very well for David Cameron to say that those people have responsibilities, but so does the Government. It has responsibilities to look at the rights of children and young people. Not every young person is able to stay at home until they can save up the deposit for a flat. I do not want to go into personal details, but I had to leave home at 16. It was not easy, but I got there by a lot of luck and a lot of good opportunities. An awful lot of youngsters just do not get that.

I know that I have to finish, Presiding Officer. This is about much more than just getting a home. It is about keeping it. I am glad that the committee's report recognises that.

I finish with something that a young lad in Motherwell said to me a few years ago.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): You should be drawing to a close, please.

Linda Fabiani: He said, “Do you know what, Mrs Fabiani? They gave me a house, but they didnae tell me how to work it.” That is the key to what we have to do.

14:59

Margaret McDougall (West Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to be able to debate this important issue, and I congratulate the Equal Opportunities Committee on an excellent and comprehensive report.

Homelessness is unacceptable at any age, but it is particularly harmful for those who are starting out in adult life, as it sets them up for problems for years to come. A range of social ills such as crime, mental ill health and addictions can be avoided or treated more effectively if a young, vulnerable person is supported into a home and helped to retain it.

I agree with the Equal Opportunities Committee's finding that preventative measures such as mediation, respite accommodation and education are vital to tackling youth homelessness and homelessness more generally.

For example, in the area that I represent, North Ayrshire Council uses a range of effective prevention measures, in line with the holistic housing options approach, and has found that, in the four years since its prevention strategy was

put in place, homeless presentations are down by 49 per cent.

Members will note from the committee's report that North Ayrshire Council has had excellent results from mediation between family members and young people at risk of homelessness because of family relationship breakdowns. That allows the young person a safe route back into the home. For those who are not at risk of violence, that is the best possible solution until they can enter their own tenancy in a planned and well-managed way.

However, during mediation, it might not be possible for a young person to stay in the family home. That means that respite accommodation can be a vital tool in the prevention process. Giving evidence to the committee, Quarriers acknowledged the great importance of respite accommodation. The committee rightly observed that that aspect did not appear to be well integrated into the mediation process and said that not enough evidence on respite had been given to the inquiry.

I welcome the minister's comments today but ask that she explore the importance of respite accommodation further. I expect her to give a full-throated commitment today to ensuring that the issue is given proper consideration in any Scottish Government action on youth homelessness.

Of the most concern to me was the committee's finding that, all too often—as the convener said— young people leaving care are discharged into homelessness. A system that allows that to happen with any regularity is a system that is failing.

Dennis Robertson: Does the member accept that with the work that is being done around the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill and GIRFEC, we are at least looking at that transition period? We should be getting it right for every child and young person.

Margaret McDougall: GIRFEC should result in our getting it right for every child, but there is still a lot to be done to prevent homelessness among young people.

More must be done to protect vulnerable young people leaving care. Their often complex needs mean that they are high-risk candidates for losing a tenancy, and they require a holistic and consistent support system. To that end, I fully support the committee's recommendation that the Scottish Government take action to ensure that appropriate aftercare is put in place across the board, and there should be a review of where the system is failing.

I would like the report to have explored in greater depth the involvement of the voluntary

sector in helping young people to get and keep a home. For those young people who enter a tenancy and are neither financially nor emotionally prepared, voluntary organisations can provide targeted and alternative forms of support that can bolster existing local authority services. That might answer Linda Fabiani's point about practical help for young people.

Involving the voluntary sector might also be a good way of integrating young people into their neighbourhoods, teaching them new skills and making them more employable.

I therefore urge the minister to focus on co-ordinating with housing options hubs to ensure that the voluntary sector is involved and valued, not only in the process of resolving homelessness when it occurs but in the prevention of housing crises among young people.

The costs of tenancy failure are huge, not only to the taxpayer but to young people who are made homeless. Becoming homeless as a result of a lost tenancy can irreparably damage a person's life, and the impact on our society is huge. We must do everything that we can to co-ordinate a consistent national response that incorporates the Equal Opportunities Committee's recommendations into a meaningful and wide-ranging strategy to ensure that young people are supported into homes in a safe, planned and sustainable way.

15:05

Richard Lyle (Central Scotland) (SNP): I do not think that Alex Johnstone wrote his speech. I am appalled at his speech, which was typical Tory dogma. For 36 years, I was at the sharp end of homelessness: as a local councillor, I worked with families and young people to secure accommodation. People need to be helped, not pilloried as the Tories have done today.

As members know, the Scottish Government set out a target to tackle homelessness in Scotland, stating that

"all unintentionally homeless households have a right to settled accommodation by the end of 2012."

Its homelessness legislation is regarded as among the most progressive in Europe. Positive results can already be seen. From October to December 2012, there were 8,734 applications for homelessness assistance—12 per cent lower than in the same period in 2011. There were 7,526 assessments of people who were homeless or threatened with homelessness, which is 8 per cent lower than in the same period in 2011.

I am sure that the Scottish Government remains committed to implementing measures to protect the most vulnerable groups in society, particularly

young people, in order to ensure that they have access to good-quality housing. While the Westminster Government implements destructive welfare reforms that will put thousands of Scottish tenants at risk, the Scottish Government has announced funding to help to minimise the devastating effects that the Westminster cuts will have.

In 2011, the Government announced the creation of a Scottish welfare fund, which will run for two years from April 2013. The fund has two main goals. The first is to

"provide a safety net ... when there is an immediate threat to health",

and the second is to

"enable independent living or continued independent living, preventing the need for institutional care."

I note that the Government has announced an additional £9.2 million for the fund, which brings the total value of the fund in its first year to £33 million.

The Equal Opportunities Committee's inquiry last year into having and keeping a home highlighted the principal causes of homelessness in Scotland. One cause is family breakdown. The committee was presented with a bleak picture of the causes of family breakdown, which include addiction issues and mental health problems. Those are particularly problematic as young people do not have an effective means of communicating the problem, and so it is never resolved and gets worse until the young person is taken into the system. Some of those young people may be given their own tenancy, but they rarely know how to keep it. Linda Fabiani expressed well the problems that young people face.

Another principal cause of homelessness is the parents' or carers' attitude, which can put young people at risk. Unfortunately, some young people cannot stay in their family home because of abuse and have to leave for their safety. Overcrowding in the family home can be a factor. If too many people live in the home, there might be no place for the young person. Some parents and carers think that as soon as someone is 16, they are an adult and it is time for them to leave home and make their way in life. In many cases, those young people are left to fall into the system. Over the years, I dealt with many people in that situation.

A further cause of homelessness is the challenge of employability. Without a fixed address, young people find it hard enough to register with a doctor, never mind find meaningful employment. A stigma is attached to homelessness and employers seem reluctant to offer employment to someone whose address is a hostel or supported accommodation.

To tackle homelessness, the committee has identified ways in which to prevent its initial or main causes, on which I compliment it.

One way is mediation. The majority of young people who become homeless do so straight from the family home. Young people have said that mediation would have helped to relieve some of the pressures in the family home that led them to leave.

Another is respite. Young people themselves have voiced the opinion that if they could have had a short break, it would have helped to stop them and their parents becoming overwhelmed and would have enabled them to rectify the situation.

Another is education. The committee has pointed out very well that education must play an important role in raising awareness of the realities of homelessness for young people, and that young people must have someone to speak to if they are to avoid the risk of falling into homelessness.

As I have stated, I dealt with homelessness on a daily basis as a councillor. I remain committed to helping anyone who finds themselves homeless.

I was shocked by the speech that Alex Johnstone made. It was not to his usual standard and I think that it was prepared for him.

We all must work together on this issue. I compliment the convener of the committee, Mary Fee, and her committee on their excellent report.

15:11

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I, too, welcome this debate, and I thank the Equal Opportunities Committee for the work that it has done on the matter.

Like Richard Lyle, my experience of young people becoming homeless came during my time as a councillor. My experience was not for the same length of time as Richard Lyle's—I am not calling him old—but during that period young people came to my surgery to explain that they were being caused problems by other tenants in the area. Other tenants would come to me to complain about young people's antisocial behaviour, such as playing music at all hours, and there was also the problem of young people with rent arrears.

When I spoke to the young people, I would find out that the story was a lot more complicated than just being about a young person sitting there playing music loudly or deciding not to pay their rent. I would find out that that was not what happened or what caused the situation. As Linda Fabiani has said—I paraphrase her when I say this—those young people are not bad people; they

have just had bad luck in life. They need the support that we can offer to help them move on.

Mary Fee mentioned Yvette Hutcheson's account. Some of the things that she said were quite interesting:

"If there is a family breakdown—especially if it is caused by addiction or mental health issues—the young person cannot really speak to anyone about it, so they take it on their shoulders and a bad situation just becomes worse until they end up in the system.

Some people might have moved out and managed to get their own tenancy and a flat, but they do not have the knowledge to keep it."—[*Official Report, Equal Opportunities Committee*, 29 November 2011; c 128.]

That small extract alone articulates the problems and issues that we are dealing with. For too long we have had a situation in which social landlords have flung a set of keys at vulnerable young adults and said, "There you go. There's the key for your new tenancy. You're now a tenant in a house. Away you go." They then wonder why two or three years later there are problems with antisocial behaviour and rent arrears.

Linda Fabiani was quite right when she mentioned the young man from Motherwell who said, "They gave me a house but they didn't tell me how to work it." To me, that sums up many of the cases that I had to deal with over the years.

The tenancies that young people are offered by the social landlord are normally in areas where nobody else really wants to live. They are in areas where the local authority or the social landlord cannot get rid of the stock as it is. It becomes a never-ending circle and an on-going problem. The young people are trying to do their best, but at the same time they are having to deal with the council to get repairs done. They are all things that are brand new to those young people. I like to believe that I had a reasonably steady childhood, but I have to say that when I was 16 or 17 I would have had difficulties dealing with that kind of situation.

As has been mentioned, people often end up going to the private sector, paying private rents. That makes things even more difficult, as there might be unscrupulous landlords who do not give their tenants the support that they need, and the rents can be phenomenally high. Support is definitely needed.

I am aware that Renfrewshire Council and a local housing association in Paisley are building supported accommodation in the south end of the town. That development is receiving funding from the Scottish Government, and it is welcome. That shows that we can support young people through housing. It is not just a case of throwing a set of keys at a young person and saying to them, "That's you. You've got your own house now."

We must consider education, ensuring that not just young people from difficult backgrounds but all young people understand what it is like to have financial responsibility. I have a 19-year-old daughter, and financial responsibility is not one of the things that come to mind when I think about her. I will probably get a phone call on Friday because she has worked out when pay day is. That shows how she has been able to deal with situations.

Education Scotland has provided a range of teaching support material for financial education, which the minister outlined in responding to the committee. We have to take the requirement seriously, and we must ensure that we provide the support.

Mention has been made of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill. The Scottish Government is seeking to strengthen the legislation on throughcare and aftercare to ensure that vulnerable children are prepared and supported in relation to their transition. As I have said, it is not just those who come from a more challenging background; anyone of that age has to deal with the responsibilities of life, and it can be difficult.

As Linda Fabiani and others have said, welfare reform will have a massive effect on the situation. There are 165,000 one-bedroom properties in the social rented sector in Scotland, and only 20,000 will be available in the next year. Alex Johnstone said that we should consider whether the housing stock is suitable for the demand. That is not the issue, however. For years, councils have ensured that people wanting two-bedroom or three-bedroom houses get them. I remember that, during my time at Renfrewshire Council, we got rid of some one-bedroom houses because they were not what the sector wanted—two or three-bedroom houses were wanted.

Westminster's welfare cuts are showing themselves again. It is the tale of two Governments: one that wants to do something for the people it represents, and one that does not.

We must support young people so that they can thrive in their new homes and so that they are no longer just an ever-changing statistic, moving from one set of stats to another—for example, a looked-after young person going into their own house might later end up being thrown out of their home. We have to deal with such situations appropriately, as the committee report has set out.

As Richard Lyle says, we can take it from the debate that we all agree that we should take responsibility in doing all that we can do for young people in Scotland and in giving them the opportunity that they need. For someone to have a roof over their head is one of the most

fundamental things in their life, and we should all strive to support young people in that respect.

15:18

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab): Dennis Robertson was right to say that we have the best homelessness legislation in Europe; Alex Johnstone was also right to say that building houses is not enough, vitally important though it is. That is why the prevention agenda has been very important for the past 10 years, since the homelessness legislation was passed.

It was also important in relation to the recommendations of the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee, which, by chance, was doing a study on homelessness at the same time as the Equal Opportunities Committee was doing its inquiry.

I will not go on about the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee recommendations, but one of them interested me. It said:

“the Scottish Government should consider the development of a measurement tool for homelessness prevention work.”

That is an interesting recommendation. The intention is to drive up standards and ensure more consistency across Scotland. I would be interested to know whether the Government has taken the suggestion on board, as it is quite an important one.

Let us concentrate on the Equal Opportunities Committee's report. As other members have said, the report emphasises mediation, respite and education, among other things.

The emphasis on mediation was particularly strong, as others have said. Edinburgh Cyrenians said in a recent report, referring to young people:

“thousands of them could be saved from the trauma of homelessness”

if there was adequate investment in mediation services.

Suzanne Fitzpatrick not only emphasised to the Equal Opportunities Committee the importance of mediation but, perhaps more interesting, pointed out that that was a key feature of youth homelessness services in England. It was perhaps surprising that she also said that we could learn a lot from those services in England, as we are generally leading the field in Europe on homelessness. However, there are things that we could learn from elsewhere. She said that the bespoke youth homelessness service in England is something that we can learn from, so we should look at it in more detail.

Along with others including Quarriers, Suzanne Fitzpatrick also emphasised the importance of

respite. She also said that we should concentrate on developing parenting skills in relation to teenagers. Perhaps the Government could take up that idea in its parenting strategy.

Education features strongly in the report. One of the recommendations is that we should find out why schools are not doing prevention work and remove the obstacles. That is an important recommendation. I was particularly struck by what Michaela Smith, from my local authority, said about that. She said that we must start the work long before the young people are 16 but that that is difficult for people who work in the homelessness service. A lot of the responsibility therefore lies with the schools.

Michaela Smith also said that peer education is important. That reminded me of an excellent peer education project that I saw in Edinburgh at the Rock Trust, which used to be in my constituency but is now in Marco Biagi's constituency. A year or two ago, the trust was working with third and fourth-year students at secondary schools. I do not know whether that work is still going on, but the approach was very effective at the time and could be copied by others.

There is quite a lot in the report about care leavers, who are a key group in relation to this agenda. The recommendation is for effective care leaver protocols and not discharging care leavers through the homeless route, as some local authorities do. There is also the question whether people should leave care at 16, which the children's commissioner raised in his report "Sweet 16? The Age of Leaving Care in Scotland". That is another matter, although it is relevant.

The minister referred to the housing support regulations and said that we must meet the housing support needs of certain homeless applicants. If she has time in her winding-up speech, I would be interested to hear what the criteria are for who should get housing support. Everyone who is unintentionally homeless must be assessed, but which of those thousands of people are entitled to the housing support service? It would be interesting to hear that, as it is not clear to me.

The minister also referred to the supported accommodation implementation group, whose recommendations were interesting. I will pick out two of them. First, the group—like many others—emphasised the importance of consistency of approach across Scotland, which is a recurring theme in this and other agendas. Secondly, the group recommended moving-in grants. The committee agreed that grants should be paid on the day that somebody moves in. That is an important practical issue that I hope the Government is addressing.

That reminds me of the importance that Margaret McDougall attached to voluntary organisations. In West Pilton, in my constituency, Fresh Start helps people with a new tenancy to get the equipment and furniture that they need. There are other organisations that help, too—we should remember all of them as well.

Central to the prevention agenda are the housing options approach, which many members have spoken about, and the hubs. I do not think that I have much time left, so I will not add anything about them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You may have a little extra time.

Malcolm Chisholm: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I refer—for the last time, I promise—to the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee's report, which said that we should ensure that the housing options service is consistent throughout Scotland. That is becoming a bit of a recurring theme for me, as it is for lots of people who have written about this agenda. There is loads of good practice in Scotland, but we must ensure that it is taken up throughout the country.

Although Alex Johnstone was right to say that building houses is not enough, it is an indispensable part of the agenda. I ask the Scottish Government to look at the grant per house for housing associations, as the number of social rented houses is dropping off and is likely to fall off a cliff in two or three years' time if the grant level is not restored. It is not me saying that, but housing associations in my constituency.

To the UK Government I would say, "Scrap the bedroom tax," because that makes the whole agenda particularly difficult when it comes to allocations. Many homeless people, if not most of them, are single people to whom two-bedroom properties cannot be allocated, and councils such as City of Edinburgh Council have hardly any one-bedroom properties.

The report raises the issue of shared tenancies, partly in the context of dealing with isolation. If people want a shared tenancy, that should certainly be an option, but crucially—the committee is right about this—that should happen only when the tenants give their consent.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You might wish to draw to a close now.

Malcolm Chisholm: If we are to have shared tenancies, we need to change the tenancy arrangements, because it is not possible to have a shared tenancy under a Scottish secure tenancy. That is an area in which the Scottish Government requires to take some more action.

I end by thanking and congratulating the Equal Opportunities Committee.

15:25

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I entered this Parliament, after a by-election, on 13 June 2001. Five other colleagues who are present now were there on that particular day. They will recall that, immediately after being sworn in, I was thrown in at the deep end to stage 3 consideration of the Housing (Scotland) Bill.

Linda Fabiani was the first member to speak in today's debate whom I heard on that day. The proceedings were extremely confusing and long, and they took place in a cramped chamber up the road, which got very sweaty on a warm summer day. Therefore, it is appropriate to return to the subject of housing.

I have the Christian name "Stewart", which is the family name that comes from many of my ancestors who were Travellers. They were not, of course, people who were homeless, but people who moved around Scotland with their home, although a number of my rather distant ancestors were homeless from time to time.

I was brought up in relatively comfortable circumstances in a large house with a large garden, but homelessness was not that far away from us. A gentleman of the road, whose surname was Stewart, used to stay with us in the bottom of the garden for a month each year; he used to get soup from the kitchen. I suspect that, to some extent, he was homeless through choice—perhaps he was reconciled to his circumstances—but in today's modern society, particularly in urban areas, being homeless is nothing like a cushy number.

We must think about the consequences that legislation can sometimes have. Homelessness touched on my personal circumstances on another occasion as a consequence of the introduction of the Licensing (Scotland) Act 1962, which changed the rules for the licensing of hotels on Sundays. Up to that point, a hotel could sell drink on a Sunday only if there were people resident in it. In consequence, hotels offered huge discounts for people to stay in them—each hotel had someone who lived in it at a low cost. When the legislation changed, all those people were thrown out and became homeless. One of them was a patient of my father. He was a poor wee soul. He was a former soldier who could just about get by. After becoming homeless, he lived in the caravan in our front garden for a year.

Many of the homelessness issues that we deal with are a result of highly diverse circumstances. For me, as for other members, the circumstances

that matter most are those in which people have become homeless through mental ill health. I worked as a psychiatric nurse for about seven or eight months between school and university, and many of the people who were in psychiatric hospitals in the early 1960s were people who could not—in the circumstances that then prevailed—live independently. Some of them had been homeless and then ended up with us. It was fundamental that their condition was based on distorted perceptions of the world, which required special training to deal with.

Anyone who has met, dealt with, lived with or looked after someone suffering from mental ill health will understand that. Some of the people in our ward—we had 32 beds—were there because of substance abuse, whether alcohol or other substances. Mental ill health is a particularly potent source of problems.

Historically, the support for mental ill health among the young has never been particularly good, and trying to throw them into the adult system has never really worked. Such young people become very disconnected from their peers as they grow up, so that they end up as adults who find it very difficult to cope with life. Objectively, that is not only a huge cost but a lost opportunity to the individuals and to society as a whole.

We have heard talk of finance, and we talk about training youngsters with relatively modest amounts of money in financial management. I cannot help but remember that when I was a youngster we had a local savings bank in most of our big towns. We had one in Cupar, where I was brought up. The bank came to the school and we all put a little bit of money away each week and learned a little bit, by practical application, about how to manage money and defer the gratification of spending all our money now for a future objective for which we would aggregate it.

One of the great disgraces that I think the Tories were responsible for was the selling off of the Trustee Savings Bank and turning it into just an ordinary bank with much less of a social attitude and conscience than it previously had. Not every kid is lucky enough to have a George Adam "Bank of Dad", and many kids find managing money difficult.

Of course, we expect financial management of a high standard from the people who are least able to do that: those with the least capability and least money. In all honesty, I do not really count the money out of my pocket as I spend it, and I suspect that none of us here is in the kind of income bracket in which we have to do that.

The situation of youngsters in care or coming out of care presents huge problems as well. That

is a regular feature of the constituency case work that I undertake, and I am sure that that is the case for all members.

The committee has treated an issue of huge importance in a serious and useful way, but many of the reasons for homelessness are not necessarily based on rational failings. Mental ill health means irrationality, so I hope that we can support in particular those who suffer from mental ill health.

15:32

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): As a substitute member of the Equal Opportunities Committee, I have played no part in producing its report, "Having and keeping a home: steps to preventing homelessness among young people", but I am delighted to take part in the debate on the report and to state how helpful it is.

What struck me about the report was that there is clear evidence on how effective targeted multi-agency support can be in preventing youth homelessness in the first place. The work in Angus is a huge success—a young persons options service was implemented that saw a 75 per cent reduction in homeless presentations after its first month—and many local authorities could and probably should look to emulate it.

It is clear from the report that one area that needs improvement is the mythology around young people moving into their first flat compared with what the reality often is. It came out again and again in the evidence that young folk thought that living alone would be great but quickly realised that they had glamorised it as a life of doing what they wanted when in fact it can be a lonely and very isolating existence. I therefore welcome the report's recommendations and the Scottish Government's commitment to look at supportive adult foster services that could offer the help and assistance that is often required for the transition into living alone for the first time.

The aim of homelessness services should be to support everyone into appropriate housing that is suitable for their needs. The report refers to the issues around sub-standard housing, and we know that the Scottish Government is working on that area. I am sure that members support the new independent Scottish Housing Regulator, which is responsible for monitoring the progress of landlords in achieving the living standards set out in the social housing charter, which need to be achieved by 2015.

A lot of good work is being done on supporting young people in their transition into a new tenancy or home and it is important that that momentum continues. The new curriculum for excellence looks as if it will be a good vehicle for teaching

lessons on finance and budgeting and looking after a home. Stewart Stevenson, Linda Fabiani and others spoke about such matters earlier.

In the report, the committee was keen to see more work on the role of education in schools. That idea had a lot of support from affected stakeholders, who suggested that the work should not be an add-on but should—as the convener said—be offered to all pupils in all schools, perhaps through personal and social education lessons.

It is clear that the homelessness prevention programmes that are in place in schools are very successful, and that they should become the norm. It is also important that they are interactive and relaxed and give information on what the reality of becoming homeless is, as well as practical information about budgeting, the cost of housing and the cost of living.

It is also important that support is given to young people whose education has had significant disruption. It was recognised in the report that disruption to education is an area in which more support is needed, because very often those who become homeless, particularly through leaving the care system, lack the social skills that would assist them in living alone. I am delighted that that will be looked at in more detail in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill.

It was mentioned in evidence that one of the barriers to accessing education at college level is that housing benefit is not paid to people in full-time education at college and that that disincentive to learn is a huge obstacle to overcome, particularly if someone can be paid to sit in a hostel all day but not for attending at college. That is an area of housing benefit that needs serious reform by the Westminster coalition Government. I support Citizens Advice Scotland's call in its response to the report. It wants the UK Government to ensure fair, equal treatment of young people in the housing benefit system.

I do not want to kick a man when he is down, but Alex Johnstone refused to take interventions earlier and I suspect that that was because of Iain Duncan Smith's comments yesterday about removing housing benefit from those aged under 25. We are talking here about trying to get a solution to a problem in Scotland and we are being hit with that whammy from Westminster, so I can understand why Alex Johnstone did not want to take any interventions.

It is clear that welfare reform is a barrier to continued progress. As the report says,

"given welfare reforms, we are aware that the landscape is changing and that preventing youth homelessness may become more challenging."

The Welfare Reform Committee heard today from Professor Alan Miller, chair of the Scottish Human Rights Commission, on austerity and human rights. In his written submission he suggested:

“Consistent evidence and testimony indicates that disadvantaged and marginalised groups ... will be disproportionately affected by the measures ... In other instances the measures may render people homeless or destitute.”

We are already seeing the evidence of that, as a few members have mentioned.

The welfare reforms were sold to us as a way to streamline and simplify the system to make it fairer and easier, to ensure that work pays, and to reduce poverty. In reality, they may—nay, will—render disadvantaged and marginalised people homeless.

The draconian reforms to our welfare system have the ability to impact directly on the way in which the Scottish Government, local authorities, schools, charities and other stakeholders work to help the most vulnerable in our society. It is a sad state of affairs when the effect of a report such as this, for which the committee has taken on wide-ranging views and evidence and has found areas of good practice and areas in which improvements need to be made, is curtailed by welfare reforms that are being imposed on the people of Scotland by a Government that we did vote for and ministers who will personally be completely unaffected by the changes.

A number of things came to me from the report. First, it is a very good example of what the Scottish Parliament committee system is capable of, and it includes thoughtful nuanced evidence and advice. It has asked pertinent questions of the way forward to alleviate what is one of the most serious problems affecting Scottish society, and it has recognised the needs of those most affected—in this case, the young homeless.

Secondly, there is clearly still work to be done, but I am hugely encouraged by the Scottish Government's response and commitment to work alongside stakeholders to get the best possible result. Thirdly, there has been recognition of the real impact, both at present and in the future, of the Westminster welfare reforms. Fourthly, the only way that we can fully alleviate the problems that come from those welfare reforms and make it easier to house all our young people is with the full powers of an independent country.

15:39

Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to today's debate and I thank the members of the Equal Opportunities Committee for their time on, and

commitment to, the important subject of homelessness among Scotland's young people.

We know that all forms of homelessness are on the rise as a consequence of the challenging economic circumstances that we face. However, homelessness among young people is often a result not of failure to pay rent or redundancy from employment, but of family breakdown and the absence of effective intervention.

The UK homelessness charity Crisis—which I thank for its detailed briefing for the debate—has identified that most young people who end up without accommodation do so because they have been told by parents or carers to leave the family home. However, it would be naive to assume that the current levels of youth unemployment across the country have played no role in family breakdowns, which can follow periods of mental ill health, deteriorating personal relationships and concerns about household finances. In truth, we can recognise that cuts to housing benefits, the welfare reforms and high unemployment affect youth homelessness just as much as they affect housing issues for people who are over the age of 25.

That illustrates the need for effective intervention services that offer support and good-quality accommodation for young people after they leave the family home, or exit care services, after the age of 18. Crisis has recognised that the overwhelming majority of young people who find themselves without accommodation have been considered to be vulnerable. More than 50 per cent have been excluded from school, and more than 40 per cent have been identified as survivors of some form of abuse. A third of homeless young people are known to self-harm. The work of charities such as Shelter Scotland and Quarriers has become invaluable in efforts to achieve the aims of the Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003, and is central to identifying the young people who are at most risk of becoming homeless.

The most effective means of tackling the root causes of youth homelessness is third sector organisations working in partnership with well-resourced social work departments across local government. Having worked in Glasgow City Council's social work services for children and young people, I know first hand that social work services engage with local and national voluntary organisations to share information and resources when that is necessary for the benefit of the most vulnerable young people.

However, I have also experienced the effects of cuts to local government budgets and staff, and the inevitable impact that cuts have had on the ability of social work to support the young people who are most affected by family breakdown.

Ambitious targets such as those in the 2003 act are commendable, but they are utterly meaningless without proper resourcing and the financial assistance that allow staff to dedicate the appropriate time to individuals and families who have unique and complex needs.

The lack of affordable social housing in Scotland compounds that problem and means that, even when social work staff have addressed the needs of the young people with whom they work, the level of assistance that they can provide may be further restricted due to the limited supply of suitable accommodation.

We can all agree that the existence of youth homelessness is a devastating reality and that much more should be done to protect people under 25 who face the prospect of living on the streets. Ultimately, we must commit to the necessary increase in the resources that are awarded to local government so that our social work services are able to dedicate the necessary time to every young person who is at risk in our communities.

The excellent work of our voluntary sector must be complemented by an adequately funded public sector and a substantial increase in the construction of affordable social housing across the country. That collective approach is the only route to ensuring that Scotland's young people are not casualties of Westminster's welfare reform, the Scottish Government's local government cuts, and rising levels of unemployment.

15:44

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I thank the Equal Opportunities Committee for the debate. Any decent society should do what it can to tackle and end youth homelessness, and should give every young person the best chance in life. Obviously, that includes providing roofs over their heads. I thank the Equal Opportunities Committee for the work that it has done in assessing the problem.

Elaine Murray said that homelessness has preoccupied Parliament from its very early days. That was well exemplified by Stewart Stevenson's detailed recollection of his first day in Parliament.

Our homelessness legislation is widely regarded as being among the most progressive in Europe, and it is clear that progress has been made. Dick Lyle set out the most recent figures, which show a reduction in homelessness applications and in assessments of people as being homeless or threatened with homelessness. From October to December 2012, 96 per cent of applicants who were assessed as homeless were accorded priority, which is an increase of 5 per cent on the same period in 2011.

I am sure that all members welcome such progress. However, we should always be willing to make further systematic improvements, so I very much welcome the committee's inquiry and report. The committee set out the principal causes of homelessness, which include family breakdown; a young person can be forced out of their home if there is on-going conflict with family members. The attitudes of parents or carers can put a young person at risk, and can force them out of their home for their own safety. There are also financial pressures on families, which will be exacerbated by the Westminster welfare reforms that many members have mentioned.

The minister accepted the committee's point that prevention is key to tackling the problem and to reducing the incidence of youth homelessness. The committee made key suggestions in that regard; it suggests that mediation can play an important role, and it talked about respite and education as being part of the prevention strategy.

It is interesting that, in evidence, Janeine Barrett of North Ayrshire Council—which is the lead authority for the Ayrshire and south housing options hub—said that staff systematically and vigorously try to track down the parents by phone on the day when a young person presents as homeless, and that the approach is successful in most cases. That demonstrates that mediation can work. The point was accepted by Keith Brown, who was Minister for Housing and Transport at the time, and in her response to the committee's report, Margaret Burgess said:

"The Housing Options approach has embraced mediation in many parts of Scotland".

The issue is clearly important to the Scottish Government.

I was interested to hear that respite features as an important issue in the recommendations of the supported accommodation implementation group, which issued its final report at the end of November.

I am also well aware of the work that is being taken forward in our education sector to try to equip young people with the necessary financial literacy skills, which will stand them in good stead in the context of housing, and more generally throughout their lives.

Like Linda Fabiani, I am a member of the Welfare Reform Committee. From the evidence that our committee gathered—it is often mentioned in Parliament, and several members have mentioned it today—it is clear that the Westminster welfare reforms undermine the good work in Scotland on tackling homelessness, and threaten to exacerbate the problem. Some 105,000 people in Scotland are likely to be hit by the pernicious bedroom tax, for example, although

only about 20,000 socially rented properties will become available for rent in the next year. I am sure that other members are, as I am, already being contacted by constituents who are in arrears as a consequence of the bedroom tax. The problem that people have been talking about for some time is starting to emerge.

It was interesting to see in paragraph 87 of the committee report the concerns that have been expressed about the time lag in paying community care grants. It was suggested that the problem can be “insurmountable.” The committee saw evidence of how that can impact negatively on a young person’s prospects of maintaining a roof over his or her head. I was therefore delighted to see that the Scottish welfare fund, which is the successor to community care grants, gives longer lead-in times—eight weeks rather than the six weeks under the Department for Work and Pensions current social fund—for people making applications to local authorities before they take up a tenancy. I hope that the reforms will make the situation better.

James Dornan mentioned the danger that is posed by the under-25s losing their housing benefits. I very much agree. Concern has also been expressed by Crisis about the changes to the shared-accommodation rate for people aged up to 35 years, which will affect 7,500 claimants in Scotland. It states:

“As a result of the changes, the vast majority of single people under 35-years-old in receipt of housing benefit can only afford a room in shared accommodation in the private rented sector.

In many areas of the country this type of shared accommodation simply doesn’t exist or there is not enough available.”

We are therefore again seeing the dangers that are posed by Westminster welfare reforms, which are working against how homelessness is tackled in Scotland.

I very much commend the committee’s report, and I look forward to hearing what the minister has to say.

15:51

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Some housing and homelessness-related issues affect people of all ages, young and old. However, some of the issues particularly affect young people or affect them more severely.

The lack of suitable accommodation has been mentioned. Alex Johnstone referred to that, but he forgot to say that the right-to-buy scheme was a major mistake. That scheme reduced the amount of housing that is available. He also omitted to say that there is a shortage of money for new housing because of the Westminster cuts.

Although I normally have a lot of time for Malcolm Chisholm, he talked about the housing grant being too low, but failed to say whether he would want a higher housing grant, which would mean fewer houses being built, or whether he would take money out of the health service, for example, and put that into housing.

Lack of suitable housing is clearly a problem. That is being made worse by Westminster’s bedroom tax and other welfare cuts. The fact that the right to buy has been curtailed is a welcome step towards improving the social housing supply. However, of major concern is the private letting market. It seems that some landlords have seen that market as a quick way to make a profit, but take little responsibility for their buildings or their tenants. Of course, there are some good private landlords and letting agents—I know a number of them myself, including some in my constituency. However, the cases that are highlighted to me by constituents tend to be about things that are going wrong. That is often the fault of the private landlord, but sometimes it is the fault of the letting agent or the tenants.

When we talk about the state of buildings, we must make reference to property factors, and some owners’ unwillingness or inability to fund repairs and maintenance of their buildings properly. I know that there has been legislation to improve factors’ behaviour. However, we also have perfectly good factors who want to maintain common property but struggle to get the owners, including private landlords, to pay their proper share.

Compulsory factoring and sinking funds have been suggested. I have sympathy for that approach, but a problem is that some owners just do not have the money for the repairs that are required.

It also strikes me that some tenants are more able and willing to complain than others. Housing association tenants are often well aware of their rights, and there are clear procedures for taking up issues, including regular contact with housing officers. However, people who rent in the private rented sector are often more vulnerable to start with and, if they are younger, they may be doubly disadvantaged.

Although I joined the committee after the inquiry was carried out, it strikes me that there are key themes running through the report. First, we need a joined-up approach and, secondly, prevention is the key—as it is in many other areas that we debate. That point is highlighted in the sections on mediation and respite.

The report also highlights the role of schools, both as a first point of contact in a crisis and in covering issues such as financial education. I

know that more work is being done on that by credit unions these days, but I also accept that there is a danger that we expect the schools to do too much if we look to them to deal with every problem that we have. I note the point that financial education provision in schools can be patchy—for example, paragraph 33 states that

“getting there was ‘pretty much dictated’ by whether headteachers viewed it as a priority”—

but I think that we must also have some sympathy for school headteachers, who may face a range of priorities, depending on their area.

When the Finance Committee studied employability issues, we also concentrated especially on young people. During our visit to Hawick, we heard about one housing association—whose name escapes me at the moment—which takes on some of the most challenging school pupils on work placements. That has a double advantage because it helps the young people to be more ready not only for employment but to be tenants. That seems to me to be a good example of a more holistic approach in which things are more joined up.

More locally, I recently had a case involving a 16-year-old girl in secondary 5 who was doing well at school. However, she stayed with her grandmother and, unfortunately, the grandmother died. There were no other relatives who were able or willing to help the girl, so she was left with very little income and a house that was too big for her. From what I can see, the school has bent over backwards to help her, and the housing association has tried to find smaller, more suitable accommodation. I think that the school has even helped her financially, but surely that should not be the school's responsibility. I hope that that situation works out well; it shows that we need a joined-up approach. Too often, things seem to depend on individual teachers or social workers going the extra mile beyond their job responsibility.

On prevention, there is so much that can be said—some of it already has been. Tensions building up within a home can lead to a young person leaving and becoming homeless, so anything that we can do to reduce those tensions must be welcomed; the need for respite provision is mentioned in the report and has been mentioned by members today.

Another option, I suggest, is to provide help to families so that they can get a holiday away together, where they can have time for reflection and be away from the normal pressures that the household faces. I recently led a debate on social tourism, which I think has a place in taking some pressure off families.

It is also good that the report highlights isolation as an issue. It applies not just to young people; we

saw a similar problem when residents of the big mental health facilities, such as Gartloch hospital in Glasgow, were suddenly moved into individual flats, where they felt very isolated. That was not the ideal situation for many of those folk; similarly, putting a young person in a flat on their own may not be ideal. I hate to think that anything good could come out of the current welfare reforms, but for some young people sharing the costs of a flat could be an advantage.

In conclusion, if we learn one thing from the committee's report, it should be that homelessness among young people is not just a housing issue or a social work issue, but is a challenge for a wide range of people, including ourselves, here. We all need to take on that responsibility.

15:58

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests as a director of Highland Homeless Trust.

As John Mason said, homelessness is a very complicated issue, on which a wide range of agencies need to come together to provide support. As we heard in the minister's very positive response, and as we read in the committee report, local authorities are working collaboratively. We also know that good work is happening in the voluntary sector.

The report reflects the good work that continues to take place, on a consensual and factual basis, among members of the Equal Opportunities Committee. For that reason, I was very disappointed by Alex Johnstone's speech. If the Scottish Conservative and Unionist party's view is that homelessness is a lifestyle choice, that just shows how out of touch the Tories are.

When the committee took up its inquiry, I was very keen that we should not lose the rural dimension—I frequently go on about that—so I was delighted that we took evidence from Highland Homeless Trust. We heard the strategic line from Dr Paul Monaghan, we heard the front-line manager's view from Gordon Fleming and, most important, we heard the first-hand experiences of residents Julia Edgar, Matthew Friess and Rhea Nicholson. We heard, similarly, from residents from Quarriers.

The rural dimension is no different from the urban dimension, in that if someone does not have a house, they do not have a house. It is very simple. However, in rural areas, services are invariably centralised and the absence of wider support from the community or family can lead to many challenges. We heard about the challenges for Rhea Nicolson's mother, who is a single

parent, and that, because of benefits implications, Rhea could no longer stay with her. That is part of a vicious welfare attack, which we heard about from Linda Fabiani and others.

Family breakdown has been mentioned a lot, although overcrowding has not been mentioned so much. I have similar experience to that of Dick Lyle. As a councillor, I represented the largest area of social housing in the north of Scotland. Highland Council has 11,000 people on its waiting list and there are 36 communities that have no single-bedroom accommodation whatever. Overcrowding is a significant issue. I had officials consider house design to see whether something could be done. When three generations of a family live in a two-bedroom house, there will be tensions, regardless of the other circumstances.

Support services are terribly important, as is mediation. The report talks about linking mediation with respite, perhaps because mediation has a greater potential to fail if it is not coupled with respite. It is important that a risk assessment is done. The getting it right for every child philosophy is important and it should apply across the board. In my experience, housing was not always taken into account, which was disappointing, given that we all have to live somewhere. I hope that that has changed, because a residence is as important to a child as it is to an adult, and the same pressures are brought to bear. Under GIRFEC, the wellbeing of the child and young person is at the centre of everything. If we have that in mind, we will not go too far wrong.

Truancy is an issue, and I see a positive role for the police in supporting other agencies with it. That would be not a punitive role, but a child protection role.

Throughcare and aftercare have been referred to. We are all corporate parents. The situation that has occurred of corporate parents leading their child to the service point to have them declared homeless does not seem to me to be the appropriate way to go about business. The report refers to the comment from the Scottish Council for Single Homeless that it is not a surprise when someone leaves care. Good grief! We all plan, and if we cannot plan for vulnerable people who are in our care, there is a problem. Local authorities are critical of the way in which individuals have conducted themselves with regard to families, so perhaps a bit of introspection is important, too.

The Scottish Government has talked about strengthening the legislation on vulnerable groups, which is to be welcomed. We have heard many comments about the life-skills deficiencies and lack of educational attainment that are often associated with looked-after children. Those issues are a corporate responsibility.

The committee clerks asked for updates from various participants in the inquiry. I would not normally discuss individual cases, but some people were happy to report and give us an update. Julia Edgar and Rhea Nicolson, who come from the Highlands, have moved from supported accommodation to take up tenancies. We all know the challenges that are associated with that—the issue is often not just housekeeping, but door-keeping—but they continue to receive support, which is important, and are doing relatively well, which I would say is not bad in this day and age. Matthew Friess, who also gave evidence, is still in supported accommodation and fancies a career in politics. He has not nailed his colours to any particular mast, but he was impressed with the Parliament building.

The Highland Homeless Trust welcomed the Scottish Government's amendment to legislation that creates new duties to assess households and to meet needs. There are challenges with the community care grant. As many members have said, collaborative work with the third sector is important. I commend the work of New Start Highland, through which basic furnishing and starting packs are available, so that young people can move into semi-furnished, rather than unfurnished, accommodation. There is sometimes an important role for people to assist in a positive way, even with decoration. The additional moneys to the Scottish welfare fund are to be welcomed.

It is apparent that the issue crosses portfolios. Although it is probably appropriate for the housing minister to be here, I know—from correspondence that we have received on this and other matters—that there is a recognition that the issue crosses portfolios. It would be wrong just to leave it to one minister.

Education has a key role to play. Reference was made to some programmes. One of them was called "on the money" and the other was called "skint". One was for young folk and the other was for old folk. It is clear that skint is the more appropriate one at this time.

On prevention, building houses will prevent homelessness. It is a long-term approach and only part of the solution, but I would like to see a massive house-building programme. There are communities the length and breadth of Scotland that lack single-bedroom accommodation and so face the problems that are associated with that. A massive house-building programme would be a welcome boost to local economies.

On housing options and overcrowding, many people in the council area that I represented previously were in two-bedroom houses. There was overcrowding there, so it is clear that more houses and a better range of houses would play an important role in keeping families together.

I look forward to support from across the chamber—including from Mr Johnstone—on addressing the issue of removal of housing benefit for people who are in education. It is crucial that we have active progress for people who are moving on.

I commend the response to the report.

16:05

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): When the report was written, I was a member of the Equal Opportunities Committee. I am no longer a member of that committee.

What struck me when we took evidence was the openness and honesty of the witnesses. Yvette Hutcheson, a young woman from Quarriers, has already been mentioned. She not only articulated her own circumstances but was an ambassador or advocate for many others who have gone through the trauma of being in care and transitioning to looking for a tenancy.

One thing that struck me most was that young people in Quarriers found it necessary to draw up a charter of basic rights that said that, when they have a tenancy, they are looking for running water, a toilet that functions, a house that is clean and electricity so that they can meet their basic needs.

Why did those young people have to draw up a charter for such basic needs? It is because, sometimes, young people are offered accommodation that most of us would not think was fit for habitation. They had to put down basics such as having a toilet that functions because, in some cases, they had been offered accommodation where that was not the case.

When I visited the community project in Edinburgh, the young people there viewed me with some suspicion, because they were not sure why we were there. However, when they relaxed, they started to talk about the difficulties that they have as young people who, perhaps, left home not because they wanted to but because they felt that they needed to for their own safety.

That is not a lifestyle choice. It is about people protecting themselves, looking after themselves and trying to have a better future. Having a better future is not about handing the keys over to unlock a door to more problems.

That is why we need to ensure that the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill gives our children and young people the right to protection and assistance and ensures that, if a young person takes up a tenancy, they have a key worker for their transition from care or from their family home. That is the right support and assistance to enable the tenancy to bring them a new and brighter future.

Partnership working by social work and housing services is not new. Perhaps I do not remember as far back as Stewart Stevenson does, but I remember, in my first social work placement in Govan in 1980, being impressed at the housing officer and social work services working together, examining problems in their community and trying to find solutions.

The committee's report is about finding solutions to offer a better and brighter future for our young people. I am encouraged by the minister's responses, by our belief that we can do better and by our recognition that there is more to do.

The committee published a report with many recommendations because it listened to the aspirations and needs of the young people who came before it. We listened not just to organisations but to the young people, with their real stories and hardships. Those young people deserve a better future, and it is up to the Parliament and members of all parties to ensure that they have a future.

16:10

Alex Johnstone: I am one of those members who are not averse to behaving like an Opposition on occasion, so I am happy to say what needs to be said when debates such as this come along. However, my opening speech essentially supported the views that the committee expressed. I am concerned that some people might have taken my remarks in a slightly different way. If at any stage in the debate I gave the impression that I believe that homelessness is a lifestyle choice, I withdraw that remark unequivocally. However, if on later inspection it turns out that there has been an attempt to put words in my mouth, I will take the opportunity to extract my revenge at leisure.

Nonetheless, the debate has been constructive and has brought out a number of key elements that are important for us to take forward. It would be remiss of me not to remark on the fact that, in his retirement from ministerial office, Stewart Stevenson is becoming a valuable resource to the Parliament, and he should be commended for his ability to remember things that happened a very long time ago, if for nothing else.

A number of key issues need to be addressed. First, we have had the usual railing against the right to buy. I will pass briefly over that by saying that we should value and learn from mixed-tenure communities created by the right to buy. Those communities' existence is a strength for our housing sector, and those strong, stable communities often provide examples of how things could be done better in the future. Perhaps finding a way to form such strong, stable communities in a

post-right-to-buy environment should be a priority for the Government.

It has been suggested that the shortage of building activity in Scotland today is somehow entirely the fault of the Westminster Government's budget cuts, but I have analysed a number of budgets over the years, and I see social housing being prioritised for disproportionate cuts. As a consequence, the housing association sector has been driven almost to the wall, and local authorities have been building properties—for the first time in a generation, in some cases. However, only local authorities that can borrow are building, and those that cannot borrow are not, so the level of building is not consistent across Scotland.

Support has been given during the debate for educating young people for life. Too many young people find themselves in a difficult position and simply lack the skills for life, and many members have discussed the opportunity for teaching such skills in schools. I share the concerns that have been expressed about such teaching depending largely on the priority that headteachers give it, so it is not always delivered where it is most required.

Dennis Robertson: Does Alex Johnstone accept that the curriculum for excellence is about individualising what is needed for each child at school, and that, if the pathway has suggested that a child needs such skills, the school should meet that need?

Alex Johnstone: As the member says, that should be the case. However, other members have pointed out that the priority that such teaching is given differs from school to school and from headmaster to headmaster. As a result, we do not have the level of consistency that we would like.

Malcolm Chisholm pointed out that, south of the border, there is a youth homelessness service. I will research that further and perhaps bring the issue back to Parliament, with the suggestion that we should consider such a service in Scotland, if there is a benefit to be achieved from it.

The final issue that I will address, and to which I will devote considerable time, is welfare reform. That will, inevitably, be brought back to the chamber time and again, because it is a subject of significant argument in the political structures in Scotland.

I believe that we are failing to tackle welfare dependency, simply because those who oppose reform are digging in their heels. For many people, welfare dependency is a life sentence. In our housing policies, we have in effect made that life sentence one that must or should be served in solitary confinement. That is an unacceptable consequence of where we are.

John Finnie: Will the member give way?

Alex Johnstone: I need to make this point.

The underoccupancy charge has a number of possible consequences. As John Mason pointed out, one possible consequence is that we could encourage people who need mutual support to live together. However, as other speakers have pointed out, it is not possible to achieve a shared tenancy in the current environment; that would require a change in the law. It is time that the Government looked positively at how the law might be changed to facilitate shared tenancies, so that we can at least in part overcome that problem.

Dennis Robertson: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Alex Johnstone: I am afraid that I am coming to the end of my remarks.

The final point that I will make about welfare reform is a challenge that I have put to the Government on several occasions. The need for welfare reform is accepted. In many debates in the Parliament, members have raised people's expectations about how welfare will be delivered in some hypothetical future Scotland. I am delighted to engage with that argument but, for it to be a serious argument, the Government must equip it with figures that tell us what the Government intends to spend in its future Scotland and how it intends to raise that money in a fiscal environment in which all resources will have to be accounted for within Scotland's borders. I believe that the argument against welfare reform that the Scottish National Party Government has made is dishonest and, until we have those numbers, there will be no honesty in that discussion.

16:18

Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to have been given the opportunity to close this important debate for Scottish Labour. As a member of the Equal Opportunities Committee, I was involved in the evidence-taking sessions that were held to inform us better of the growing problems of youth homelessness.

The debate has again highlighted the growing concerns that many of us across the chamber have about the issue. Stewart Stevenson raised mental health issues; Margaret McDougall, Anne McTaggart and John Finnie discussed the voluntary sector; and almost every speaker addressed welfare reform issues—even Alex Johnstone, although he is the only person in the chamber at the moment who is singing from his particular hymn sheet.

Throughout the debate, the need for action has been clear. Those of us who are members of the

committee and those who have been members of it are keen for the report to be seen not simply as a good document to read but as one that brings about action.

As the report said, the committee welcomes the initiatives that the minister, Keith Brown, spoke about when he gave evidence—particularly the fact that financial education is now part of the curriculum for excellence. However, the report highlighted the need to do much more. Many have talked about the need for education in life skills, and the Minister for Housing and Welfare and the convener spoke about GIRFEC.

We have to get it across that life skills should be taught in schools. Throughout the evidence, we heard young people say that they were let down by that. As John Mason said, teachers cannot do it all. They need support—we have to give them the tools.

Linda Fabiani was correct to say that we need practical education. That came across in the report, too. Young people told us that no one had ever taught them how to clean a home. They have the home, but how do they clean it? That takes us back to the young person in Motherwell who said, “They gave me a house but they didnae tell me how to work it.”

Another area that requires immediate action is access to community care grants, which Jamie Hepburn and Malcolm Chisholm, among others, mentioned. In evidence to the committee, Yvette Hutcheson, who has been mentioned, explained that those grants are supposed to be processed—including payment—within seven weeks on average, but

“in reality, it takes more like 13 weeks. When a person is offered a house, they can go and see it a week later and get their keys and move in a week after that, but there can still be another three and a half months before they get a community care grant to buy basic things such as curtains, carpets and white goods.”—[*Official Report, Equal Opportunities Committee*, 29 November 2011; c 136.]

The committee heard that community care grants can be insufficient to cover basic needs, with people receiving £100 to furnish their entire property.

Dennis Robertson: Does the member accept that, with the Scottish welfare fund, some of those problems might no longer exist, and that basic materials should be given at the point of tenancy?

Siobhan McMahon: I welcome the fact that we have the power to do something. The fund has been around for only a short time, so we cannot evaluate it. However, I will discuss one of my concerns about it later.

In October 2011, I spoke in the chamber about the opportunities brought about by the devolution of the community care grant to the Parliament. I

highlighted the fact that many people—young and not so young—had to wait for their grant to be processed and as a result failed to keep their tenancy. I said at that time and in subsequent debates in December 2011 and in May and June last year that the devolution of the community care grant afforded us the opportunity to ensure that people who apply for the grant receive the money on the same day as they receive their keys. In October 2011, Alex Neil, the then Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure and Capital Investment, pledged to look seriously at whether the Government could take those suggestions forward.

When he was asked at the committee whether the Scottish Government would consider ensuring that the community care grant was paid on the same day as a young person got the keys to a new tenancy, the then Minister for Housing and Transport, Keith Brown, said:

“It is important that we try to ensure that everything is in place at the appropriate time ... I can see the benefit in people getting the community care grant at the same time as the tenancy, but I would have to ... look at the issue in more detail.”—[*Official Report, Equal Opportunities Committee*, 26 June 2012; c 570.]

As I said earlier to Dennis Robertson, I am pleased that the Scottish welfare fund seems to be making applications a little easier for people. However, Citizens Advice Scotland states:

“Community care grants are discretionary, which means that even if you are eligible, you will only get a grant if the local authority decides that your need is important and there is enough money left in the budget to pay you a grant.”

Although the Scottish welfare fund was introduced only in April, we should look at that issue again. I would be grateful if the minister provided an update on the progress that is being made with the initiative, given the need to make the payments work for those who need them most.

The report highlighted the case of Yvette Hutcheson, who received support from Quarriers when she became homeless. She wished to attend her local college when she was living in a homeless unit, but she could not secure a place, as she did not receive funding for that, and her place in the unit would have been in jeopardy. Linda Fabiani and James Dornan also spoke about that. No one in the chamber would want any young person to be deprived of a place at college or university as a result of where they stay.

Yvette Hutcheson’s case was not the only one that was highlighted in evidence to the committee. It is therefore imperative that the Scottish Government and its partners commit to looking into the issue further and to discussing with the UK Government what more can be done. Education is devolved, housing benefit payments are now

devolved and student loans are our responsibility, which is why it is important that we consider what more we can do as a Parliament, and that we make representations to the UK Government to ask for any relevant powers to be devolved, when that makes sense.

The condition of the houses that are offered to young people has been highlighted. Alex Johnstone, Malcolm Chisholm and John Mason spoke about the private sector's role in that. The minister will know that, at the time of the previous budget, Scottish Labour called for more money to be put into housing. Although that would not alleviate the problems now, it might do so in the future. It would help to alleviate the problems that Dr Paul Monaghan of the Highland Homeless Trust spoke about when he said:

"My experience is that the availability of housing to young people is poor and is getting worse. The housing that is offered to them is typically of very poor quality. The standard of customer care that a homeless and vulnerable young person receives from many agencies is very low, partly because few young people have the ability to complain about or challenge appropriately the services that are provided to them."—[*Official Report, Equal Opportunities Committee*, 29 November 2011; c 139.]

I am sure that we would all agree that it is scandalous that young people who are already in a vulnerable position are subjected to such low levels of housing provision. It is not acceptable that young people who have been forced into homelessness are treated in that manner. I would be grateful to know what action the Scottish Government has taken in the light of the comments and recommendations in the report.

Finance is of course the biggest barrier to action being taken. I hope that the Government will look seriously at the points highlighted by many members, particularly my colleague Anne McTaggart, and that it will do everything in its power to ensure that no young person is denied a home, an education or the support that they desperately need in the future as a result of a lack of funds afforded to them.

16:25

Margaret Burgess: We have certainly had a wide-ranging debate and a number of views have been expressed, but in the main the debate has been very consensual. There is clearly real concern about youth homelessness in Scotland.

I want to cover some of the points that have been raised. I start by saying to Alex Johnstone that the first fact is that as many social houses are being built now—with very restricted funding—as were being built when funding for the Scottish Government was increasing. The second fact is that there are far fewer people in bed and breakfast accommodation now than there were in

2005. Alex Johnstone suggested that that is not the case, so I should correct the record. I will deal with welfare reform later.

Malcolm Chisholm asked a couple of questions. One was on the prevention monitoring tool. That tool has been developed and so far 31 of 32 local authorities are very supportive of it and are willing to take it on on a mandatory basis. We are in discussions with COSLA about that. I hope that by next year we will be able to proceed with that tool. It is an important element, so he was right to raise it.

Malcolm Chisholm also asked about certain groups of homeless applicants having to be assessed in line with the new statutory obligation. I was referring to those who are assessed as unintentionally homeless and whom the local authority has reason to believe need support. Clearly not every homeless applicant will require mandatory support, guidance and advice. However, it is very clear that a young person would come into that category. If they did not, I would certainly want to know about it.

Respite was raised a number of times. I thought that I had made it clear in my opening speech that we are looking very seriously at respite as part of mediation. That was one of the recommendations of the supported accommodation implementation group, whose recommendations are being taken forward by the Scottish Government and COSLA homelessness prevention group. I hope that it is quite clear that we are taking that forward.

I think that everyone is agreed that focusing on prevention is the way forward. The focus that we have had so far with the housing hubs is having an impact. The Scottish Government will continue to support that approach, which has now taken root across Scotland. Meeting the needs of young people, including those leaving care, is an important part of the preventative approach that is being taken through the hubs, which are also involved in taking forward the recommendations of the supported accommodation implementation group.

More than ever, we are aware of the wide range of issues that can impact on young people who find themselves homeless. A number of speakers have said that it is clearly not just a housing issue. We know that there is a need for a joint response across all sectors and services.

As the committee highlighted, curriculum for excellence has a key role to play in improving the life chances of all young people. Young people are entitled to support to help them realise opportunities and reach their potential. Through the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill, the Scottish Government is considering extending up to the age of 25—which is beyond the current cut-

off age—the right of young people leaving care to receive support. That will be more in step with ordinary families, who provide support to their children throughout their early adult lives and sometimes—as in my case—beyond that.

As has been mentioned, we have provided an additional £9.2 million for the Scottish welfare fund. Siobhan McMahon raised some points about that—and she has done so before. The Scottish welfare fund is a national scheme, but it is localised, so it has much more flexibility, and local authorities have the power to award a grant in principle.

Even when the house is not yet allocated, the local authority knows that an allocation is coming. As has happened in one case, it can award a grant in principle to ensure that, when the person moves in, the necessary resources are there. That is happening just now.

Siobhan McMahon: I welcome that. We do not want a postcode lottery, with one local authority giving a grant and another not. Will the minister look across Scotland, once the arrangements have had time to bed in, to ensure that the scheme meets its statutory aim and is not something that is left to each local authority to decide?

Margaret Burgess: At the moment, it is a national scheme. We have produced guidance for it, and it will be monitored. It has to have the flexibility to meet local needs, but, as the member says, we do not want a postcode lottery. Every aspect of the scheme will be monitored, as we have said before.

A number of members have mentioned welfare reform, which will clearly have an impact on some young people. However, it is wrong to suggest that we must consider shared accommodation as an option because of welfare reform. Many organisations are looking into shared accommodation because it is the right thing for particular young people, not because of welfare reform.

Dennis Robertson: Will the minister accept that some tenancy agreements preclude people from taking on shared accommodation arrangements?

Margaret Burgess: Yes, I am aware of that. We are considering the point.

Loads of organisations are involved. Members have mentioned the third sector, and third sector and voluntary organisations are doing pioneering work through projects dealing with youth homelessness that I and others have visited, some of which have been mentioned in the debate. They are considering the issue of shared accommodation, and we are considering the information that they are providing to us.

For some young people, shared accommodation is right: it stops the isolation and is a good solution. However, it is not that they have to go into shared accommodation because of welfare reform. It is not correct to say that welfare reform has given us that option. The option is there when it is right for the person concerned. In all this, it is the individual and what is right for them that we are considering.

We want to continue with the getting it right for every child approach to improve outcomes for children and young people in Scotland. That approach helps to deliver our social frameworks, which include equally well, early years and achieving our potential. I think that it was John Finnie who said that GIRFEC cuts across portfolios—it is not simply a housing matter.

We have prioritised work that supports partners to develop the whole-system approach to young people under 18 who offend. It applies across all agencies, bringing key policy frameworks together into one holistic approach for young people who offend.

Experiencing homelessness can be damaging for anyone, but particularly so for a young person. As I said, I have visited a number of projects across Scotland in recent months, and I have met many young people who are looking to rebuild their lives after periods of homelessness. There are some very positive stories. Some people have come from places of absolute desperation, sometimes with mental health problems or addiction problems. They had been unable to sustain a tenancy, but they have been supported into one and will continue to be supported.

Some great work is going on in relation to employability skills, voluntary work and preparation for work, and I commend all of it.

Through the housing voluntary grant scheme £1.9 million of Scottish Government funding goes to projects such as those that I have been talking about to address housing support issues, including homelessness.

If a young person becomes homeless, it is critical that they have early opportunities to access advice, information, housing and support to help them rebuild their lives and futures. That is the important bit—it is about rebuilding their lives.

This Government's commitment to tackling and preventing homelessness remains as strong as ever. In these challenging times, we must all intensify our efforts for young homeless people and continue to be creative and innovative in our approaches. Scotland is a progressive nation and can rightly be proud not just of the changes that we have already made in addressing homelessness, but of the direction in which we are travelling. We are complementing a strong

legislative framework with an ability to work together to promote new approaches to prevention and to achieve positive and sustainable outcomes that all homeless people in Scotland should expect.

I thank the Equal Opportunities Committee for a well-evidenced report, and I thank the people and organisations who gave that evidence. I look forward to our working together as we continue to develop and embed innovative approaches to tackling youth homelessness in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

Thank you, minister. I now invite Marco Biagi to wind up on behalf of the Equal Opportunities Committee. You have 10 minutes, Mr Biagi.

16:35

Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to wind up on behalf of the committee for the first time as the deputy convener. Perhaps that is emblematic of how much the committee's membership has changed since work on the report began. We have had not only almost an entire change of membership—including a change of convener and deputy convener—but a change of responsible minister as well. It is like a latter-day ship of Theseus or, as I believe it is called by fans of "Only Fools and Horses", a "Trigger's broom", every part of which has changed but whose essential nature has continued. That essential nature is the concern that we have shown for youth homelessness.

A lot of points have come up in the debate that I will do my best to respond to in the next nine minutes. It was particularly good of Linda Fabiani to let us know how far things have come since she was a lass. Hers was the first of a good many testimonies of working on the front line, which included Richard Lyle's casework, Anne McTaggart's experiences as a social worker and George Adam's reference to his daughter—no doubt, she has a bright career ahead of her as either a financial adviser or a charity fundraiser. Personal testimony was a very important part of the inquiry, which included visits and a great many human stories. It was an example of how a committee should meet those who are directly affected, and not simply their representatives.

One of the key issues that has come through in all the speeches, and which was very much in the foreground of the report, is that of family breakdown. In the question of how young people become homeless, that is the be-all and end-all. Anne McTaggart made the excellent point that changes brought on by the recession and unemployment feed directly into that issue. When it gets harder to put dinner on the table and when the role of the breadwinner is suddenly challenged

by unemployment, stress grows, tempers fray and it is no wonder that people get into difficulties such as that which Dennis Robertson highlighted, when leaving the family is often an issue of safety.

Any committee report is only the tip of an iceberg; nine tenths of it is the written evidence underneath. Women's Aid's submission noted that violence is a growing feature of family breakdown leading to homelessness, and Shelter pointed to the same concern. There is a danger, when looking at family breakdown, to blame the young person for not being able to get on with the family, but there can be real problems—which members have highlighted—of substance misuse, mental ill health and domestic abuse. In those circumstances, it becomes a rational course of action for the young person to leave, and they should be assisted just as any other person in an emergency situation has a right to be supported by statutory services.

That is not to say that we cannot prevent homelessness. Indeed, prevention is a major theme in the report. Jamie Hepburn gave an example from North Ayrshire, where staff have tried systematically and vigorously to contact parents on the day of presentation, which has made a big difference and resulted in a success rate of between 65 and 80 per cent. The more of that that we have, the better. Malcolm Chisholm mentioned Edinburgh Cyrenians, which I am familiar with. The organisation has spoken highly of the value of mediation in preventing things from reaching the point at which angry words are thrown, bags are hurriedly packed and doors are slammed, potentially never to be opened again. I very much commend Edinburgh Cyrenians' written submission to the committee to any member who is interested in that area.

Similarly, the sofa surfing—that is perhaps an informal term to use; it would normally be used in a different context—or hidden homelessness that Elaine Murray identified needs to be looked at more closely, because if people do not present as homeless, they will not be able to access all the relevant services.

Education is an issue that has come up quite a lot. Quarriers told us in evidence:

"Young people have come to Quarriers and said, 'Is this really what it's like?'"—[*Official Report, Equal Opportunities Committee*, 12 June 2012; c 512.]

Stewart Stevenson said that homelessness was not a cushy number. It was suggested in evidence that there has been a perception that homelessness is a lot easier than it is and that it is a direct route to getting a flat. That needs to be challenged.

Peer messaging is another issue that has come up quite a lot—Malcolm Chisholm raised it and it

came up in evidence. We need to understand the potential but also the limits of education. It is easy to put the burden on schools, but young people are in school for about 30 hours a week, whereas the rest of their life—which is often very turbulent—takes up the other 130 hours, so we must be realistic. We must also recognise that schools, particularly those in economically challenged areas, are generally open to the realities of the situation and are doing a great deal of work.

However, as has been said, peer support represents a great opportunity, from two angles. First, being told what the reality is intimidates people. We have heard examples of people who have gone through homelessness bringing the reality home to their peers. Secondly, peer support can provide inspiration. Quarriers, which gave a lot of evidence, has run an exchange that involves school pupils going to Holland. We would not normally associate such exchanges with people who are at risk of homelessness, but the young people concerned come back greatly boosted and more able to deal with life challenges of the kind that have been mentioned.

Dennis Robertson: Does the member accept that schools can often identify a young person's need for support—through continual trancies, for example?

Marco Biagi: Yes, indeed. Truancy is one of the key factors that show up someone who is likely to be at risk of homelessness. The research by Suzanne Fitzpatrick of Heriot-Watt University highlighted all sorts of trigger evidence among 14 to 17-year-olds that would show up at school as warning signs. That highlights the importance of getting it right for every child. Although we talk about early intervention, that should not be restricted to the early years. If we can solve a problem in the early years, that will help throughout someone's life, but early intervention can mean intervention at the early stages of a developing problem in the late teens. That is where having a named person and agencies working together comes into play as an important factor. I was a bit concerned that GIRFEC was not mentioned by many of the agencies that came to give evidence. There is always a danger of siloing in how we look at the issue.

There has also been debate about life skills. George Adam made the point that the keys are not enough. There were differences of opinion on life skills among those who gave evidence. For some people, a lack of life skills is a real problem, but others struggle even to get that far. Streetwork, which works in my constituency, said:

"homelessness work is not simply about teaching young people the practical skills to maintain a tenancy, though these are important too. It is primarily about understanding

the impact that neglect, trauma and abuse have upon the emotional development and behaviour of young people."

Another issue that did not come up a great deal in the evidence, and which has not been mentioned much in the debate, is employability. There is a set of layers. For someone to become employable, they must have life skills, but before they can have life skills they must overcome—in many cases—mental health challenges, such as those that Stewart Stevenson talked about. If they want to take the final step to employability, they come across the benefits trap of going to college, which Linda Fabiani, James Dornan and Siobhan McMahon mentioned. Many witnesses cited that, too, not least Yvette Hutcheson, who gave us the example of how she would be paid to sit in a hostel, but not to sit in a college classroom. Although we might have differing opinions on how to solve that issue, it is definitely one that must come to the foreground.

We have seen some progress with the community care grant. Lots of speakers highlighted that and it is right to emphasise it. Siobhan McMahon was right to highlight the existing seven-week target, and we now have a three-week target that everyone will back. I do not think that I am overstepping my remit as the committee's deputy convener when I say that the committee will be interested to see whether the target is observed.

Dennis Robertson spoke well about the Quarriers charter. John Mason made the point that, because by 2015 all social housing will be regulated through the Scottish housing quality standard, we have the possibility of two tiers opening up, the other being private rented sector accommodation. I know that a strategy is coming later in the year and I am sure that the Equal Opportunities Committee and other committees will look at the issue through that lens.

Welfare reform was not touched on as much in the report as it has been in the debate, although the issue came up in the written evidence. We have seen the Scottish Government step in to provide greater funding for advice, to take over the community care grant and to deal with council tax benefit reform. However, there is a limit to how much the Scottish Government can do. Alex Johnstone said that he would like to see a debate on that issue. With an impartial hat on, I think that I speak for the majority of the committee when I say that I would quite like to see that as well. Perhaps it would be useful to the Equal Opportunities Committee and other committees if the Parliament had access to the DWP dataset so that we could properly model all the implications.

I will end where Margaret McDougall began. We must remember the human cost of youth homelessness: potentially blighted lives, crime and

ill-health. That is a future that the Scottish Government, local government and the Parliament must strain every sinew to prevent. I hope that the report will provide some basis for that.

Scottish Law Commission Reports (Implementation)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-06693, in the name of Dave Thompson, on behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, on implementing Scottish Law Commission reports. I call Dave Thompson to speak on behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee and to move the motion. You have around four minutes, please.

16:47

Dave Thompson (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): The Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee recommends a series of standing order changes that will establish a procedure for the Parliament to consider bills that arise from Scottish Law Commission reports. In developing the new procedure, the committee drew heavily on a report of the law reform working group, and the committee is grateful for the evidence that it received from the conveners of the Justice Committee and the Subordinate Legislation Committee.

The Scottish Law Commission carries out a valuable role in recommending reforms to improve, simplify and update the law of Scotland, but the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament are responsible for deciding when and how to translate the commission's reports into law. That can be challenging, given the many competing pressures on parliamentary time, but it is hoped that the new procedure will address some of those time pressures.

The new procedure defines a new kind of bill, to be referred to as a Scottish Law Commission bill, which can be used when the need for reform is widely agreed but no major or contentious political or financial issues arise. Under the procedure, such bills may be referred to the Subordinate Legislation Committee for scrutiny rather than to the relevant subject committee. Only a minority of Scottish Law Commission bills are likely to be suitable for scrutiny by the Subordinate Legislation Committee and, to give some flexibility, the proposed standing orders provide for the Presiding Officer to issue a determination that will specify what the criteria should be. We anticipate that that determination will be based on the proposals in the law reform working group report.

The Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee considered how Scottish Law Commission bills should be referred to the Subordinate Legislation Committee and agreed

that, in line with existing practice for bills, there should be a straightforward referral from the Parliamentary Bureau rather than a formal consultation with subject committees beforehand. That will avoid the addition of an unnecessary hurdle in straightforward cases, and will not prevent the bureau from taking informal soundings from committees when it feels that that is necessary to inform its decision.

The committee also agreed that the Subordinate Legislation Committee should be renamed the delegated powers and law reform committee in order to reflect more accurately the range of the committee's new responsibilities. We are aware of concerns that that may lead to the setting up of a de facto second justice committee. However, the committee stresses that we have no intention of moving towards a second justice committee.

We consider that the criteria will operate to limit the number and nature of bills that can be referred to the delegated powers and law reform committee, and we want to make clear that the changes will not extend the committee's remit beyond that limited proposal.

We acknowledge that the new procedure will solve only in part the problem of finding parliamentary time to implement Scottish Law Commission reports. However, we hope that the procedure will be a useful option that is open to the Parliament. We will review the new procedure later this session, either after the first two Scottish Law Commission bills are referred or, in any case, after two years. At that stage we will consider whether the new procedure is working as intended and whether any further steps are needed.

The motion in my name invites the Parliament to note the committee's report and to agree that the changes to standing orders will be made with effect from 5 June 2013.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's 2nd Report 2013 (Session 4), *Implementing Scottish Law Commission reports* (SP Paper 307), and agrees that the changes to Standing Orders set out in the annexe of the report be made with effect from 5 June 2013.

16:51

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I say to the convener and members of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee that it was a delight to appear before them—and not as the accused, for a change.

I am relatively content, on behalf of the Justice Committee, that we have moved in this direction. Historically, I made and laboured the point to the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments

Committee and its predecessor committees that I certainly did not want to see another Justice 2 Committee. I fought—and lost—that battle as the Justice 1 Committee convener in session 2. Thankfully, the Justice 2 Committee was ditched in session 3. I am pleased to hear that we are not going in that direction.

The laudable purpose of establishing the Justice 2 Committee was to assist in processing legislation, but all that happened was that both committees—the Justice 1 Committee and the Justice 2 Committee—ended up with even more legislation, so it failed in that regard. However, I recognise that many deserving bills generated by the Scottish Law Commission have been left for years on the proverbial dusty shelf and that most of them—although not all—will be Justice Committee related. I continue to labour the point. It will not happen on my watch—I am looking the convener of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee in the eye.

I am relatively content. I proposed option 2 on behalf of the Justice Committee, which was that bills should be referred by the bureau after introduction, but only after formal consultation with the relevant subject committee. I realise that there has been a bit of a compromise—I think that that is what politics is supposed to be about—in that informal discussions will be held between the convener of the newly named committee and the subject committee, to see whether any issues arise.

As we know, the thing about the unexpected is always to expect it. Paragraph 14 of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's report makes clear that should new substantive issues arise on a bill that has been referred to the new committee, it will be referred back to the bureau. How many of us have been here?

I am looking at the criteria, which I will reprise. They include:

“where there is a wide degree of consensus”—

I am laughing—

“amongst key stakeholders about the need for reform and the approach recommended”.

Beam me up, Scotty. I am thinking back to the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Bill, on which apparently there was a huge degree of consensus. When it came to the committee, lo and behold there was not.

Criterion C is:

“which does not have significant financial implications”.

How many of us have sat in a committee, taking evidence at stage 1, and said, “Wait a wee minute.

We're told that this is the bill's financial implication, but we've unearthed other, unexpected, financial implications"? I am glad that there is that caveat.

I welcome the fact that the new procedure will be reviewed and appraised after two bills—I will not call them trial bills—have been referred. I have concerns—I keep those concerns here—that every time we are told that something is dead simple and that there will be no problems, as sure as eggs is eggs we find out that it is not simple and that there are problems. I put that down for my colleague, Nigel Don, the convener of the Subordinate Legislation Committee. We have a healthy working relationship, and I hope that it remains that way. The Justice Committee will ensure that its territory is not poached.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Nigel Don to speak on behalf of the Subordinate Legislation Committee.

16:54

Nigel Don (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): I welcome the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's report. As that committee recognised, the Scottish Law Commission has an important role in recommending reforms to update the law in Scotland. It is important that those reforms are not lost and that Parliament has the opportunity to translate them into law. The committee also recognised, as did the law reform working group, which informed its work, that a number of factors impede the consideration of Scottish Law Commission-inspired bills, most notably the availability of committee time to consider them.

The Subordinate Legislation Committee has a busy work programme in dealing with secondary legislation, delegated powers provisions in primary legislation, legislative consent memoranda and Public Bodies Act 2011 consent motions. However, we recognise that there is some scope in our current work programme to consider bills that have been inspired by Scottish Law Commission reports, on the assumption that there will be no more than a few bills in any session.

In order to enable the Subordinate Legislation Committee to consider such bills, the report proposes a change in the committee's remit specifically to enable it to consider certain Scottish Law Commission bills, provided that they meet criteria to be determined by the Presiding Officer. The criteria proposed for the referral of Scottish Law Commission bills, as suggested by the law reform working group, are that only bills on which there is already a wide degree of consensus—I take the point that colleagues have already made in that regard; that do not relate directly to criminal law reform, which is absolute, I think; that do not

have significant European convention on human rights implications, as far as we can see; and on which the Scottish Government is not planning any wider work, which we can ask about, would be suitable for referral to the Subordinate Legislation Committee. It is critical to the committee that any bills that are referred to it should be referred on the basis of a strict application of those criteria, as determined by the Presiding Officer, and that, as such, only a minority of Scottish Law Commission bills will be suitable for referral to us.

Those criteria seem to be reasonable and appropriate. It is difficult to assess the impact that that approach will have on the implementation of Scottish Law Commission reports, but we have no doubt as a committee that it will effect an improvement.

The Subordinate Legislation Committee performs a unique role in undertaking technical scrutiny of delegated powers provisions and instruments, and as a committee, we would not want that role to be compromised. Extending the nature of the bills that the committee might consider beyond what the law reform working group envisaged could undermine that role, and the committee would not want that. I emphasise to members that we do not want to be a justice 2 committee or a justice 1A committee, and we do not want to encroach on policy committees' remits. The proposed changes appear to strike the right balance between enabling Scottish Law Commission bills to be introduced and referred to the committee, and ensuring that the criteria are rigorously applied, thereby placing an appropriate restriction on what the committee might consider.

Mindful of the change in remit, the Subordinate Legislation Committee agreed to seek a change in name, and accordingly proposed that its name be changed to the delegated powers and law reform committee. The committee considered that the proposed name more accurately reflects the range of its responsibilities under its amended remit. In addition, the name reflects more accurately what the committee has been doing to date, as it has considered delegated powers rather than just subordinate legislation since its inception. We welcome the report's acceptance of the proposed name change.

In welcoming the name change, I reiterate that the purpose of that change is merely to more accurately reflect the committee's remit. It does not represent any aspiration on the part of the committee to widen its remit still further. Indeed, the committee is of the firm view that its remit should not be extended, and in particular that it should not be extended in any way that would mean its considering policy matters. The committee's role is to undertake technical scrutiny

of matters, and members of the committee do not want to see that change.

I again welcome the report and look forward to having an opportunity as convener of the Subordinate Legislation Committee or the delegated powers and law reform committee to contribute to an improvement in the implementation rate of Scottish Law Commission reports.

Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (Membership)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

The next item of business is consideration of motion S4M-06694, in the name of Dave Thompson, on behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, on changes to standing order rules on Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body membership.

16:59

Dave Thompson (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): The Scotland Act 1998 provided for the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body to have four members in addition to the Presiding Officer. The Scotland Act 2012 amended the reference to read “at least” four members.

The Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee supports an approach whereby the standing orders provide for there to be four SPCB members, as at present, unless the Parliament decides on a motion of the Parliamentary Bureau that there should be a different number.

The motion in my name invites the Parliament to note the committee’s report and to agree that the changes to standing orders be made with effect from 5 June 2013.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee’s 1st Report 2013 (Session 4), *SPCB Membership - Standing Order Rule Changes* (SP Paper 261), and agrees that the changes to Standing Orders set out in the annexe of the report be made with effect from 5 June 2013.

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 motion S4M-06693, in the name of Dave Thompson, on behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, on implementing Scottish Law Commission reports, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's 2nd Report 2013 (Session 4), *Implementing Scottish Law Commission reports* (SP Paper 307), and agrees that the changes to Standing Orders set out in the annexe of the report be made with effect from 5 June 2013.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The second question is, that motion S4M-06694, in the name of Dave Thompson, on behalf of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, on changes to standing order rules on Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body membership, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's 1st Report 2013 (Session 4), *SPCB Membership - Standing Order Rule Changes* (SP Paper 261), and agrees that the changes to Standing Orders set out in the annexe of the report be made with effect from 5 June 2013.

Shia Community (Sectarian Attacks)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S4M-05853, in the name of Sandra White, on sectarian attacks against the Shia community. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament condemns recent attacks on the Shia Muslim population worldwide, including in Quetta in Pakistan where more than 200 people are reported to have died in attacks since 10 January 2013, and in Iraq, where it understands that almost 30 people were killed in car bomb explosions in markets near Baghdad in February; expresses condolences to the families of those killed or injured in these sectarian attacks; notes that the governments of Pakistan and Iraq have condemned these and expressed a wish to provide security for Shia Muslims; further notes the contribution of the Shia Muslim community throughout Glasgow and the rest of Scotland, and notes calls for the Scottish Government to liaise with the UK Government and its counterparts to eliminate sectarian attacks against the Shia Muslim population worldwide.

17:02

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I welcome the many people in the public gallery, from the Shia community and beyond, and I thank them all very much for turning up. I also sincerely thank my fellow MSPs from all parties who signed the motion, enabling this debate to take place and the plight of the Shia Muslims to be heard.

Violence of any form against any individual is wrong and is something that we all have a duty to speak out against. Only yesterday we saw the aftermath of yet another attack in Iraq, which caused the deaths of at least 66 people and injured more than 200. During the past two weeks, more than 300 people have been killed in a wave of attacks that threatens to drag Iraq into a sectarian war and plunge the region into further conflict.

In Syria there has been an escalation of violence in a conflict that has already taken many lives and which is having a catastrophic effect on thousands of people in Syria, Lebanon and beyond.

Although the Government of Pakistan has condemned systematic attacks that go back many years, attacks against the Shia community continue. Only this morning, gunmen in Karachi shot dead a Shia Muslim high court lawyer and his two sons.

Last week's terrible attack in Woolwich brought home to us all the barbarity of acts of violence. The violence has been condemned by all the Muslim community, in Scotland and beyond. I ask

members to take a moment to condemn such acts and remember all those who have lost their lives in terrible acts of violence throughout the world.

Extremism in any form is rightly to be condemned—it does not discriminate. It is important to remember that the violence perpetrated against the Shia community is another example of that extremism.

What are we to do in the face of extremist attacks? How do we stop them? We need to work together towards understanding and to have respect for one another. It would be wrong to see those acts of violence as a reason to put up more barriers; they should be seen as an opportunity to explore why they are happening and to find ways of ensuring that they do not happen again to any minority group here and beyond.

In Scotland, there was widespread opposition to the war in Iraq, a war widely accepted to have been illegal. Security for the Iraqi people has not been improved: the situation has deteriorated and it is getting worse by the day. Given the false premises of and promises for the war, the United Kingdom Government has a responsibility to the Iraqi people and other minorities who are being persecuted to ensure that the sectarian attacks are ended.

In Scotland, we have a responsibility to speak out against the atrocities and, although foreign policy is reserved, to do everything in our power to influence the thinking of the UK Government and the Governments throughout Europe and the world. We have a part to play. We have a distinct voice to bring to the table, which is one that I hope will be listened to. Scotland is an inclusive and pragmatic society that looks at dialogue and discussion as a way forward.

The Minister for External Affairs and International Development, Humza Yousaf, is a very capable and understanding MSP. He is someone who can articulate the will of the Scottish Government clearly, and I am sure that he will do everything that he can to put our view across to the UK Government and others.

Scotland is a country that is respected across the world for its contribution to the modern world, its sense of fairness and justice and its welcome to all. When I talk about justice and fairness, it would be remiss of me not to mention the work that is carried out in my own constituency of Glasgow Kelvin and throughout Scotland by those in our Muslim communities—some of whom are here, as I have said—the integrated role that they play in the services that they give and offer to all, and their deeply held conviction of standing up for the underdog and minorities. That sounds very familiar; it is what the Scottish people are also renowned for.

It is always a pleasure to meet with my brothers and sisters and to know that the mutual respect that we have unites us not only in our approach to each other but in our respect for others. I will not go into the individual details of having dinner at the mosque or my meetings in houses, but I am always saying, “No thank you. I have already had too much food.” We are treated very well and very respectfully.

I thank those people for the contribution that they make to Scottish society. The mosque doors are always open, and anyone in the community can go there and learn about Islam. The people in the mosque go out and do fantastic work in the community. That is why it is important to have this debate. As I have said, the mutual respect that the Shia community and other minorities show to everyone is important—it shows what a society is. They stand up for the underdog and for the minorities throughout the world.

We need more dialogue, not more weapons, if we are to end sectarian attacks against the Shia community and tackle the causes of extremist attacks across the world, regardless of who they are perpetrated against. The Shia community has a long tradition of condemning violence and promoting peace and understanding, something of which they are rightly proud. That is a voice that we share and one that needs to be heard.

I thank the chamber for allowing me to have the Shia voice heard here today. I look forward to the minister's speech.

17:08

Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab): First I say, “As-salamu alaykum”—may peace and blessing of Allah be upon all the Muslim community in Scotland and, in particular, our guests in the public gallery. I thank Sandra White for securing this important debate.

Attacks against the Shia community are on the rise across the world. Although the motion targets Quetta and Iraq, I assure members that those are not the only places where the Shia community are victims of violence. The issue is a serious one.

I accept that the Shia community is not the only community to have come under attack in the Asian sub-continent. For example, the Sunni community in Iraq and the Christian community in Pakistan have also frequently been targets. However, the latest attacks on the Shia community have been of concern because in Iraq and Pakistan, which are the two main countries in which the Shia community has been targeted, the Governments seem to have been helpless to stop matters. That is of serious concern because, when Governments let people down, sometimes the wrong message goes out that the targeting of a community is

acceptable. Quite clearly, that should not be the case.

I hope that the new democratically elected Government that is now in office in Pakistan will take the issue more seriously than the previous Government in helping to put a stop to the violence against the Shia community. If we can be of any assistance, please advise us because this is a common challenge and we should not be afraid to work together in a bid to stop the senseless killing of innocent civilians. I am happy to work with any Government that is willing to work towards bringing the communities together. I personally pledge that I am willing and able to work with any Government to fight against discrimination, bigotry and religious intolerance.

We must remind those Governments that fail such communities that they will suffer instability and insecurity to the degree that the nation is weak and the population uneasy and insecure. That situation is harmful to all people, regardless of who they are. Let us pray today that sense prevails and that people across the world will learn from history that violence is no solution for peace. Therefore, I look forward to ensuring that hypocrites do not rule people but that—inshallah, or God willing—people of substance do.

Sandra White was absolutely right that all our communities play an important role in Scotland, and it is important that we do not allow discrimination. Time and again in history, we have seen how issues that have started off very small have turned out to involve major loss of life, limb, property and solidarity, which is unacceptable in this day and age. Bosnia was just one recent example in which large numbers of people were killed simply because they were of the wrong faith or belief.

The Shia community is an integral part and important element of the Islamic world and, like all other segments, it must be treated with respect. Therefore, in today's important debate, I wish to assure the Shia communities not only in Scotland but elsewhere in the world that, if I can be of help to them in any way at any time or anywhere, I will be there with them shoulder to shoulder.

17:12

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): Although it is with no pleasure that I and other members come to the chamber this evening to debate the appalling attacks on innocent people across the world, I thank Sandra White for bringing the issue to our attention. Sectarian violence, murder and terrorism against a religious minority—in this case, the international Shia community, many of whom live in Scotland and most of them in the fair city of Glasgow—is an issue of grave

importance that deserves nothing less than the full attention of the national Parliament.

Sadly, sectarian violence is not a stranger to these islands, but no matter where it is found, sectarianism always has the same characteristics: prejudice, hatred, fear, ignorance and intolerance. The aim of sectarianism is to divide people and to punish those with whom it disagrees and hates. Wherever it happens, it is to be abhorred. No one should die because of the colour of their skin, no one should die because of their nationality and no one should die because of their religious beliefs.

When I knew that I would be speaking in tonight's debate, I googled "attacks on Shia" for a bit of background—I advise others not to do it—and found a depressing catalogue of man's inhumanity to man. The scenes from Iraq yesterday showed innocent people being killed indiscriminately just for having the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time—in this case among the Shia community.

The Shia community is not unique in suffering from prejudice, which also affects many other communities, but we must acknowledge the history of prejudice, violence and sectarianism that has been shown to Shia Muslims historically and throughout the world. Sometimes, such prejudice is even institutionalised. For example, under Lebanon's constitution, a Shi'ite Muslim can never hold the office of President or Prime Minister, as only a Christian can be President, only a Sunni can be Prime Minister and only a Shi'ite can be Speaker. In a system that is known as confessional distribution, seats in Lebanon's Parliament are allocated to religious communities and sects based on population using a census that is 50 years out of date.

That system keeps Shia Muslims from two of the highest offices in the land. It is a sectarian-building-block form of governance that, when it was introduced in 1943, was supposed to be a temporary measure. It might have been right at the time, but it is wrong that it stands to this day.

In the recent election campaign in Pakistan, the targeting of Shia candidates took the lives of nine people and injured more than 20. For what? It was for the crime of being a Shia Muslim and wanting to play their part in their country's political process. Just today, I read of a Shia lawyer and his two young sons being killed for the crime of being Shia, which Sandra White mentioned. Such cowardly acts of terrorism must be stopped. I ask the minister in his summing up to outline what representations have been or are being made to the Government of Pakistan on behalf of Scotland's Shia community.

In Glasgow, many Shia Muslims, some of whom are personal friends of mine—I am delighted to

see that the public gallery is dotted with them—are outstanding members of the community. There are businessmen and businesswomen, family people, political activists and citizens, who are proud to call Scotland their home. We are extremely fortunate that Scotland and—may I say it?—Glasgow, could be held up as a beacon to show how different communities can work together, socialise together and even celebrate their difference and similarity together.

The evidence for that is twofold. This is a kind of good news, bad news story. First, when I was googling last night, I found a map of attacks on mosques across the UK. Clearly, that is the bad news. The map highlighted 13 or so such attacks, but none of them was in Scotland. The Muslim community seems to have built a relationship and is clearly an integral part of Scotland, just like the community who come from an Irish background, including me. The Muslim community is seen in exactly the same way. Secondly—I had better get this right—on 9 June, an event is taking place at Celtic park involving speeches from politicians and the Scottish Inter Faith Council to promote peace and community integration. If ever we needed an example of the part that the Muslim community—in which I include Shia and Sunni, although we are talking about the Shia tonight—has to play in Scottish society, that is it.

Internationally, the people in the Shia community want peace and freedom; they want freedom to live their lives in peace, to celebrate their religion in peace and to live in their communities throughout the world without the overhanging threat of violence being brought down on them and their loved ones. I am sure that we speak as one on the issue. I whole-heartedly support the motion—and the Shia community.

17:17

John Lamont (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I, too, congratulate Sandra White on securing tonight's important debate. Religious warfare, in whatever insidious form it takes, is one of the worst things that can happen to a society. Although we in Scotland have had, and continue to have, our fair share of religion-incited discord, when it comes to such a deeply ingrained and divisive matter as sectarianism, we would often do well to look further afield than our own back yard, if not for answers, then at least for a degree of perspective.

Unfortunately, the persecution of religious populations is an all-too-common feature of our 21st-century world and, as the motion notes, the Shia Muslim population is no exception. Pakistan and Iraq in particular are two countries in which sectarian attacks against the Shia population are common, if not widespread. Human Rights Watch,

in its 2012 report on Pakistan, summed up the situation in five words:

“Pakistan had a disastrous year”.

The report noted that Shia groups were routinely persecuted and that some supposedly banned militant groups operated with impunity, even in areas such as Punjab, where state authority is well established. Human Rights Watch's 2013 report does not paint a more positive picture. It estimates that, last year alone, about 325 Shia Muslims were killed in targeted attacks across Pakistan.

The UK Government rightly welcomed President Zardari's speech last year, in which he recognised the problems that minorities in Pakistan have faced and the efforts of those in Government to address the situation. Of course, more needs to be done.

Two months ago, I noted in the chamber the persecution that Shia Muslims have in the past faced in Iraq. Although we can all be thankful that oppression on such a widespread and repugnant scale no longer exists in that country, it is of course a matter of great regret that any form of sectarian persecution should still occur.

However, I am encouraged by the words and actions of the Iraqi Government when it comes to attacks against the Shia community. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and President Jalal Talibani know all too well the evils of sectarianism, being victims of it themselves, and I share their determination to refuse to allow religious militant groups that are attempting to exploit political instability to exacerbate sectarian tensions in Iraq. I admire their resolve to ensure that religious insurgency

“will not be able to bring back the atmosphere of the sectarian war”.

It is regrettable that sectarian attacks are not limited to Shia Muslims or to the geographical areas of Iraq and Pakistan. In both those countries, other religious groups are also targeted, and sectarian attacks occur in Saudi Arabia, Syria and even in countries that have strong traditions of religious diversity and tolerance, such as Indonesia.

The UK Foreign Secretary has repeatedly reaffirmed his commitment to working with Governments to end sectarian attacks against religious and ethnic minorities. The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office has a strong voice on the world stage and it is right that that should be put to good use. Therefore, I welcome current FCO initiatives supporting interfaith dialogue and integration. The list is long, but it includes projects to encourage Pakistan's political parties to recognise the electoral power of minority communities; campaigns by the FCO's Jakarta embassy to raise the right to freedom of religion

with the Government of Indonesia; the funding of a series of grass-roots meetings in Iraq bringing people from different faiths together to combat sectarian violence; and general ministerial engagement lobbying federal and provincial Governments to guarantee the rights of all citizens.

As noted in Sandra White's motion, the UK Government has a crucial role to play in eliminating sectarian attacks against the Shia Muslim population worldwide. Therefore, I look forward to seeing how the Scottish minister intends to support the UK Government in its critical role in ensuring that we achieve the objective for which we are all striving.

17:22

The Minister for External Affairs and International Development (Humza Yousaf): I join others in thanking Sandra White for raising this important issue and securing the debate. I also thank all the members who signed her motion. I welcome the many people in the public gallery from the Shia community and beyond who have attended the debate.

I share everybody's concern at the level of religious violence in Pakistan, in Iraq and throughout the world that is directed towards Shia communities. As we have heard, in February, more than 30 people were killed and about 190 injured in a spate of car bombings in mainly Shia areas of Iraq. Tragically, that has continued, with more than 60 people killed in car bombs in Baghdad yesterday.

Twin bomb attacks on 10 January in Quetta in Pakistan killed 100 people and injured up to 200 more. Further bombings in February took the death toll to more than 200, most of whom were from the Shia community. The attack was definitely directed towards them.

I do not know a single person who was not affected by the scenes that we saw in the aftermath of the bombings in Quetta, when mothers refused to bury their dead and sat next to coffins in defiance until protection for their community was guaranteed.

Members from across the chamber made good speeches. To answer the questions from John Lamont and James Dornan on working with the UK Government and the Government of Pakistan, I inform members that, on 20 January this year, I wrote the consul general of Pakistan to condemn the attacks and express our condolences to the families that were affected. Then, in a meeting, I reiterated the Scottish Government's offer of assistance to work with the Government of Pakistan to do what we can.

From what the consul general and other Government officials in Pakistan said, I have no doubt that they have a resolve to tackle the issue. I will come on to the new Government of Pakistan a little later.

Freedom of thought, conscience and religion are closely related rights that reflect the freedom of an individual or community to think and freely hold conscientious beliefs. It is incredibly important to manifest religion in teaching, practice, worship and observance. Those rights sit under international treaty and are central to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

As a good global citizen, Scotland has a strong and enduring commitment to securing democracy, the rule of law and fundamental human rights throughout the world. We would, of course, expect all states to comply with international and human rights law, and we condemn human rights abuses wherever they occur. In our view that is a basic minimum requirement of any state under international law, although I appreciate that human rights are an immensely complex and challenging issue, especially for Iraq and Pakistan, which both have monumental challenges to address.

When I last spoke to Pakistani officials, they gave an unwavering commitment to defeat that type of violence. I do not doubt for a minute that the resolve of the new Government in Pakistan will be just as strong, and it may offer a fresh opportunity to tackle the evil scourge of violence that is directed towards the country's Shia population.

I reiterate that the Scottish Government, working with the UK Government, will seek to provide any assistance that it can that might be useful to Iraq or Pakistan in defeating sectarian violence. I will happily raise that issue, and reiterate that offer, the next time I meet an FCO minister.

The opportunity exists for us to engage with Pakistan. The elections on 11 May were a crucial milestone in Pakistan's democratic history and journey, as that was the first time that power was transferred democratically between one civilian government and another following a full term. I am sure that all of us in the chamber welcome the strengthening of democracy in Pakistan.

Tomorrow, I will be speaking at an event that is designed to address the question of how Scottish businesses can invest in Pakistan. We have a vested interest in seeing greater stability in Pakistan so that we can do business and trade with the country, and thereby help to lift it out of poverty and improve its economic circumstances.

In addition, we subscribe to the moral argument that—as members have rightly said—there should be no attacks on anyone, particularly minorities, who must be protected. Importantly, we in

Scotland, as good global citizens, want to see an end to that violence. I was delighted to announce earlier this month the award of £1.8 million from our south Asia programme to fund some development projects in Pakistan.

In Iraq, religious-based attacks are still far too common. However, with democracy holding, and with statistics showing that violence has fallen from its 2007 peak, there is cautious hope—I emphasise the word “cautious”—that religious violence can be curbed. Scotland is playing whatever part it can—even if that is a small part—in Iraqi development. The Scottish Government has awarded a total of £1.5 million to NGOs for projects to develop civil society in Iraq between 2010 and 2013.

The Scottish Government values and appreciates the contribution that diverse faith and belief communities make to enrich Scotland economically, socially and culturally. We have a vibrant Shia community in Glasgow—and throughout Scotland—which is part of the rich cultural diversity of that city that adds so much to its character.

I am pleased to say, speaking from a personal point of view, that relationships between the Shia and Sunni communities in Glasgow are very good. Both communities are members of the Muslim Council of Scotland, and they attend each other's events.

Sandra White spoke about the mutual respect and dialogue that exists. She also mentioned food and how people are always well fed when they go to a mosque event, whether it is a Shia or Sunni mosque. Food is a good place to start the dialogue—I am thinking of the response to the recent unfortunate and tragic events in Woolwich, and how English Defence League members were given tea and biscuits yesterday by a mosque in York. That helped to break down the barriers, and discussions took place, so we have a great amount for which to thank the humble custard cream.

After the bombings in Quetta, I attended a cross-party event with the Shia community in Glasgow, along with many members from all sides of the chamber. There were Sunni and Shia imams present, and all stood united in their condemnation of the attacks. It is important that that bond of common friendship is maintained, because those who terrorise our communities and minority want us to forget that common bond and remain divided.

I join all members in the chamber in condemning the recent violence that was targeted at the Shia community. It is in all our interests for Pakistan and Iraq to be stable and prosperous. Religious tolerance is vital for peace and

prosperity to flourish, and Scotland is committed to support efforts to achieve that.

We will continue to highlight the importance of improving religious tolerance with the newly elected Government in Pakistan and with the Government of Iraq, and we will do what we can to work with the UK Government to ensure that we end the evil scourge of violence and attacks that are directed at the Shia community.

Meeting closed at 17:30.

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e-format first available
ISBN 978-1-78351-153-2

Revised e-format available
ISBN 978-1-78351-172-3

Printed in Scotland by APS Group Scotland
