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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 30 October 2013

Session 4

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

Affirmation

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is a solemn affirmation by our new member. I invite Cara Hilton to make a solemn affirmation.

The following member made a solemn affirmation:

Cara Hilton (Dunfermline) (Lab)

Portfolio Question Time

Justice and the Law Officers

14:01

Criminal Justice Bodies (Document Retention Policies)

1. Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands (Ind): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to review the document retention policies of all public bodies in the criminal justice system. (S4O-02502)

The Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs (Roseanna Cunningham): The Public Records (Scotland) Act 2011 promotes efficient and accountable record keeping by Scottish public authorities. It requires each body to prepare and implement a records management plan, which must set out proper arrangements for the management, archiving and disposal of the body's records. Each plan must be submitted to the keeper of the records of Scotland for assessment and agreement. The keeper has published on the National Archives of Scotland website a timetable by which named bodies must submit their plans. The website also includes the keeper's assessment of the plans that have been submitted to date. Scottish ministers have no separate proposals to review the document retention or disposal policies of criminal justice bodies.

Jean Urquhart: I thank the minister for her reply, which was useful. What advice would she give to an individual whose ability to challenge decisions made by the criminal justice system has been hampered by an unclear document retention policy that means that the documents that are most vital to him are no longer available?

Roseanna Cunningham: Document retention and disposal policies are operational matters for each of the public bodies that are involved, which have to take account of relevant statutory provisions, for example under the data protection legislation. It is important that bodies in the criminal justice system have in place robust arrangements for the retention and destruction or disposal of relevant public records that they hold.

Under the Public Records (Scotland) Act 2011, as I said, there must be a plan that includes details of the body's document retention and disposal policy. I am sure that the member will want to have a look at the relevant plan in respect of the case that she is raising.

The circumstances of any individual case in the criminal justice system are a matter for the relevant justice organisation within their

independent powers or for the courts. It is difficult for me to answer when I do not know or understand any of the background to the question. I invite the member to get in direct contact with me and, if she does so, I might be able to help her further.

HM Prison Grampian

2. Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what benefits Her Majesty's Prison Grampian will bring to the north-east. (S4O-02503)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): HM Prison Grampian will be Scotland's first community-facing prison and it will accommodate men, women and young people from the north-east of Scotland. It will provide offenders with the ability to maintain close links with families and communities, which is intended to help them to desist from offending and to better reintegrate with their communities in the north-east and elsewhere on release.

The north-east community will benefit by an additional 40 jobs, which will bring commensurate economic benefit to the local community. There will also be an improvement to the visual image of the area, an increase in local work placements where there is a need for them, an overall reduction in travel time to courts and reduced carbon usage.

Stewart Stevenson: I welcome the cabinet secretary's comments. Given that the primary objectives of a prison are community safety and the reform of convicts, does he agree that the previous success of Peterhead prison's specialist sex offenders unit is an excellent base on which HMP Grampian can build?

Kenny MacAskill: Absolutely; I agree with that. There was outstanding expertise at that unit. This morning, I was at the Prison Officers Association conference in Peebles, at which the unit was being commemorated and officers from Peterhead prison were present. Their expertise will be used and shared across the prison estate, and I say on the record that we should all express our gratitude to those officers at Peterhead prison for the outstanding expertise that they built up. I assure the member that those skills will now be shared across the prison estate.

Graeme Pearson (South Scotland) (Lab): The cabinet secretary will be aware that our prison population is rising. The Government's forecast is that there will be 9,500 prisoners incarcerated in the coming years. Does he intend to build more prisons?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): The question should be about HMP Grampian and

the north-east, but I invite the cabinet secretary to answer if he wishes.

Kenny MacAskill: We have a prison replacement programme under way. HMP Inverclyde will replace HMP Greenock and there will be a new prison in the Highlands to replace HMP Inverness. *[Kenny MacAskill has corrected this contribution. See end of report.]* A replacement will also be necessary for HMP Barlinnie. It is our view that we have enough capacity currently, and the Scottish Prison Service accepts that view. When I was speaking at the Prison Officers Association conference, I said that I recognise that new prisons are built not simply for the benefit of inmates who have to be rehabilitated and reformed but for the safety and comfort of the people who have to work with them. On that basis, we have a prison building programme that will proceed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that supplementary questions should be in line with the original question.

Fire Deaths

3. Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what recent progress it has made in reducing the number of deaths from fires. (S4O-02504)

The Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs (Roseanna Cunningham): The latest Scottish statistics show that in 2012-13 the provisional figure for fatal fire casualties was 46, which is a drop of 23 per cent compared with the previous year and is the joint lowest figure for 10 years. Overall, there were 26,613 fires in Scotland in 2012-13, which is the lowest figure for the past decade. Although we know that statistics that are based on small numbers can fluctuate over time, the positive downward trend is undoubtedly testament to the hard work of the fire and rescue services and their partners in Scotland, and their continued focus on prevention, making Scotland a safer place to live.

Joan McAlpine: I welcome those figures from the minister. I hope that the new single service's focus on front-line activity will help those trends to continue. Does she believe that fire investigation dogs have a role to play in freeing up further resources by uncovering and preventing deliberate fire-raising?

Roseanna Cunningham: I am sure that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service will want to consider the use of fire investigation dogs and I invite the member to liaise directly with the service about that. As I recall, I have met one of the dogs in question and I think that most people would be impressed by their activities.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 4, from Patricia Ferguson, has not been lodged for understandable reasons.

Question 5, from Mary Scanlon, has been withdrawn for understandable reasons.

Sauna Licensing (Edinburgh)

6. Margo MacDonald (Lothian) (Ind): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on Police Scotland's reported decision to ask the City of Edinburgh Council to grant licences for saunas only on the condition that items of a sexual nature are not allowed on the premises. (S4O-02507)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): Under the terms of the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982, any individual or body may make representations concerning the granting of a public entertainment licence. Representations made by individual bodies, such as Police Scotland, are operational matters that the Scottish Government would not intervene in.

Margo MacDonald: I thank the minister for his reply, but I am a bit puzzled, as the Scottish Government promotes the safer sex message. It is an odd contradiction to ask saunas not to have any condoms in them. Where was that policy made? Is it an operational matter, or should it be overridden by the Government's greater task of ensuring safer sex and lower levels of transmission of infectious diseases, which are on the rise? That is another reason why this instruction is so mysterious. While I am at it, I note that the saunas that were visited and inspected included gay saunas. Does the minister know why that was?

Kenny MacAskill: There are two issues. First, these are operational matters on which we would not seek to intervene, but obviously there is a Justice Sub-committee on Policing here, to which Ms MacDonald is able to make representations.

On condoms and other aspects, let us be quite clear. Police Scotland has said that its recommendation was not just misinterpreted but misrepresented by the press and that it was not proposing to ban condoms. Police Scotland issued the following important statement:

"At no point do the recommendations make reference to the banning of condoms. Police Scotland absolutely supports proper measures to protect sexual health."

More generally, the Scottish Government is in favour of a harm reduction approach to sexual health. Evidence suggests that banning items such as condoms can have a detrimental effect on public health. Ms MacDonald is right that if a position was taken to ban condoms, it would be contrary to the Government's intention on public health, but that is not Police Scotland's position.

Equally, it is most certainly Police Scotland's position that where matters of criminality come to its attention, it is important that it should act. On that basis, the Government fully supports Police Scotland.

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary raise the issue of free condoms being provided to these saunas, which are private businesses? Will that cost be met by Edinburgh council tax payers?

Kenny MacAskill: These matters are fundamentally for the City of Edinburgh Council, which will have to consider them as it has before. Police Scotland is operationally independent, but I thought it important that we put on record that it was not just misinterpreted but misrepresented. I have no doubt that both Ms White and I can make representations individually to the City of Edinburgh Council.

Cashback for Communities Scheme

7. Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has for the cashback for communities scheme. (S4O-02508)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): I am delighted to say that when I was out last week seeing the work of the excellent cashback school of rugby at Wallace high school in Stirling, I had the great pleasure of announcing a further £24 million investment, which will be used to expand this Government's hugely successful cashback for communities programme for a further three years. That latest commitment to invest in our young people and their communities heralds a landmark £74 million of criminals' money seized and put back into communities across Scotland since 2008.

Sandra White: Will the cabinet secretary detail what projects have been funded by the cashback scheme in my Kelvin constituency?

Kenny MacAskill: There is a variety of projects. Indeed, before I went to the Prison Officers Association conference at Peebles, I was at an event for the Scottish Professional Football League music box programme, at which we had the first contribution in this country from the Fender Music Foundation. One of its guitars will go to the Partick Thistle community trust music box at Firhill; no doubt, many of Ms White's constituents will be able to enjoy that.

Projects in the Glasgow area have received more than £4.5 million of cashback investment, which has benefited more than 122,000 young people. There is a variety of projects in Glasgow Kelvin and Glasgow's west end, including the Boys Brigade, Partick boxing club, schools of rugby, Scottish Sports Futures, YouthLink

Scotland and basketballscotland, and the Scottish Football Association runs two cashback-funded programmes at Partick Thistle. There is a variety of projects, as well as small grants, and I am sure that the area is much better for that.

Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): When will we finally receive the evaluation of the cashback scheme? I and many others have raised concerns about outcomes and the meeting of its objectives. When will that evaluation come before the Parliament?

Kenny MacAskill: The scheme is on-going and will be built on. I can say that the Scottish Rugby Union—I am grateful to Clare Adamson for hosting a reception for the SRU—was very grateful for the cashback contribution, as were the SPFL and the SFA. I know that Mr McNeil does not like to put a dampener on matters, so he should realise that many communities and young people are benefiting. They include the youngsters who are getting the opportunity to meet stars from various bands who have given their time and the youngsters who are benefiting from the first Fender guitars to be given outwith the North American continent. That is a testament to the outstanding work and success of the cashback for communities scheme.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): Is the cabinet secretary aware of the recent cashback grant for a young people's chill-out area at the Dumfries multicultural centre, and would he be willing to visit the young people at the centre once the new facility is up and running?

Kenny MacAskill: I am happy to try to do so. I have seen some outstanding work with cashback for communities in Dumfries itself and in Dumfriesshire, such as at Annan Athletic Football Club. I am more than happy to try to catch up with those matters. It was a pleasure to be at the Easter Road stadium, and it would be a delight to be able to attend at Dumfries in the future.

Undercover Policing of Non-violent Political Protest

8. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what safeguards are in place to regulate the undercover policing of non-violent political protest and what the extent of such activity is in Scotland. (S4O-02509)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): The use and conduct of undercover police officers is covered by the Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Scotland) Act 2000. The decision to authorise undercover police officers is an operational matter for the Police Service of Scotland.

Patrick Harvie may be interested to learn that the Scottish Government will shortly publish a draft

order that will include enhancements to the regime for Police Service of Scotland authorisations for the use of undercover officers. That will put on a statutory footing the recommendations made in an independent report by Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary for England and Wales. The report followed on from the extensive media coverage of a Metropolitan Police officer's long-term undercover deployment.

Patrick Harvie: Although the most disturbing of the recent revelations took place in England and Wales, we need to ensure that we learn the lessons from them in Scotland. There have been allegations of officers having sexual relationships, and even beginning families, with their targets under the guise of undercover policing.

Will the cabinet secretary assure us that Scottish police officers have not been, are not and will not be permitted to engage in sexual relationships with their targets while acting as undercover officers?

Kenny MacAskill: I give an assurance that, when we recognise good practice, we will adopt it here. That is why the recommendations in the report by HMIC for England and Wales will be put on a statutory footing in Scotland.

The things that occurred south of the border raised legitimate concerns and worries and, indeed, were the precursors to the investigation by HMIC for England and Wales. I am not aware of such things ever having happened in Scotland.

We always keep up to date and, when good practice is demonstrated—whether south of the border or elsewhere—we take it on board in Scotland.

All my experience with undercover officers is that they are remarkably brave. I have seen investigations into Yardie gangs, in which officers came up from south of the border and put themselves in some difficulty and danger to address matters in Edinburgh. I have met officers in the south-west of Scotland who were involved in infiltration into Irish Republican Army-related gangs.

We owe those officers a great deal of gratitude. Their work is hard and difficult and they are remarkably brave, but I assure Patrick Harvie that we monitor such matters and will ensure that there will be no tarnishing of their outstanding service.

Corroboration

9. Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it will implement its plans to abolish corroboration in criminal cases. (S4O-02510)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill): The Criminal Justice (Scotland) Bill proposes the removal of the general requirement for corroboration in criminal cases. It will still be necessary to prove cases beyond reasonable doubt, and corroborative supporting evidence will still be sought and used.

The bill is still being considered by Parliament. A final decision on commencement will be taken in close consultation with key justice stakeholders, although current planning is for the provision to be commenced in 2015.

Colin Beattie: Why does the Scottish Government consider it important to abolish the requirement now?

Kenny MacAskill: We are building on the report by the Lord Justice Clerk, Lord Carloway. We carried out a further investigation into safeguards. We are conscious that this is a fulsome investigation into evidence and procedure in Scotland.

No other criminal justice system in western Europe or the Commonwealth operates a general requirement for corroboration. Justice is not being done. The requirement is archaic, as the Lord Justice Clerk has said, and it is time to ensure that we deliver on his significant reforms to improve justice and make Scotland a safer place.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Margaret Mitchell for a brief supplementary question.

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary at least look at ways of reforming the law of evidence, while retaining the important safeguard of corroboration, to ensure that the criminal justice system is balanced and fair for those who are accused of crimes and for victims of crime?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask the cabinet secretary for an answer that is as brief as possible.

Kenny MacAskill: We are happy to take on board safeguards and we have taken on board and agreed to safeguards that judges of the High Court of Justiciary suggested. If Ms Mitchell wishes to make further suggestions, we will be happy to look at them.

Rural Affairs and the Environment

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 1, from Michael McMahon, was not lodged, and an explanation was provided.

Common Agricultural Policy Funding

2. Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on common agricultural

policy funding to be made available to Scotland. (S4O-02513)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment (Richard Lochhead): For several weeks, we have pressed the United Kingdom Government for a resolution on this urgent matter, given that we are talking about around €4 billion of European funding for the UK. We have presented strong arguments—which are supported across the chamber—on why Scotland should receive a fairer allocation of the overall funding and why the full CAP convergence uplift that the UK will receive should come to Scotland. The ball is now firmly in the secretary of state's court in Whitehall to do the right thing for Scotland's industry, and I hope that we will receive positive news soon.

Annabelle Ewing: I very much support the case for the uplift to come to Scotland. Will the cabinet secretary confirm how much was lost to agriculture in Scotland in the most recent CAP negotiations because of our lack of a seat at the top table as an independent European Union member state in our own right?

Richard Lochhead: As the member knows, under the CAP that has just been negotiated for 2014 to 2020, a new funding formula was agreed to close the gap between countries that have poorer payments per hectare and countries that have higher payments. We estimate that, if Scotland had been a member state, we would have qualified for an extra €1 billion to come to Scotland under the formula, given that we are third bottom of the league. Thanks to the UK's poor negotiations and its not prioritising Scotland's interests, it looks as though we will be bottom of the league under the new arrangements.

That relates just to direct payments under pillar 1. Under pillar 2, which provides rural development funding, it looks as though we will be bottom of the league as well. Other countries negotiated an uplift in their rural development funds, but the UK did not do that for Scotland.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The situation is not about Scotland being an independent member state but about Scotland having to negotiate a position in the EU, and the cabinet secretary cannot give Scottish farmers any guarantees about what funding would look like at the end of any negotiations.

We are discussing an imminent decision that will be in place until 2020. The cabinet secretary has supported a significant transfer from pillar 1 to pillar 2. Does that position depend on Scotland receiving the full uplift?

Richard Lochhead: As I have said, and as I said in the debate in Parliament a few weeks ago, the decisions that we take—including the decision

on the extent to which we transfer from pillar 1 to pillar 2—will be influenced by the size of the overall budget. The smaller the budget, the more difficult will be the decisions that we must take. I am sure that Claire Baker will also ask for decent funding for environment schemes and other schemes under pillar 2, which is on rural development, but we do not have the budget to satisfy all the demands, because of the poor negotiation result that the UK Government delivered for Scotland.

As for negotiations on Scotland being in Europe as an independent country, no one seriously thinks that Scotland will not be permitted to enter the European Union. CAP budget payments will continue, because the budget is already in place for 2014 to 2020. Given that an independent Scotland would be a net contributor to that budget, it is ludicrous to suggest in any forum that Scotland would be denied its farming payments under independence.

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): The issue is not about Scotland being a full member of the EU but about the terms and conditions under which it would become a member and when that would happen.

I am sure that, in his more charitable moments, the cabinet secretary would agree that we are where we are on CAP funding per hectare, largely because we opted unanimously at the time of the previous reform to have a system that is based on historical payments. As he knows, I support internal and external convergence, which can be negotiated as we move forward.

The big decisions have been taken and signed up to in Europe, and the clock is ticking. Will the cabinet secretary now start—indeed, kick-start—the consultation on the options for implementing CAP reform, which is in his gift, so that Scotland's farmers can begin to plan ahead, which they badly need to do?

Richard Lochhead: I say to the member that of course we will consult the industry on the new common agricultural policy, and we will stick to our consulting schedule for the rural development programme: the pillar 2 funding in November and the pillar 1 funding—the direct single farm payments, or the new area payments—in December. We will stick to that schedule.

As regards how the budgets were calculated, if the member looks at the results that other member states within Europe achieved in the negotiations, he will see that the result is not down to historical reasons; it is down to the lack of willingness by the UK Government to negotiate on behalf of Scotland's farmers. That is what determined the pitiful low budgets that we have under pillar 1 and under pillar 2. Billions of euros will be lost to

Scotland's rural businesses and rural farms as a result of that poor negotiation. Those are the facts and the hard reality of the poor deal that is delivered for Scotland as part of the UK.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 3, from Annabel Goldie, has been withdrawn and an explanation has been provided.

Climate Performance (FTSE 350 Companies)

4. Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how the recent report by the carbon disclosure project on the climate performance of FTSE 350 companies impacts on Scotland. (S4O-02515)

The Minister for Environment and Climate Change (Paul Wheelhouse): The report considers FTSE 350 companies and takes a UK-wide focus. The principal recommendations, including the five-point plan, are a sensible approach and the Scottish Government recognises the significant impact that action and leadership by those leading companies will have both on their own and their supply chains' resource efficiency as well as on their greenhouse gas emission reductions.

To that end, I also welcome the involvement and the valuable contribution made by Scotland's 2020 climate group at the international climate justice conference and climate leaders workshop earlier this month.

Hanzala Malik: Given that important Scottish companies such as the Wood Group and Cairn Energy scored badly as they failed to disclose information or to respond at all, how can the Scottish Government persuade Scottish companies to take the monitoring and reduction of climate pollution seriously?

Paul Wheelhouse: Those are important issues. We are working through the 2020 climate group. I am sure that Hanzala Malik knows this already but—just to put it on the record—the group includes a number of key companies such as Diageo, Tesco, Lloyds Banking Group, Stagecoach, SSE, BT and many others.

By using that forum to discuss what business interests are and what the value is of taking part in initiatives to support climate change reduction and also to improve reporting, we can set an example by having companies set an example to their peers of how they go about things and of the business advantages of engaging in the agenda and addressing performance. I hope that positive peer pressure from other companies in the FTSE 350 and in the FTSE 100 will apply some pressure to companies that are perhaps not doing as much as we would like them to do and that it will help to bring them on board.

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): Will the minister confirm how the Scottish Government is promoting long-term investments against climate change among Scottish businesses? What will he do to ensure that Scottish businesses can implement the five recommendations presented by the carbon disclosure project?

Paul Wheelhouse: I touched on what we are doing in my response to Hanzala Malik. We are providing support to the 2020 climate group. It is a very important group: it involves some very high-level senior business figures who are able to use their business experience to explain to other people in the business community why they should be involved and what the advantages are to businesses of engaging in this agenda. As I am sure the member knows, many positive economic opportunities come from addressing such issues.

We are trying to work with Scottish businesses in various areas such as through the zero waste plan—we are trying to engage businesses in that as well, so there are a large number of practical issues. The climate group has identified 13 priorities for 2013 and it is trying to promote them to as many businesses as possible. It is showing leadership and I very much welcome that, but of course I will look at the detail of any reports to see whether there is any way in which we can finesse our approach to tackling business involvement in greenhouse gas emissions.

Farmers (External Trade)

5. James Kelly (Rutherglen) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how much trade Scotland's farmers have with the rest of the United Kingdom and with the rest of the world. (S4O-02516)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment (Richard Lochhead): It is estimated that Scotland exported approximately £400 million-worth of crop, animal and hunting-related products to the rest of the UK and approximately £75 million-worth of such products to the rest of the world in 2011.

Our primary production sector supports Scotland's food and drink exports and, indeed, the overall performance of the food and drink sector's growth in this country. With £5.4 billion-worth of food and drink exports in 2012, we hope to build on that success and meet the ambitious target that we have set of food and drink exports reaching £7.1 billion-worth by 2017.

James Kelly: In the area of farming products, Scotland trades twice as much with the United Kingdom as it does with the rest of the world and four times as much with the UK as with the EU. Why would we want to leave such a market,

bearing in mind that we have 63 million customers with whom we are trading?

Richard Lochhead: I regret James Kelly's scaremongering and his attempts to sow doubts and uncertainty. If that is the sort of politics that he wants to conduct, it is fair enough—we will come back with our positive case for independence, and he can stick to his negative politics.

For instance, Ireland—small country, not far from here—exports roughly the same per head of population to England and the rest of the UK as we do. It does not seem to have encountered any problems in being a successful country and exporting to those markets, so why on earth would Scotland?

The benefits for Scotland are illustrated by my answer to the previous question. As an independent member of the European Union, we will be able to negotiate a much better funding package for our farmers and crofters in rural communities, which will bring great benefits. The biggest threat to our access to markets elsewhere comes from the Tory Government's threat to hold an EU referendum. If Scotland was taken out of the EU by the UK, that would be the biggest threat to our food and drink sector.

Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary update members on the repatriation of the £1.4 million red meat levy that is currently paid by Scottish livestock producers south of the border?

Richard Lochhead: That is another good question, and it helps to answer the previous question from James Kelly, in that another benefit of independence would be that the levy raised by the livestock sector here in Scotland would stay in Scotland to promote Scottish livestock produce.

Unfortunately, the current UK Government is making no progress in returning to Scotland what is rightfully its levy—paid by Scottish livestock producers—but which has unfortunately been used to promote produce from the rest of the UK and not from here.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 6, from Dave Thompson, has not been lodged, for understandable reasons.

Local Air Quality Management (Review)

7. Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it will conclude its review of the local air quality management system. (S4O-02518)

The Minister for Environment and Climate Change (Paul Wheelhouse): We received about 150 responses to the consultation exercise that was undertaken to inform the review. The consultation finished on 20 September, and the

responses are currently being analysed. We will publish our conclusions as soon as possible, following completion of the analysis, which is likely to be early in the new year.

Gordon MacDonald: The west of Edinburgh has four main arterial routes into the city centre for commuters, three of which—Gorgie Road, Glasgow Road and Queensferry Road—continue to exceed the annual nitrogen dioxide air quality standard. The “Strategic Development Plan June 2013” for the south-east of Scotland highlights the need to provide additional housing in the west of the city and in West Lothian, all within commutable distance of the centre of Edinburgh. Is the minister concerned that the proposal to build a substantial number of houses to the west of the city will further exacerbate the current air quality issues?

Paul Wheelhouse: First, I declare an interest—as per my entry in the register of members’ interests—in that I acted as an adviser on education impacts to a number of developers in the west of Edinburgh prior to my election as a member of the Scottish Parliament.

The strategic development plan for south-east Scotland that was approved by Scottish ministers in June 2013 requires that strategic housing land allocations be reflected in local development plans. Planning applications for housing development proposals must be determined in the normal way by planning authorities, taking into account all material considerations including air quality and the ability of development proposals to promote the use of sustainable transport.

I hope that that answer helps Gordon MacDonald.

Food Waste

8. Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to promote the reduction of food waste. (S4O-02519)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment (Richard Lochhead): Food waste is a global challenge, as 1.3 billion tonnes per year—a third of the food that is produced—is wasted. Government, individuals and businesses all have responsibilities to address that. We are already working with retailers and major brands to use their influence to cut waste in households and supply chains.

Last year’s national food waste reduction campaign combined awareness raising with practical tips on how to reduce waste at home. We will reinforce those messages in a follow-up campaign in the new year, and we will encourage more food waste recycling in the 1.2 million households that now have a separate food waste collection service, following our investment of

almost £20 million through the zero waste programme over the past three years.

Bill Kidd: In the light of recent reports that supermarket chains scrap up to 70 per cent of salad products and 50 per cent of bakery produce at a time when some of my constituents in Glasgow Anniesland are having to attend food banks, does the cabinet secretary have any talks planned with supermarket management to find a way of avoiding that astonishing level of waste?

Richard Lochhead: I am due to meet the retailers forum that was set up by the Scottish Government. Given Bill Kidd’s question, I will make a point of raising that issue with the supermarket representatives when I meet them very shortly.

On the pretty scandalous figures that Bill Kidd mentioned, I acknowledge that many retailers are conducting food collections that go to good causes—that is a significant move that we should acknowledge—but they could look much harder at their practices, their pricing mechanisms and the arrangements within each retail store that lead to there being so much food waste. For instance, we all know the impact of two-for-one deals on particular goods. There is a lot more that retailers could do to cut down food waste in our society, so I ask them to live up to their responsibilities to do that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can allow a brief supplementary and a brief answer.

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): Household waste in Scotland reached 2.77 million tonnes in 2010, so what is the Scottish Government doing to raise awareness of the environmental problems that are caused by household waste? What measures is the Scottish Government taking to encourage a culture change?

Richard Lochhead: Those are very good questions. As I illustrated in my previous answer, we have moved on from the position that we were in only a few years ago, when very few homes had food waste collections, to 1.2 million households in Scotland now having separate food waste collection. I hope that that helps to connect with all householders in Scotland who are now putting their food waste out for collection and who were not previously doing so. I hope that it will help to change our culture so that we appreciate the costs, both financial and environmental, of food waste.

Common Agricultural Policy (Convergence Uplift)

9. John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what progress has been made with the cross-party approach to

securing the full common agricultural policy convergence uplift for Scotland. (S4O-02520)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment (Richard Lochhead): As John Wilson will know, the uplift is an important and serious issue for Scotland's agricultural and rural sector. I was pleased that colleagues from all across the chamber were willing to write jointly to the United Kingdom Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to set out the unassailable argument for the external convergence money to come to Scotland. That demonstrates the overwhelming support in the Parliament on the issue. I hope that Owen Paterson will recognise that and do the right thing for Scotland's farmers and rural communities.

John Wilson: The UK Government must acknowledge that the only fair outcome on the external convergence uplift funding is for it to come to Scotland, which is the only part of the UK to be below the European Union threshold, thanks to the UK Government's failure to seek a fair share of the budget for Scotland. How much will the convergence uplift be worth for Scotland over the budget period?

Richard Lochhead: Under our latest estimates, the uplift that the UK will receive—it is only because Scotland is currently part of the UK that the UK qualifies for the uplift—will amount to around €220 million between now and 2019. Given that the UK is receiving the uplift only because of Scotland, we believe, as do all members in the Parliament, that 100 per cent of that uplift should come to Scotland.

Agriculture Support (New Entrants)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can allow an extremely brief question 10 from Clare Adamson.

10. Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what progress has been made regarding payments to new entrants and others who are currently excluded from the single farm payment scheme. (S4O-02521)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment (Richard Lochhead): I am pleased to confirm that the first instalment of almost £900,000 has been paid to around 600 farmers, whose applications for support were approved by the joint Government and industry working group. We are now in the process of clarifying some information about a further 50 applications. There will also be a further payment next year.

Clare Adamson: Does the cabinet secretary welcome the improved exchange rate that is to be used for the 2013 single farm payment scheme? What effect will financial discipline activation have

on new entrants and on the 16,000 Scottish farmers who receive their single farm payments in sterling?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask the cabinet secretary to respond as briefly as possible.

Richard Lochhead: Due to the financial discipline—if Clare Adamson is referring to the subject that I think she is referring to—that is being imposed by the European Commission, there will be a small percentage decrease in single farm payments in the coming year. Thankfully it is, as a result of negotiations, a much smaller decrease than was expected, so we must put it in perspective. Single farm payments will be roughly the same as they have been in previous years, so I hope that the impact will not be too great.

Community Transport

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-08079, in the name of Maureen Watt, on the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee's inquiry into community transport.

14:40

Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): The Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee welcomes the opportunity to debate its report on community transport and its recommendations to the Scottish Government.

First and foremost, I take the opportunity to thank all the stakeholders who submitted written evidence, helped facilitate our fact-finding trips and gave oral evidence to the committee over the course of its inquiry. I also thank the committee staff and the communications staff, because social media played an interesting part in the inquiry.

The inquiry and report would not have been possible without the significant input of time and effort by community transport groups, representative organisations and service users. The committee hopes that the report will go some way towards highlighting the good work undertaken by these community transport operators in providing a vital service to communities across Scotland.

I also thank our colleagues on the Health and Sport Committee and the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee for their interest and participation in the inquiry. In particular, the Health and Sport Committee's evidence session on transport for health was very helpful in informing the committee's considerations.

The purpose of community transport is the provision of safe, accessible, cost-effective, flexible transport for those who are unable to access or use public or private transport. It is provided by several types of organisation, including dedicated community transport providers, community groups and private individuals using their own vehicles.

We learned that no two organisations are the same and that a mixture of voluntary and paid staff meet the specific needs of a local area. However, early in the inquiry the committee identified key barriers and issues that many community transport providers have in common that significantly impact on providers' ability to run services. Those are: funding arrangements; driver training and licensing; joint working with partnership organisations; leadership; and the lack of definitive

information and data on the provision of community transport throughout Scotland.

The committee made a number of recommendations to the Scottish Government and is pleased that the Minister for Transport and Veterans indicated, in evidence to us, that he would carefully consider our recommendations. Indeed, in its response to our report, the Scottish Government said that it would look into ways to scope out the practicalities of and take forward some of the committee's recommendations.

It is vital that the issues are addressed now. Given Scotland's ageing population, inevitably there will be increased demand for and reliance on community transport services. Getting it right now could bring enormous benefits for Scotland's population in future.

It will come as no surprise that, during our inquiry, funding arrangements emerged as the single biggest problem that community transport operators face. The committee heard that following the transfer of funding responsibility to local authorities, under the concordat, the level of funding that local authorities provide to community transport groups has varied significantly across Scotland. The committee was concerned that that could lead to additional financial pressures, particularly in capital funding, on community transport operators in areas in which local authority funding is lower than it was under previous schemes or is not provided at all.

Although we acknowledge that decisions on their spending priorities are matters wholly for local authorities, we are of the view that the variation in the availability of funding for community transport throughout Scotland presents significant financial challenges to many operators, which, in turn, can impact on the provision of services to users. The committee called on the Scottish Government to explore the potential for the provision of funding to further assist the community transport sector, particularly with the capital costs of new and replacement vehicles. We were pleased that the Scottish Government noted in its response that it is considering the possibility of a grant scheme to fund new vehicles and that it welcomes any steps that can be taken towards alleviating that significant burden on providers. I would welcome an update from the minister on how the Government's consideration of that important matter is progressing.

During evidence, the committee heard a range of views on whether a more co-ordinated approach to community transport in Scotland is required. Some responders argued that such an approach would be beneficial in overcoming some of the barriers that providers experience. However, other witnesses were keen to emphasise the importance of community need-responsive

services. The committee agreed that community providers are better equipped to understand local needs but was of the view that they could benefit from a higher level of support and advice at a national level. In its response, the Scottish Government supported the committee's view.

The committee recommended that the Community Transport Association in Scotland would be well placed to take on an expanded role in Scotland, providing leadership and promoting shared standards across the sector, and we called on the Scottish Government to work with the CTA in Scotland to that end. The Scottish Government responded that it will continue to work with and support the CTA to strengthen the services that it can provide to support and encourage community transport initiatives. The Scottish Government also noted in its response that the CTA has been invited to submit costed proposals for an expanded role. The committee was pleased to hear that that recommendation is being explored and that options are being evaluated.

The Scottish Government also agreed to explore how existing approaches such as the CTA's quality mark and the west of Scotland community transport network can be developed further to support groups throughout Scotland and to drive up standards. We welcome that news and believe that the development and adoption of common standards across Scotland will benefit operators, users and funders.

During our inquiry, we were struck by how little information is available about the community transport sector in Scotland. The consequence of that lack of information is that it is hard to establish where gaps in provision exist, what and where the unmet need is and how to plan for future need. It is also hard to establish, beyond an anecdotal level, what the additional benefits of community transport are, elements of which the report sought to highlight. The Scottish Government stated that it proposes to commission a new piece of qualitative research that will collect information from a selection of community transport providers in Scotland on their services, including benefits and costs, and to deepen its understanding of what services are currently available. We welcome that commitment.

Another significant long-term challenge for community transport sector providers is the impact of minibus licensing changes, which is already starting to be felt. In short, the challenges come from the costs associated with training volunteers for their D1 licence, which can be significant and burdensome, especially for small providers. Over the course of the inquiry, the committee suggested that there might be scope for cost saving through more effective co-ordination of training, with larger and smaller services working together. To that

end, the committee recommended that training co-ordination be looked at in the context of developing a wider means of supporting community transport throughout Scotland.

Another significant theme of the evidence in the inquiry was the call for greater joint working between agencies providing transport, particularly for health. As many members will know, that call was made in Audit Scotland's report "Transport for health and social care", it was a recommendation from the Scottish Government's short-life working group on patient transport and it was echoed in the Health and Sport Committee's report to the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee. The Scottish Government responded to that call by saying that it would continue to work with regional transport partnerships. I look forward to Duncan McNeil expanding on that issue in his speech.

I will briefly mention concessionary travel, an issue that featured in our deliberations. The committee concluded that, due to the significant logistical issues of extending the national concessionary travel scheme infrastructure to all concessionary travel schemes, including car schemes, and the potentially extremely high financial costs, that was not an option. However, we recommended that the Scottish Government explore how to address the inequities in community transport provision.

The importance of community transport in the lives of those dependent on it should not be underestimated; nor should the invaluable contribution of those who volunteer and work in the community sector. It is vital that those lifeline services can develop and grow and, importantly, be sustained as we work towards making Scotland a fairer and healthy society for all.

I hope that the Parliament finds our report both informative and interesting, and I look forward to members' speeches.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee's 7th Report, 2013 (Session 4): *Report on Community transport* (SP Paper 377).

The Deputy Presiding Officer: When I introduced this item of business, I should have mentioned that we have time in hand, so time for any interventions taken can be reimbursed.

14:52

The Minister for Transport and Veterans (Keith Brown): First of all, I welcome the work undertaken by Maureen Watt and her colleagues on the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee into community transport in Scotland.

As I stated in my response to the committee in September, its report is an important piece of work on a significant transport sector that does not always receive the recognition that it deserves. I hope to demonstrate that, even in relation to the Government's response, the report has already had an impact on the sector.

The Government has invested more than £8.3 billion in transport since 2007, which is the largest transport investment programme that Scotland has ever seen. Bus services account for around 80 per cent of all journeys by public transport. In difficult economic times, and despite Westminster budget cuts, we have managed to sustain direct central Government spending on bus services, at around £250 million a year in cash terms. That is on top of the considerable funds that come via the local authority funding settlement. Nevertheless, as the committee identified, it is a fact that public transport is easier and more affordable to access for some areas and groups than it is for others. Community transport has a significant role to play in addressing some of the needs to which conventional services are less well suited.

As members will be aware, funding of community transport was devolved to local authorities following the concordat with the Scottish Government. That is the right approach, because councils have a better understanding of transport needs in their areas, and those needs are not the same throughout Scotland.

Despite the dramatic reductions in public spending imposed by the United Kingdom Government to which I referred, we have maintained the revenue funding available to local government. Between 2007-08 and 2012-13, the resources available to the Scottish Government from the departmental expenditure limit and non-domestic rates increased by 6.4 per cent. Over the same period, the local government budget increased by 8.9 per cent. It is that budget that provides the resources that enable local authorities to support community transport provision in their areas.

As well as maintaining overall funding, both direct and through the budgets made available to local authorities, the Government has made a number of changes that are benefiting many organisations in the sector. For example, last year, we changed the rules on bus registration to allow demand-responsive transport services that are available to the general public to qualify for concessionary travel and the bus service operators grant. At the same time, changes were made to the BSOG, so that the calculations are now based on distance travelled rather than on fuel used. I know from discussions with operators that the change has been of benefit to many rural bus operators in particular, including eligible

community transport operators. For example, in its written evidence to the committee, Buchan Dial-A-Community Bus said that the changes to the BSOG have made

“a vital difference to CT operators, specifically those in rural areas, and ... supported the services a great deal.”

Despite those policies and changes, we know that community transport faces a difficult time. I add my thanks to everyone who contributed to the inquiry, whether orally or in writing, whose evidence brought into sharp relief the problems that the community transport sector faces in the current economic climate.

Previous debates that we have had on the subject suggest that we all recognise the important role that community transport services play as part of the transport network in Scotland. We appreciate and admire the dedicated volunteers who freely give their time and effort to organisations in their local communities. That is done for no financial gain, sometimes over many years, because it is the right thing to do. Recently, I talked to someone who had contracted cancer. She was a driver, as was her husband, but he, too, had health conditions. On a couple of occasions, because she could not get to the Beatson centre under her own steam, she was offered support in getting there and back by a community transport provider. That included the provider hanging around for a number of hours in Glasgow while the treatment was administered. That assistance was vital to the individual concerned.

That is just one example of what such providers often do. It exemplifies the fact that, in providing the service that they provide, they are helping people who might otherwise be excluded from playing a bigger part in the community. The provision of community transport helps to support independence, enables people to have a more active lifestyle and encourages less reliance on social and health services.

I will now say a few words about the Government's response to the committee's report. I am well aware of the number of calls that have been made—most recently in relation to Age Scotland's still waiting campaign—for all community transport services to be included in the national concessionary travel scheme. Many members have written to me on behalf of constituents on the subject.

As we have heard, the committee acknowledged the logistical and administrative difficulties that extension of the scheme to include all community transport projects would present. It concluded—rightly, I think—that that would not be the best way forward. The Government agrees with that conclusion for a number of reasons.

Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP): I do not know whether the minister has seen the briefing from Inclusion Scotland on the position of disabled people. Does the Government have a view on their position and whether that might be a breach of the Equality Act 2010?

Keith Brown: In relation to eligibility for concessionary travel, which in many circumstances covers access to bus services for people with disabilities, we did not think it necessary to progress with extending that.

On Rod Campbell's specific question, I am happy to look into whether it is true that the position with regard to disabled people breaches the Equality Act 2010. I think that it is fairly safe to say that the Government does not believe that it does, because we would not support that.

The Government thinks that the proposed extension of the concessionary travel scheme to cover all community transport projects would not be the best way forward, first, because of the cost of doing so, which Maureen Watt mentioned. Our best guess at this stage is that extending the scheme in that way would increase the scheme's costs by around £11.2 million a year, but we suspect that the figure might be substantially higher. For example, we do not know how many community transport organisations operate in Scotland. In addition, the figure of £11.2 million does not include the cost of the back-office equipment and electronic ticket machines that are needed to participate in the scheme. That is problematic, given that some of the services in question are provided by cars rather than buses.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Does the minister appreciate that there is a postcode lottery as far as community transport is concerned? In some parts of my patch in the Highlands and Islands, there is very little official bus transport and community transport is the answer. Therefore, the Government's approach is unfair on rural areas.

Keith Brown: I have already acknowledged that the provision of community transport is uneven across the country. The Government has no control over that—by its nature, community transport is often provided by voluntary organisations. We cannot insist on provision being equal throughout the country, but we can do what we can to ensure that the gaps are filled.

I am not sure whether what David Stewart said was a plea for community transport services to be included in the concessionary travel scheme, but we do not agree that that is the right way to proceed, for the reasons that I have mentioned. The figure that I gave does not include the back-office costs, which can be substantial. If such services are provided with a car, the installation of

electronic ticket machines is a difficult issue. Without such machines, it is not possible to have the audit process that is necessary to ensure that the scheme is not being abused. That process has to be provided for.

Moreover, the national scheme for older and disabled people is primarily for free bus travel throughout Scotland. As I have mentioned, community transport covers many different modes, including cars; in fact, the "CTA State of the Sector Report for Scotland 2012" estimates that cars make up two thirds of the vehicles used in Scotland's community transport.

Finally, the current scheme offers operators a reimbursement rate of around 60 per cent in 2013-14, falling to 58.1 per cent in the following year, but Age Scotland is asking for 100 per cent reimbursement for community transport operators, and it is not clear how practically that could be accommodated in the same scheme.

We are very clear that the committee's report, which highlights the increasingly difficult operational environment for community transport, places some demands on the Scottish Government. Indeed, demand for services is going up from our aging population, which itself is likely to increase, and we need creative thinking about how we can help the sector further. The committee has made a number of recommendations, including some for the Scottish Government, and I intend to provide practical help in the following ways.

First of all, Transport Scotland will from next month double its funding for the CTA. That additional funding will allow the association to enhance and expand its work in the community transport sector—the committee specifically asked for that in its report—and enable it to build on its 2012 state of the sector report, which represents probably the most extensive research on the subject to date. For its report, the CTA surveyed 80 of the largest community transport groups and estimated that there were at least 100 additional organisations in Scotland. However, as I have said, we do not know how many community transport organisations operate in Scotland. The new research will provide a more comprehensive picture of the community transport sector in Scotland than we have had before, which will, in turn, give us a better idea of the requirements of the sector as a whole and make it much easier to target help where it is needed. Furthermore, the additional funding will enable the CTA to increase the level of advice and support that it provides to the sector and, by extending its CT online portal to Scotland, it will also offer better service information and direct links to the community.

On the issue of D1 licences, which was raised in the committee's report, the Scottish Government

will continue to look at options for securing D1 licence driver training more efficiently. Through Transport Scotland, we have already spoken to the CTA, the Department for Transport and local authorities, which also need qualified minibus drivers, and will continue to seek ways of addressing the issue without compromising safety standards.

The issue of funding for new vehicles has also been highlighted, and I recognise that it is one of the main difficulties for community transport providers. There are two issues to address: the first is to identify resources in very difficult times; and the second is to ensure that we get the right process for a grant system. However, we are giving very positive consideration to what we can do in this area and expect to come back with a conclusion very shortly.

The bus investment fund was launched in April 2013 to provide opportunities for local transport authorities and others to bid for resources to deliver bus-related projects. Community transport organisations have made a number of interesting applications to the fund in its first year; the results will be announced very soon, and I expect some of those applications to be successful. I certainly look forward to the sector's continuing engagement in future rounds.

Obviously, there are no quick fixes to the problems faced today by community transport groups in Scotland. However, I trust that the measures that I have outlined demonstrate the Scottish Government's commitment to continuing support for the sector, as I think was evidenced in our response to the committee.

15:03

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to participate in this important debate on community transport in Scotland. Although I was not a member of the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee at the time of the inquiry, I echo Maureen Watt's thanks to the committee clerks and all the organisations and individuals who have given evidence to the committee on this subject over the past nine months.

Community transport services play a crucial role throughout Scotland, from rural villages to urban hubs, and are invaluable to those who use them to go shopping, get to a hospital appointment on time, visit friends and family or participate in a social activity. For many, those services provide the only means by which they can travel.

Community transport takes various forms, from community car schemes to Strathclyde partnership for transport's well-known mybus service and contractual services such as home-to-school

travel. Community transport is particularly important to Scotland's elderly population and the disabled; indeed, more than 80 per cent of the entire user base falls into those categories. That is why it is vital that we do all that we can to encourage sustainable investment in community transport.

Currently, more than 1 million people in Scotland are over the age of 65. Statistics show that that figure will have increased by 21 per cent by 2016 and by 62 per cent by 2031, and it is expected that the over-85 population will have increased by 38 per cent by 2016 and by 144 per cent by 2031. Those statistics, which were provided by the Scottish Government, are stark. Given that ageing population and the significant spike in the number of people who will very likely rely on community transport services in the future, it is vital that action is taken to support older people in their communities as much as possible.

Community transport relies heavily on dedicated volunteers, who play a pivotal role in providing the service in communities. In fact, when they gave evidence to the committee, organisations highlighted that many of them are completely or almost completely volunteer based. That shows the incredible dedication of those volunteers, who are willing to do all that they can in our communities. It is up to local and central Government to try to sustain that level of volunteer activity by removing barriers and offering encouragement.

Licensing, which is one of the barriers, has been mentioned. I got my driving licence well after 1997. I am sure that many other members did so, too, and, like me, they will not be automatically entitled to drive a minibus for a commercial purpose. That is one of the big barriers that face a new generation of volunteers who want to support elderly and disabled people in their community, and I was glad to hear the minister talking about overcoming it.

I welcome the vital role that those volunteers play, but there is a fundamental concern about the unpredictability that can exist in the voluntary sector and the distinct lack of cohesiveness that exists between local authority areas when it comes to service provision. It is concerning that there are considerable differences across the 32 local authorities on the issue. The financial support that is dedicated to community transport in North Lanarkshire will be different from the support that is offered in East Lothian, for example. The creation of a postcode lottery means that the opportunities for those who use community transport will be very different, depending on where they live. However, I certainly have a great deal of sympathy with our councils on the matter. They face exceptional financial cutbacks as a

result of budget decisions in the Parliament, and they are being forced to make incredibly difficult spending decisions and to prioritise areas other than community transport.

Keith Brown: Will Mark Griffin clarify what he is driving at? Is he against the idea that we have taken away the ring fencing for the funding, or is he arguing against the fact that the cuts that we have had imposed on us in the Parliament have been greater than the cuts that we have had to inflict on local government, as I demonstrated in my speech? There has been a larger increase in funding for local government than for the Scottish Government. Is he suggesting that we should get rid of ring fencing? Is he suggesting that we should bring back ring fencing as it used to be and, if so, does he have the councils' support for that position?

Mark Griffin: There is no need for ring fencing if local government is properly resourced. The local government settlement as a proportion of the Scottish Government's budget has continually fallen from its peak under this Government. Local government's share of funding as a proportion of the Scottish Government's budget has continually fallen—I do not believe that any Government minister disputes that.

It is clear that the funding streams for community transport organisations offered more support prior to the Government's concordat with local authorities. The Community Transport Association made it clear to the committee that, between 1998 and 2008, due to central Government investment, there were two funding pots, and we saw considerable growth in community transport across Scotland. Since that approach ended in 2008, however, we have seen a sizeable reduction in community transport initiatives.

The reduction in funding, which is not necessarily related to the removal of ring fencing, and the rise in costs clearly hamper the ability of existing community transport organisations to provide an effective service, and act as a barrier to the establishment of new organisations or to the renewal of buses and other types of accessible transport. Vehicle replacement is key to the provision of an effective, comfortable and safe service in our communities, but many organisations find it difficult to source funding for fleet upgrades.

Given the financial pressures facing local authorities, it is important that the Scottish Government contributes and offers community transport organisations what support it can on fleet renewal. At an event in the Scottish Parliament after the committee's report was published, an operator commented on procurement and asked whether local authority buying power and Scottish

Government buying power could come together to assist in pushing down fleet renewal costs.

In Scotland, 100,000 people use community transport. With an ageing population, that figure will rise substantially over the years ahead. Yes, councils should do more—they should do all that they can to ensure that our constituents get an effective local service. However, the fact is that councils are struggling to provide even the core service that people rely on. It is important that the Scottish Government does more, particularly when it comes to fleet replacement, to assist organisations that carry out tremendous work, much of it on a voluntary basis, across Scotland.

15:11

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): Prior to the committee's inquiry, I thought that I knew a bit about community transport. The first thing that I learned as a result of the inquiry was how little I knew. I learned a great deal during the process.

Community transport means different things in different areas and different things to different people. There is an enormous diversity of provision and it can mean anything from a single volunteer who is willing to give up their time and car to give somebody a lift to a hospital or other appointment, right up to the voluntary sector organisations that are run like professional bus companies. We came across a number of those during the course of our inquiry. In fact, I commend the standards of professionalism in community transport in the voluntary sector and I think that we should all take the opportunity to do so today.

The sector is not without its problems, however, and we were able to dig them up during the course of the inquiry. The problems are fairly easy to define. We repeatedly came across references to the Community Transport Association and the fact that it appears to have had its budget and its staffing restricted. It was repeatedly named as an organisation that was best able to advise and support voluntary organisations providing community transport, but there was concern that one of its key staff members had recently had to be put on a part-time contract and that consequently they could not be contacted as often as previously. We need to consider providing more of the kind of support that the CTA provides. It would not take much resource to provide a continuous point to which hard-working and keen volunteers could refer to understand what they had to do to ensure that the transport system that they provide is strengthened.

When we get to the bottom of the issues, funding is always what we find down there; it is,

and I suspect always will be, a contentious issue for community transport. Funding has now been devolved to local authorities. We can debate whether local, decentralised decision making is the same as a postcode lottery, but I believe that where such a diverse sector exists, ensuring that local decision making is in place and that local authorities can decide how they fund, based on what is required, is a key element in ensuring that the service provided fits communities' needs. I do not believe that the one-size-fits-all approach is desirable.

Of course, local authorities have their priorities and, as a result, we see some local authorities being able to deliver what they want in relation to community transport while others have diverted resources away. That is extremely disappointing, but I believe that, at the bottom of the argument, there is a need to accept that local decision making must be allowed to take place.

When we look at the funding issue, we also need to consider the nature of short-term funding. People repeatedly told us that organisations that have only a handful of staff find that perhaps 20 per cent of the time of an individual staff member is spent pursuing the funding to keep the service going the following year. There is a particular aversion to the single-year funding arrangements that appear to be in place in so much of Scotland.

The other funding issue that was mentioned to us over and over again is the problem of capital funding for replacement vehicles. That problem is getting worse because the cost of vehicles is rising quickly. Indeed, it is perhaps rising more quickly than inflation would suggest that it should, because the standard of the vehicles is increasing and, consequently, the cost of maintaining them is increasing, too. I welcome the fact that the Government has acknowledged that there is a problem in that area and that it must be addressed in future.

Moving on from the problem of finance, we come to the issue of the support that is given to individuals and the suggestion that Age Scotland made in its still waiting campaign that concessionary travel should be extended to community transport. I accept the minister's point that there is a mismatch in the suggestion that community transport should benefit from concessionary travel, but I disagree with his position that there is nothing that we can do. Perhaps here is the one area in which I diametrically oppose the position that the Government has taken today and on previous occasions.

The problem that we have with bus funding in Scotland is the dogmatic pursuit of a policy of no change to the concessionary travel scheme. The introduction of the green bus initiative and the

changes to the bus service operators grant were constructive, positive and desirable, but the starvation of funds that has taken place as a result of the determination to maintain the concessionary travel scheme without change is the elephant in the room as far as all bus transport funding is concerned.

I repeat what I have said previously. I believe that it is right for us to align concessionary travel entitlement with pensionable age. By doing that, we can free up enough resource to consider doing something serious about delivering free transport through the community transport organisations. Only by taking that route can we give ourselves the opportunity to deliver the support that the organisations need.

I believe that we should promote diversity and not restrict it, because the one-size-fits-all approach will never deliver in community transport. I believe that we need to have a scheme in place to support organisations to replace their buses when necessary, and that the Community Transport Association is a valuable resource and one that we can underpin at a limited cost.

Finally, I believe that we need to continue to support across the board the training that is necessary for those people who do not have D1 entitlement. As was mentioned earlier, anyone who passed their test after 1997 does not have it. The number of people in their 20s who volunteer to drive minibuses is limited and I am worried that we have now got to the point where drivers in their 30s do not have the entitlement, as they are the ones who are volunteers. I believe that, by doing the right thing and supporting training where necessary, we can underpin a renaissance in community transport.

I should address one fear. Some people worry that, if we give young drivers training, they might just go off and get themselves a job. That is a risk that we have to take. If any young person finds a job as a result of training that is provided in that manner, I will be delighted.

15:19

Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde (Lab)): I put on record my thanks to the Presiding Officer for ensuring that I can speak in this debate on behalf of the Health and Sport Committee.

Bums on seats, Presiding Officer. What counts is

"more bums on more seats more often, more flexibly and more cost effectively."—[*Official Report, Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee*, 15 May 2013; c 1706.]

That is what Highland Council told the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee during its inquiry. Highland Council aimed to pool

national health service vehicles, ambulance service vehicles, school buses and other community transport. Indeed, that is catching on. One of the outcomes of a seminar that we organised in Inverclyde was discussions about how we could best use our community resources, and I hope that a pilot scheme is on its way. Those are good local initiatives that we on the Health and Sport Committee wish to see extended nationwide.

I thank my fellow convener, Maureen Watt, and her ICI committee colleagues for inviting Health and Sport Committee input to their work. We were pleased to make a modest contribution, but one that, I hope, might encourage a more integrated approach and shift us from what Voluntary Action Scotland saw as

“a patchwork quilt of arrangements that can be developed locally.”—[*Official Report, Health and Sport Committee, 28 May 2013; c 3902.*]

As well as VAS, we took evidence from NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, the Scottish Ambulance Service, the British Red Cross, and the Royal Voluntary Service. We were also aware of the Scottish Government’s short-life working group on the delivery of effective patient transport to healthcare services. The group did not report in time for the committee to reflect its work, but I detected similar themes to those that were suggested by our witnesses, and to those in Audit Scotland’s 2011 report. To recap, the findings of that report were inequity of access, poor integration, lack of leadership and planning, and poor recording of data and spend.

We conducted our own scrutiny under three headings—co-ordination, cost, and issues for remote and rural communities—and I will touch on each of those in turn.

Audit Scotland’s report said that transport should be an integral part of care planning and co-ordination. However, the tone of the evidence that we heard suggested that that is more an aspiration than a reality. The Royal Voluntary Service said:

“it needs to be built into the systems that are being created for health and social care integration.”—[*Official Report, Health and Sport Committee, 28 May 2013; c 3900.*]

An initiative to improve the patient transport system was highlighted by the Scottish Ambulance Service. After a recent speech on new medicines, Jackson Carlaw said that he came close to drowning in alphabet soup, which reminded me of the line in “Yes, Minister”

“The Minister doesn’t know his Acas from his NALGO.”

The SAS told us about integrated patient transport models in Lochaber, Elgin and Wigtownshire. We recognise, of course, that local variation and circumstances must be taken into

account, but is now not the time for piloted and proven good practice to be applied more widely?

The auditors also found that data on transport costs for health and social care were poor. Transport on medical and mobility grounds tends to be funded by the NHS, while the cost of transport for those of limited means or who are living in remote areas is met by councils. NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde said that a different approach was needed but, so far, such efforts have not moved beyond small-scale projects. As the Royal Voluntary Service told us, the costs that are involved in community transport are relatively small when compared to the costs of missed appointments. Surely an integrated model for funding patient transport is not beyond the wit of man, woman or short-life working group.

Maureen Watt: Does Duncan McNeil believe that if community transport organisations were involved in community planning partnerships, especially with regard to the health and social care agenda, much could be done to have a more joined-up framework for providing patient transport?

Duncan McNeil: I will refer to the question of leadership later. In my locality, and from witnesses, we hear a lot about what people cannot do. I ask those people what is preventing them from doing what they want to do. If we ask the question differently and involve more people who deliver the service, we certainly can make progress. That is a personal departure from the committee line—I must watch what I am saying.

Our third and final theme was remote and rural communities. SAS has worked with the health board and community transport providers in Wigtownshire to pilot a new approach, which involved zoning patients and improving scheduling, which increased passenger and journey numbers. The ambulance service described it as “particularly helpful” to its thinking about how to better serve patients in rural settings.

Co-ordination, costs and rural communities were our hat trick of themes.

The worry is that the improved planning of community transport is still being talked about more than practised. Audit Scotland’s report underlined the significance of the leadership and ownership of services. I want to reinforce that before I put my bottom back on my seat.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): Thank you, Mr McNeil, for stretching the fabric of parliamentary language to the limit.

15:27

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): During the evidence sessions for the report

we heard how important the community transport sector is to many people in communities throughout Scotland. More than 80 per cent of community transport passengers are old or disabled and evidence suggests that the service is used by 30,000 individuals and 4,000 community groups who make more than 3.5 million passenger journeys every year. In many cases community transport is a lifeline service and without it people would remain housebound and unable to access the healthcare, leisure and social opportunities that they need.

We were also made aware of the difficult circumstances in which community transport providers operate, the problems created by financial pressures and the difficulty of recruiting volunteer drivers.

The report's key recommendations relate to funding, concessionary fares, driver training, joint working, co-ordination and leadership, and information. Following the stakeholder event in September, which was attended by many organisations that are involved in community transport, I am of the opinion that the most pressing issues are long-term funding, capital funding and driver training.

Funding for community transport was transferred from the Scottish Government to local authorities as part of the 2008 concordat, because councils are best able to determine their areas' transport needs. However, the result has been that local authority support for the sector has varied widely, with some councils providing similar funding to previous levels and others reducing funding or reallocating it to other areas.

One way of immediately assisting community transport operators would be to move away from short-term, year-to-year funding. A large proportion of staff time is taken up by the annual round of local authority grant applications. Because there is no guarantee of continued funding beyond 12 months, there is difficulty in planning services and retaining key staff, so there is a barrier to growth in the services provided. The Government has indicated in its response to the recommendations that it will work with the third sector to identify any barriers to fuller implementation of three-year funding.

Funding replacement vehicles is a major issue for community transport organisations. Many vehicles are beyond their economic life and the constant repairs and maintenance to keep them roadworthy are a drain on limited resources. Previously, funding was available centrally, but it was transferred to local authorities to administer, which had similar results to the transfer of revenue funding.

The committee felt that there was a strong case for the introduction of a source of capital funding to assist in the purchase of new and replacement vehicles. Third sector organisations operating under the community transport umbrella currently operate 300 minibuses with, on average, a 10-year life. The money required would not be substantial. However, if the Government were to introduce a grant scheme, two comments from the round-table event should be borne in mind. First, Strathclyde Partnership for Transport said that any fund should be for

"Community Transport Providers not groups looking for a club bus".

Secondly, Buchan Dial-A-Community-Bus highlighted that no one bus meets all its requirements.

The other key points from the round-table event related to driver training. SPT described the D1 licence issue as a ticking time bomb. Lothian Community Transport Services told the committee:

"shortly nobody under 40 will be able to drive a minibus".

That point was emphasised by the Community Transport Association, which said:

"90% of respondents are having difficulty recruiting volunteers"

and that part of the problem could be addressed by

"increasing the vehicle weight limit".

That situation is a result of European legislation that was introduced in 1997 and barred anyone without a D1 licence from driving a minibus if the vehicle was more than 3.5 tonnes or 4.25 tonnes with specialist equipment for disabled passengers. The evidence that the committee received confirmed that very few vehicles suitable for community transport needs fall into that weight category as a result of the increased weight of wheelchair technology and associated safety measures.

The 1997 legislation also introduced a requirement for new drivers to be trained in minibus driving before applying for a D1 licence, which was previously included in the driving licence, provided that the vehicle was not being used for commercial purposes.

The cost of that training, which is provided by commercial organisations, can be up to £1,000 per driver, which is a considerable sum for the individual or the organisation to find. As the committee heard from LCTS:

"There are very few drivers with D1 driving entitlement under the age of 33. Traditionally, there have been a lot of young volunteers, but that arrangement is becoming difficult. We are probably just getting to the tipping point, at which there will start to be a serious problem."—[Official

Report, Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee, 1 May 2013; c 1658.]

The Government provides support to the community transport sector, including bus service operators grant for those who provide demand-responsive transport or registered services. The national concessionary travel scheme is also open to operators that provide registered local services. Therefore, despite the transfer of responsibility to local authorities, it continues to support the community transport sector. However, if we are to continue to develop and sustain the sector, the Government must consider how it can help to resolve the issues that I have highlighted—short-term funding, replacement vehicle costs and driver training—as soon as possible.

15:33

Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in the debate on the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee's community transport report. I am no longer a member of that committee, but I was at the time of the inquiry, so I echo the thanks to the clerks and to the witnesses who came before the committee.

I had been aware for many years of the important role that community transport plays in my constituency. I recall accompanying Sarah Boyack many years ago when, as the then transport minister, early in the life of the Parliament, she handed over a new minibus to the Annandale Transport Initiative. Many of my constituents, community groups and voluntary organisations in rural Annandale and Eskdale have in the years since then benefited through being able to use fully accessible minibuses and other accessible transport in areas where public transport is infrequent and, sometimes, unavailable altogether.

So, like Alex Johnstone, I thought that I knew a fair bit about community transport, but during the inquiry I found that there was quite a lot that I did not know. For example, I had mistakenly assumed that community transport was predominantly a rural development, but the recent Age Scotland campaign and the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee's inquiry have made me realise the extent and diversity of community transport provision. Community transport also provides services in cities for people who are physically unable to use public transport buses, perhaps because the vehicles are not suitable for wheelchair users, because the traveller cannot get to the bus stop in the first place, because there is no local bus service, or because the nearest service is too far to get to.

As other members have said, community transport is not provided only using buses and minibuses; it includes transport by volunteer

drivers who help people to get to hospital appointments or make other visits with their own cars, for example.

Some community transport providers are social enterprises, such as Coalfield Community Transport in Cumnock, which I visited during the committee's inquiry. It is a non-profit-distributing company limited by guarantee that owns eight minibuses, which can be hired. It offers services such as a day hopper club, which provides excursions, and an away hopper, which offers short breaks. The local council, East Ayrshire Council, contracts it to run some public transport services under a section 22 licence, so it is eligible for the BSOG and the concessionary travel scheme for those services. The organisation is large enough to have paid staff, in addition to volunteers. In contrast, Thornhill and district community transport, which attended the same event as Coalfield Community Transport did, has one minibus and relies completely on volunteers.

The services of community transport providers—whether they are large or small—are much valued by their users, but keeping such services functioning in times of financial austerity is challenging. Initially, central Government provided funding through the rural community transport initiative and the urban demand-responsive transport initiative, which enabled groups such as Annandale Transport Initiative to purchase fully accessible vehicles.

As the minister said, the Scottish Government transferred those funding streams to councils without ring fencing, as part of the 2008 concordat with local authorities. Some local authorities have remained financially supportive of community transport providers, but the committee was told that others have been less so as they have become more financially constrained. We were told that, since funding was transferred to local authorities, growth in the community transport sector has slowed considerably. Vehicles that were purchased through the RCTI and the UDRT initiative are now ageing and need to be replaced. Maintenance of older vehicles places a greater financial strain on providers, and many have no funding stream that can provide the significant sums that are required to purchase replacement vehicles. That issue will increasingly urgently require to be addressed.

My local rural community transport providers have made the point, which I have raised in Parliament over the years with ministers—not just in the current Government, but in its predecessors—that many of their customers are eligible for free bus travel but do not get the opportunity to use their entitlement because appropriate public transport is not available. I was and am more sympathetic to Age Scotland's still

waiting campaign than some other committee members are. A major issue of inequity is involved.

Under the concessionary travel scheme's current rules, I will be entitled at the end of 2014 to apply for a bus pass, which would enable me when I stay in Edinburgh to travel from my flat to Parliament for nothing. I also have a D1 entitlement, so I could drive a minibus, too. There is something wrong when people—who will include me, in 2015—who are in well-paid jobs are able to travel to work for free, while others who are far less well off, including members of my parents' generation rather than mine, or people who suffer from limiting disabilities, have to pay for the transport that they need to get to medical appointments, to go to the shops or to have some form of social life, because they cannot access public transport to use their entitlement card.

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): I have listened to the debate with interest. Will Elaine Murray clarify the Labour Party's position on the free bus pass? I am unclear from her speech precisely what it is.

Elaine Murray: The Labour Party brought in the concessionary travel scheme and we still support it, but if we cannot debate the major inequity that affects many of my constituents who live in rural areas, we are not doing our job as parliamentarians.

There are significant problems with simply extending the national concessionary scheme to community transport, which became evident during the committee's inquiry. The problems include funding for the extension and installation of the necessary ticketing infrastructure, and reimbursement—public transport providers receive 60 per cent of the cost of an adult fare, not the whole cost of a ticket. As others have said, even greater problems would be involved in extending the system to use of private cars, which provide community transport under some schemes.

A simple extension of the national concessionary transport scheme appears to be fraught with difficulties, and there might be a better way of achieving the result that I want, which is equity in the provision of free transport for community transport passengers—especially those who live in rural Scotland, including my constituents. The committee came up with no alternative suggestion; it merely suggested that the Government should seek a mechanism for addressing inequity in the context of community transport provision, which I suppose is a bit of a cop-out.

If community transport cannot be included in the NCTS, I urge the Government to address the inequity that has persisted since the scheme was introduced.

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

Elaine Murray: As I said, I have raised the issue with ministers in successive Administrations on behalf of my older constituents who are not served by accessible public transport.

15:40

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): I, too, compliment the members of the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee on a very interesting and comprehensive report. Reading it through as a non-member of the committee, I learned a great deal. However, it also confirmed many of the issues that constituents who are involved in community transport have raised with me over the years—issues which I, in turn, have raised in the chamber and in correspondence with ministers. South Scotland, which I represent, is one of the most rural areas in Scotland and has not, since the Beeching cuts of the 1960s, been well served by the railway network—withstanding the future opening of the Borders railway.

In Dumfries and Galloway, the population is declining faster than it is in other parts of the country, the age profile of the population is older than the average, wages are considerably lower than the average, and in an area where car travel is often the only way to get around, petrol prices are much higher than the average.

Community transport is therefore vital, so it is heartening, although perhaps not surprising, that there are several vibrant community transport organisations in the region. I will speak tomorrow night at the annual general meeting of one of them, which has already been mentioned by Elaine Murray. It is Annandale Transport Initiative, which is based in Lockerbie and serves a dispersed population in towns and villages including Annan, Gretna, Moffat, Hightae and many other very rural communities. ATI has provided community transport to Annandale since 1999 and hopes to extend its services to Langholm and Eskdale. It has grown from two accessible minibuses to six accessible minibuses and two people carriers. Its service users include 150 registered groups and a number of individual users. There are 40-plus volunteer drivers who are inspiring in their commitment to Annandale Transport Initiative, and the quality of their work is such that the organisation has achieved Investors in People recognition three times.

Last summer, I wrote to ministers on behalf of ATI after it raised two areas of concern with me. First, although it is supported by Dumfries and Galloway Council—which I think, compared with many other local authorities, has a good record in

community transport—the funding decision maker has become the Annandale and Eskdale area committee. The committee has moved to one-year funding—as has been mentioned by other members—which has caused considerable problems. Also, ATI asked for my support in seeking access to capital to replace its minibuses. Its vehicles all currently have 180,000 miles on the clock and date back as far as 2003.

I have raised both those concerns with ministers and I was heartened to receive a letter from the minister, Keith Brown, in July this year in which he refers to the committee report and, in particular, to its recommendation that the Scottish Government consider the development and introduction of a capital funding scheme for purchase of vehicles. I also welcome the minister's comments today, which give grounds for optimism on that front.

I note also that the Scottish Government has responded to the committee report and addressed the two major concerns that were raised by my constituents from Annandale Transport Initiative and by many more; indeed, they were raised by all the local groups that gave evidence to the committee.

I am pleased that the Scottish Government response recognises that replacement of vehicles is a key issue and I welcome the fact that Scottish Government officials are working with the third sector to consider how the need to fund new vehicles for community transport might be met. We will hear about the positive outcome of those talks very soon, I hope.

That is certainly the view of Annandale Transport Initiative; from speaking to its manager recently, I would say that that outcome cannot come soon enough. She was sitting with six funding applications to charities and foundations as diverse as the Robertson Trust and the People's Postcode Lottery on her desk. It was mentioned to me that when they have to apply to a diverse range of funders for their funding, they have to repeat over and over again what community transport is to people who are not overly familiar with it. The manager said that it would be much better if they could apply to a fund where people knew the value of what they do and where there were experts who were able to assess their application properly.

The committee report talked about how time consuming grant applications can be for small organisations that wish to use their limited resources to deliver services to local people in need. I discovered that Annandale Transport Initiative had employed a specialist to assist in those applications, who of course had to be paid from its revenue funding. That will eat into money for repairs, but it has little alternative because the

best solution is replacement vehicles. It is a vicious circle.

Mechanical failure can be particularly distressing for vulnerable groups, including people with disabilities, who use the services. I was told of a group who had had a very enjoyable night out at the theatre, only to be unable to access the wheelchair lift at the end because it had got stuck.

I welcome the investment in transport that the minister outlined, and I note that this Government's record investment in transport and the continuation of the concessionary travel scheme have increased the number of bus journeys that are made in South Scotland. Our continued investment in transport is all the more impressive when set against the swingeing Westminster cuts—to which the minister referred—to Scotland's revenue and capital budgets in recent years.

The other main issue that was raised in the committee's report and by my constituents is short-term funding. I welcome the comments that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth made in the chamber on 1 May this year, in which he acknowledged that short-term funding can make it difficult to plan services, creates additional costs and causes uncertainty for staff. Some of the evidence in the committee's report about staff receiving yearly redundancy notices was really quite distressing. Mr Swinney said that the Scottish Government is working with stakeholders to try to move the sector back to a three-year funding package. However, as the Scottish Government's response makes clear, that is a matter for local authorities.

I want to put on the record that I think that it is very disappointing that some of the local authorities that shout the loudest about local democracy do not, when they are given complete freedom to spend their grant on local priorities, give priority to volunteer-led third sector organisations—such as community transport initiatives—that are working in the community. I hope that that will change.

15:46

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

I congratulate Maureen Watt and the members of the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee on their excellent and constructive report on community transport.

Community transport is a subject that is close to my heart. When I worked for the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations in 2005, one of my first tasks was to join a Scottish Government working group that was set up to advise the then Minister for Transport and Telecommunications, Tavish Scott, on the strengths of applications to

the rural community transport initiative. As members will know, the fund was set up by the Labour-Liberal Democrat Executive and was aimed at rural and remote areas where there were very few, or limited, bus services.

At that time, as the current transport minister will know, the budget was approximately £600,000 per annum. I remember that the group used to meet in Victoria Quay every month, and I would arrive weighed down by boxes of application forms from areas throughout rural Scotland. The forms were filled in by the hard-working volunteers. As we know, the community transport companies were operating on a shoestring, but they were united in their goal of providing a quality service to their local communities and to elderly, disabled and disadvantaged people. The group's members would agonise over scoring each application, and we were conscious that not getting it right would mean less community transport in the Highlands, Aberdeenshire and the Borders.

I place on record my appreciation for, and thanks to, all those who are running community transport across Scotland. They exhibit the power and strength of the third sector in Scotland, which has deep historical roots. A century and more ago, when the national health service was a mere twinkle in Nye Bevan's eye, hospital almoners used to care for the sick, comfort the bereaved and counsel the dispossessed. They also had an early version of community transport, in that they arranged the transport of patients back to their own homes—which was, of course, by horse and cart, at that time.

That work was not carried out through a sense of paternalism or pity; instead, it was a matter of professionalism and commitment. As the committee's report notes, community transport is about much more than moving passengers from A to B. In rural and remote areas it is a force for good, an agent of rural development and a weapon against social isolation. I will give one example. In my region—the Highlands and Islands—the award-winning Badenoch & Strathspey Community Transport Company aims to increase its reach into the community by expanding its "Where 2 Today" community car and transport scheme. As members will know, Badenoch and Strathspey is a wide rural area where isolation is a real problem, particularly among the elderly. I am proud to say that I opened the scheme in Grantown-on-Spey in 1997 on a beautiful summer afternoon in one of my first tasks as a fresh-faced newly elected member of Parliament—surprising as that description may seem to members now.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Hear, hear.

David Stewart: Thank you—thank you so much. [*Laughter.*]

The excellent service is also of notional benefit to the 120 volunteer drivers, most of whom are over 50. Of course, as we heard from Duncan McNeil, the health spin-off to service users and volunteers is immeasurable.

A couple of years ago, the Highlands and Islands transport partnership, HITRANS, engaged consultants to review community transport schemes in the Highlands and Islands. After looking at five case studies, the consultants concluded that the cost of replacing community transport initiatives with commercially managed transport services would be £0.5 million.

In passing, I want to flag up Iain Gray's member's bill, which seeks to change the regulatory framework for buses in Scotland. As members know, that would have implications for community transport. The bill is designed not only to find more ways of facilitating more accessible bus services through a new franchise power for local authorities, but to allow more use to be made of local authority fleets, with the aim of community transport making up the difference.

As the committee convener rightly pointed out, community transport faces some serious challenges ahead. Since 2008, public bus transport provision has declined by 12.5 per cent. We have all heard about the demographic changes that will mean that the number of people over 65 will increase by 22 per cent by 2020. Several members have mentioned the critical shortage of revenue and capital funding that has been available for community transport provision since the funding was transferred to local authorities. We have also heard about the need for three-year rather than one-year funding periods, the lack of representative baseline information and the lack of a national co-ordinated approach. In addition, many members have mentioned the huge issue of equity—I think that Elaine Murray mentioned that in the context of concessionary travel. As Voluntary Action Scotland said,

"Community transport networks are generally disparate in their nature and suffer from a lack of co-ordination to maximise their effectiveness."

It is also clear that some potential users do not know about the level and range of services that are available in their areas.

However, potential solutions are in the air. I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to examining the possibility of a grants scheme to fund new vehicles. In his winding-up speech, perhaps the Minister for Transport and Veterans could provide some details about the timescale for that proposal.

Community transport is undoubtedly a huge resource for users, particularly in rural Scotland. By integrating with patient transport and utilising publicly owned vehicles such as school buses, the service can go to the next level in serving communities. In terms of building communities, community transport is one instrument in the toolbox and is delivered by the dedication and professionalism of a dynamic third sector.

15:52

Jim Eadie (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP): I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the debate and, as colleagues have done, to highlight the important contribution that community transport plays in increasing social inclusion and reducing isolation across Scotland.

I will say a little bit more about the national concessionary travel scheme in the course of my speech but, at the outset, let me say that I am proud that, during its time in office, the Scottish Government has safeguarded and funded both that scheme and community transport services. As others have stated, it is clear that such investment makes a real difference to the lives of thousands of older and disabled people, who are thereby enabled to live active, healthy and independent lives.

Throughout our inquiry, the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee received extensive written and oral evidence that made the point that community transport services provide a vital lifeline service for many people and communities across the country. Whether people use such services to attend a medical or hospital appointment—a point made with some gusto by Duncan McNeil—or to travel to a lunch club or other social activity or simply to go about their normal daily activities such as shopping, community transport can make an invaluable contribution to many people's lives. As well as empowering people to participate in the life of their community, community transport services can help to tackle social isolation and loneliness and contribute to good mental health and a general sense of wellbeing. Those are all tangible benefits of community transport services.

The committee recognised the role that community transport can play in enabling access to healthcare, leisure and social opportunities that might otherwise be closed to those who need them most. The committee also recognised that community transport allows many service users to live independently who might otherwise require supported or residential care.

We need to capture the contribution that community transport services make in financial terms as well as their wider benefits to society.

That is why I welcome the committee's call for a robust assessment of the total positive impact that community transport provision has on individuals and communities. I look forward to further progress in that area. The committee was united in celebrating the value of community transport services and in making a series of recommendations, which I am pleased the Government has considered and agreed to implement.

I pay tribute to Lothian Community Transport Services, which operates in the three local authority areas of Edinburgh, Midlothian and West Lothian. In Edinburgh, the service operates a fleet of eight accessible minibuses that are available for hire, either with a driver or on a self-drive basis, to other voluntary and community organisations. It provides that lifeline service to about 130 different groups.

I also pay tribute, as Mark Griffin has done, to the dedication and hard work of volunteers in sustaining our community transport services. Without their commitment, those services would struggle to be viable. I hope that the Government will do more to encourage community transport providers to take advantage of the Voluntary Action Fund, which delivers support to voluntary organisations on behalf of the Scottish Government.

I welcome the further work that is to be undertaken in expanding the role of the Community Transport Association and the doubling of its funding that the minister announced this afternoon. This is not about centralising services, which will rightly continue to be funded and delivered locally, but it is about providing necessary and valuable support and advice at the national level. Perhaps the issue of grant applications, which Joan McAlpine mentioned, is one that could be considered as part of that process.

Some organisations and some members have talked about the merits of extending the national concessionary travel scheme to include all demand-responsive community transport services, but they have not said how that would be paid for. Age Scotland's submission recognised that cost implications would arise from extending the scheme—it estimated those to be about £11 million, although the minister has said this afternoon that that might well be a gross underestimate—and it has made a specific suggestion about how those costs would be met.

The committee received a range of written and oral evidence on the subject as part of its inquiry into community transport. John MacDonald of the Community Transport Association highlighted one of the obstacles that would have to be overcome. In evidence to the committee, he stated:

“Concessionary fares in community transport and section 19 services could only ever work where there is a fare-paying passenger. There has to be an individual on the bus, paying a fare. However, on many services, individuals do not pay fares.”—[*Official Report, Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee*, 17 April 2013; c 1624.]

As we discuss the proposal, it is important that we recognise that cost is not the only barrier to the extension of the scheme. A number of witnesses said that concessionary fares are not a priority. It was suggested that the biggest challenge for community transport is the ageing fleet and that investment should be focused on vehicles. John Moore, from Lothian Community Transport Services, said:

“Funding fleet renewal is the biggest challenge that faces my organisation ... We have an ageing fleet, which ... is getting more expensive to maintain.”—[*Official Report, Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee*, 1 May 2013; c 1650.]

When it was suggested that the national concessionary fares scheme is not the right vehicle because of the costs involved, witnesses from a range of organisations—Lothian Community Transport Services, the Women’s Royal Voluntary Service, Badenoch and Strathspey Community Transport Company and South West Community Transport—replied yes in unison.

The evidence that the committee received suggested that there are a number of practical and logistical challenges to extending the scheme. For example, the introduction of ticket machines to read the bus pass could cost up to £10,000 per machine. It was suggested that there might be more pressing priorities.

The committee was therefore clear in its conclusion. It acknowledged that there is an issue of equity for people in remote and rural communities—Dr Murray made the point effectively—but went on to say:

“the extension of the concessionary fares scheme would present hugely significant logistical and administrative challenges. The Committee recognises that there is no easy or immediate solution to this problem”.

The committee preferred to focus on investment in new vehicles, as Alex Johnstone and Gordon MacDonald said when they argued for capital funding for replacement vehicles.

We should seek to build consensus on the way forward, as the committee did during the course of its inquiry. We should continue to listen to the providers and users of community transport services in Scotland, so that a vital lifeline service can be provided to the many older and disabled people who need it.

15:58

Cameron Buchanan (Lothian) (Con): I welcome the debate that the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee has brought. There seems to be great agreement among everyone about what should be done, but it is important that we note that the measure of success will be whether that leads to a comprehensive strategy on improving community transport. There has been much discussion to date but little in the way of action—as the old nursery rhyme goes, the debate on the bus goes round and round.

Members have highlighted areas of concern. A few key points need addressed if we are to make progress. First, we must have a better idea of what is happening on the ground in community transport services. Submissions to the committee highlighted the lack of information about the current coverage and state of health of services.

That said, the consensus is that community transport is very important in our communities, particularly for those dealing with social isolation who cannot access the mainstream bus services. However, we have no idea how vital these services are, who is reliant on them or how they would cope if the services were not there.

Inevitably, some groups would benefit significantly from access to community transport but are currently missing out. Moreover, those groups may have access to funds and volunteer support that could be used to support existing community bus and car-sharing schemes. Accordingly, a detailed study or audit of services that analyses what services are available and how well used they are is a must. From there, we can progress.

The most obvious area for improvement is the co-ordination and organisation of existing services. Although there will inevitably be gaps in the service, I feel sure that there will be neighbourhoods in which a number of people use different community travel services. Therefore, there must be scope for greater efficiency. There has been criticism of the lack of joined-up working and co-ordination of approach, particularly by Audit Scotland. However, there have also been some successes. Polis is a European organisation that works with local authorities and regions to support better transport through improved technology and transport policies. It hailed the MyBus service that is operated by Strathclyde partnership for transport as a good example of demand-responsive transport—buses that turn up where you want them when you want them. The MyBus service impressed due to its joined-up approach and co-ordinated service, which goes to show that there is already good organisation and management practice out there that we can draw on and share. Moreover, the attention that the

service is receiving from EU policy makers shows that we are not alone in looking at how community travel can be used in an overall transport strategy.

As I said, co-ordination will bring better use of existing resources, but there are significant concerns about the lack of funding for and investment in the sector. I was struck by the number of submissions that complained about the quality and age of minibuses and the on-going cost of the D1 licence training, which my colleague Alex Johnstone mentioned. That is a stark reminder that action is required now, because the problem will only get worse, as many members have pointed out.

That brings me to the issue of how we fund the community transport sector. We would all agree in principle with Age Scotland's campaign to extend the national concessionary travel scheme to include community transport. I am confident that, were it simple to do so, we would go down that path. However, it is not so straightforward. Submissions to the committee highlighted that the scheme would compete unfairly with existing bus services and that money would also have to be found for ticketing machines and software to allow the monitoring of passengers, as the minister rightly pointed out. Accordingly, I think that we must move aside on that issue and consider other solutions.

It is encouraging that, in the submissions that the committee received, there were a number of proposals for how we could make things easier for the community transport sector. For example, Lothian Community Transport Services, which is based in my region, made the practical proposal that we simplify the application process for a bus service operators grant, which is based on the eligible distance travelled and fuel consumed as a result and which benefits passengers by keeping fares lower. Small, simple ideas such as that might not look earth shattering but, as a whole, could make a big difference to the people who run the services, many of whom are volunteers.

I was also struck by the suggestion from the City of Edinburgh Council of piloting a buddy system between commercial bus companies and tour operators, and community transport groups, such as we heard about in the Highlands and Islands. The suggestion is that things such as mechanical support could be shared and that the cost of purchasing through such companies would be cheaper. That not only seems worthy of consideration but highlights the potential contribution of commercial operators, which, to my mind, has been slightly lacking until now. Given that those companies are already partners in the NCT scheme, there may be an opportunity to use them to ensure that the community transport groups also benefit from the available funds.

The other reason why commercial bus companies should form part of the discussion is that the debate is not simply about the future of community transport but about the contribution that it could make to a coherent local transport strategy in our communities. As so many respondents to the committee noted, the demand for community transport services and their design tends to be circumscribed through existing bus routes. I am not referring to the blighted trams—I was going to use a profanity, but I did not. Accordingly, we should, at the very least, encourage a dialogue between the two—community transport and mainstream bus route operators—especially when community transport has the potential to drive up overall public transport.

If we are moving towards community transport taking on a more strategic role within overall transport planning, we must be prepared to put our money where our mouths are. If these groups are to retain staff and invest in new buses, equipment and staff training, they need certainty about funding. We must address that issue while ensuring value for money for the taxpayer and overall accountability.

We have arrived at this debate very much on the back of the campaign to extend the NCT scheme. Although we may have exposed the difficulties with that approach, we must not allow that to halt progress. It is clear that there are a number of ways in which we can make better use of resources and better support community transport groups. Above all else, we must have leadership on the issue from the Government, and we must identify and implement solutions.

16:05

Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP): I welcome the committee's report and the opportunity to speak in the debate, although I am obviously at a disadvantage in that I did not hear the evidence as it was presented to the committee. I will talk briefly about community transport provision in my constituency before moving on to the report.

As other members have mentioned, community transport provision is a lifeline to many people around Scotland. It is something that many people, particularly in rural areas, depend on to get them from A to B. It is a service that is of incalculable value to vulnerable people who may not be able to leave their homes anywhere near as much as they would like to without it.

In north-east Fife, there is only one main publicly funded community transport scheme in place—dial-a-ride. Members will no doubt be familiar with both the dial-a-ride scheme and the

ring-and-ride services. Dial-a-ride is a timetabled service that collects passengers from their homes on request, and allows people who have difficulties in using standard public transport the opportunity, for example, to do their shopping independently. Passengers simply have to phone the service in advance to request a pick-up.

Ring-and-ride, on the other hand, is a door-to-door service that is not timetabled and has to be booked in advance. The destination can be anywhere within the local operating area. Sadly, however, the ring-and-ride service in Fife is limited to only four operating areas—Kirkcaldy, Levenmouth, Dunfermline and Glenrothes—and is not available to serve many of my constituents to any significant extent, many of whom live in rural areas such as the east neuk and the howe of Fife.

Although general community transport is not readily available in north-east Fife, it is fair to say that the Scottish Ambulance Service's patient transport service—where that is available—is very well used by outpatients with mobility issues. As with so many things that we discuss in the chamber, it is important that we acknowledge the contribution that is made by volunteers. Their role in community transport initiatives everywhere simply cannot be overlooked. I am in no doubt whatsoever that were more general services available, they would also be used and valued.

It is clear that community transport services are an essential part of the transport infrastructure in places where they exist, and they are an enormous boon to all who can use them. However, it is also clear that the picture across individual local authorities, not to mention across Scotland as a whole, is patchy, as David Stewart inferred. On that basis, I welcome the committee's report, which makes some helpful recommendations, and I am pleased that the Scottish Government's response indicates a willingness to take forward a number of proposals.

As others have alluded to, there are a number of issues that stand in the way of extended community transport provision. Perhaps one of the biggest long-term challenges facing Scotland is that of preparing for an ageing population, as Maureen Watt, the convener of the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee, mentioned in her speech. The committee noted some daunting figures that showed the scale of the challenge, as Mark Griffin and Duncan McNeil have indicated. The only point that I emphasise is that, given that average life expectancy is 76.6 years for males and 80.9 years for females, and that health is improving slowly but surely, the forecast rise in the number of 85-year-olds of 144 per cent in less than 20 years is truly food for thought. It is clear that we are experiencing a major demographic shift, which will increase substantially the demand

for services such as community transport. It is reassuring to note the Scottish Government fully recognises that and its implications.

The committee's report also identified wider issues facing Scotland's infrastructure in general. Paragraph 86 stands out:

“community transport allows many service users to live independently who might otherwise require supported or residential care.”

I therefore hope that the Scottish Government not only recognises that but considers investment in community transport initiatives in the short term to be a major area of preventative spend in the years ahead.

I also want to mention the implications of paragraph 87, which goes right to the heart of the debate:

“The Committee notes the anecdotal evidence on the reported positive impacts of community transport services upon the lives of users and the wider community. Whilst it considers that these benefits are obvious and clear, the Committee however acknowledges that there is a significant information gap which makes it impossible to make a robust assessment of the total positive impact on individuals and communities of community transport provision.”

That theme continues through to paragraph 90, which states:

“more qualitative information on the operation of community transport services across Scotland ... might be beneficial.”

That information gap is nobody's fault; it is a natural product of a patchwork system that has grown and evolved over time to meet the changing needs of users.

Community transport encompasses many different approaches across the country, as Alex Johnstone suggested. To use the loosest possible definition of the term, community transport encompasses many services, including local authority-run services such as dial-a-ride and ring-and-ride; private limited companies such as MyBus, which operates in north-east Fife; volunteers who drive minibuses or use their own cars; patient transport services; and transport that is provided by residential care homes. I am sure that we all agree that we need to have a comprehensive system for measuring the effectiveness of all forms of community transport, whether public, private or third sector, and that its provision should be kept under regular review to ensure that it is effective.

Therefore, I am delighted that the Scottish Government has agreed to commission a new piece of qualitative research. That is a welcome step, and I await the results of the research with interest. I also welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to continue to work with regional

transport partnerships and NHS Scotland to implement the recommendations of the short-life working group on healthcare transport.

16:11

Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland (Lab)): The committee's inquiry into community transport has brought the Parliament's attention to a well-used and much-needed set of largely voluntary services. I was glad to be part of that inquiry, and I hope that members on all sides of the chamber will give their fullest consideration to the recommendations that have been made. The evidence that we gathered should help us all to understand the difficulties that such projects can face, as well as the opportunities that they can create, especially for people who might be vulnerable or isolated.

In the "CTA State of the Sector Report for Scotland 2012", the Community Transport Association in Scotland found from the organisations that it surveyed that there were at least 25,000 volunteers in the sector, who supported 280,000 hours of voluntary service and 3.5 million journeys each year. It also found that demand for those services was likely to rise as a result of the ageing of the population and the tendency of the Scottish Ambulance Service to shed patient transport services and focus on emergency response.

Let us be clear: community transport projects are vital, and they are of growing importance to Scotland because of our ageing demographics and the limitations of commercial bus services. Community transport is a lifeline for people whose transport options can be limited because of age, disability or—especially in rural areas and places that are not served by public transport—gaps in provision.

During this year's inquiry, I visited three community transport projects: one in Duns in the Scottish Borders through the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee, and two in East Kilbride in my region. It was interesting to see how different projects that serve different people had grown and developed, and the variety of uses that had been found for community transport schemes.

Over a period of 30 years, East Kilbride Community Transport has become a hugely successful service for local community groups. Its success reflects the passion, the dedication and the good business sense of Ina Cumming and her volunteers. East Kilbride and District Shopmobility is making the town centre accessible for all. It does more than just take people from place to place—it takes them from their front door to the shops and back again.

In Duns, the Berwickshire wheels project keeps people connected in a rural area. It provides more than just the chance to go shopping or to visit a general practitioner; it is a social lifeline, too. One pensioner I spoke to in Duns told me that without Berwickshire wheels she would not be able to go to the theatre. The volunteers and the drivers do more than help her with the essentials—they help her to maintain her quality of life.

At a time when the Scottish Government and others are emphasising the importance of prevention and early intervention, it is important to appreciate the difference that community transport can make. Helping the elderly, the vulnerable and the isolated to maintain an active lifestyle can prevent exclusion and promote wellness and independent living in later life. Those local examples show that community transport schemes are not just a valued presence in communities—they are in demand.

In light of that rise in demand, I urge the Scottish Government to consider what further steps will have to be taken in future to support these services. If we follow the logic of preventative spending through to its conclusion, we can expect councils and the NHS to benefit from initiatives that help older people remain active and independent for longer. Comprehensive research into added value from community transport at this stage can help us to build a more cost-effective and better-resourced set of services for the future and, by working with Transport Scotland and the CTA, we can develop best practice and explore options for joint working and shared booking systems in order to bring down costs.

All the committee and I are asking the Government to do is look at the options that are being presented to us, build up our understanding of the sector and consider how we might resource community transport in future. As demand for these projects is growing, we must have the evidence to allow us to make informed decisions about the future of community transport and the needs of these resilient, diverse and increasingly vital services.

16:16

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): For the first part of my speech, I will take the unusual step of not speaking about my constituency. First of all, however, I want to congratulate Alex Johnstone on the informative and educational journey that he is continuing to take through the committee's evidence-taking sessions. I applaud him.

Just before recess, I had the privilege of attending the Scottish accessible transport alliance annual general meeting. I was asked to present

awards at the meeting, one of which was for a community transport initiative that had been going for the past 27 years. Some of us will remember the Manpower Services Commission; this particular transport initiative, which covers Stirling, Falkirk and Clackmannan, started as a result of the commission with two minibuses. It now has 27 buses and more than 40 volunteers. Not only has it been successful in providing a community transport lifeline to many vulnerable and disabled people, but it has taken the initiative to step beyond community transport and compete with commercial transport, putting the profits from its commercial bus service back into the community transport initiative. I am sure that the minister is familiar with the service, given that he is the constituency MSP for the area.

Of course the initiative has been successful only because of the dedication of its volunteers, particularly Duncan Hearsum. He has been part of it from the very start, and I was privileged and proud to present an award to Mr Hearsum at the awards ceremony. I suggest that, if we are looking for a model of good practice and a way of dealing with the challenges, difficulties and hurdles that community transport faces, we consider the dial-a-journey service in that area.

As has been mentioned, community transport means different things in different areas of Scotland. In my Aberdeenshire West constituency, the A2B dial-a-bus service provides an essential lifeline for many, simply because there is often no commercial transport to get people from their homes to hospitals, shops or leisure pursuits.

Even when commercial transport is available, a person with a disability can quite often be denied access to it. For example, the vehicle might not be compatible with their needs; worse, constituents have informed me that they can be waiting at a bus stop in their wheelchair but when the bus comes along the driver tells them, "Sorry, but you can't get on." Either the space has been taken up by buggies or people have refused to move and the bus simply moves on.

That is totally unacceptable. People should never be able to pass a person in a wheelchair at a bus stop and say, "Sorry, you can't come on this bus." The drivers probably had training, and I am sure that Stagecoach has told me on more than one occasion that all its drivers go through disability awareness training. It is a pity that they sometimes do not put that training into practice.

That is the difference with community transport. The dedication of the volunteers who provide the community transport service means that they would never leave someone at the roadside. In fact, they go the extra mile. They do not just get the person from their home to the bus; they often wait for the person while they do their shopping,

go to a hospital appointment, or perhaps meet a friend, even just for a cup of coffee.

Margaret McCulloch mentioned the preventative spend initiative. We need to take cognisance of that and the benefits for disabled and elderly people. Community transport is their only lifeline to get out and about somewhere different, to visit a friend or a relative in hospital, or to do something else that they could not otherwise do by themselves. A minibus is not always required; often, just a car with a dedicated driver is required. The Shopmobility service in my area in Aberdeen provides just such a service.

We have heard about community transport initiatives and the dedication of volunteers throughout Scotland. That is the real value of community transport. The issue is not to do with how much it actually costs; it is about how much is put in. That is the value of the volunteers. We probably cannot quantify the real, absolute cost. I do not know how to measure dedication, but I value it, and I know that everyone who uses the community transport services in my area and throughout Scotland values the commitment and dedication of the volunteers.

We need to try to ensure that community transport has a future but, to be perfectly frank, some organisations need to be smarter. There can sometimes be a similar service a few miles down the road. We need to be smarter in engaging the agencies and getting them to come together and work together. There is no point in a patient transport service picking up someone at one end of the street to go to hospital and a community transport car at the other end of the street going to the same hospital. That does not make sense. We need better co-ordination and planning, but most of all we probably need the commitment that the transport minister has already given this afternoon.

16:22

Alex Johnstone: As I expected, the debate has been very constructive. We may have disagreed on one or two points—that is always a healthy sign—but I take from it that there is genuine support across the chamber for the community transport groups that exist throughout the country. I have always learned new things—I assure Dennis Robertson that I do not expect ever to get to a stage in life at which I feel that I know everything—and the debate has been very educational for me.

On things that have been said, I have to pick out one or two key individuals who came up with really strong comments that we should all remember.

Duncan McNeil reminded us that the cost of community transport is insignificant compared with the cost of missed hospital appointments. If we

look at the cost of running our health service in Scotland now, it is obvious that that is the truth. I will take that out and probably use it in subsequent speeches and claim it as my own, if nothing else.

In the same vein, Jim Eadie pointed out that perhaps one thing that we ought to do is find out more information about what community transport really saves us. If we have tough decisions to make about transport in the long term—especially the transport of the elderly and the disabled—and we know the real cost of community transport and can demonstrate how cost effective the service is, there will be an opportunity to invest to save. We should always be prepared to make that investment.

The most significant aspect is the quality of the people who we met during our inquiry. I will not name names, but we met individuals from throughout the north, south, east and west of Scotland from very different backgrounds and with very different experiences but who all brought something to the discussion.

Dennis Robertson suggested a moment ago that we could be smarter in how we run community transport. That is true, but I believe that some very smart people are involved in the sector already. If we make the right effort to support those people in what they do, they are capable of making decisions for us.

Maureen Watt suggested that there is perhaps space in the community planning system to involve those who run community transport organisations. I agree with that in principle, but I learned from the inquiry that volunteers who run community transport initiatives have probably very little time to get involved in community planning as well—more's the pity.

We heard earlier at some length from Gordon MacDonald, who has considerable knowledge of and expertise in the bus industry. I was perhaps surprised but certainly pleased to discover that he and I agree on many of the key issues. I was not aware of an area of David Stewart's expertise until he told us about it earlier. His involvement with SCVO brought him close to the point where decisions were being made about how money was allocated for community transport issues in 2005. I am glad that he was able to tell us about the tough decisions that were made then and how the industry that we have today was formed.

We heard from Cameron Buchanan that there are of course issues of isolation, because even in our cities there are people who cannot access the advantages of public transport simply because they are not on the routes. Elaine Murray said that concessionary fares are a good idea but that, if someone is not on a bus route and cannot get a bus, it does not matter to them whether there are

concessionary fares. That is where community transport comes in, because it can provide a service for those who are not on a bus route and cannot take advantage of concessionary fares.

I will refer to one more comment from a member before I move on. There are often statements in a debate that are quite entertaining. I would have laughed out loud at this one had it not been for the fact that it was such a serious issue. It involved the irony that was highlighted by Joan McAlpine when she talked about visiting a community transport group and being told that they were applying for support to the Postcode Lottery. Given some of the things that have been said during this debate, how ironic is that?

The big challenge that lies ahead of us is to get the Parliament and the Government lined up to achieve the objectives that the report has set for them.

The minister indicated in his opening remarks that he already understands what the committee said in the report. I believe that the Government is already going in the right direction. This is a wonderful opportunity for the Government and the Parliament to take forward a theme about which we have a common understanding and set of priorities, and to ensure that we allow the considerable number of talented people who we have in Scotland to access the limited resources necessary to achieve the massive objectives of which they are capable.

I am not aware whose idea this was, but one of the clever things that we did after the report was published was to have a post-publication round-table meeting of the committee one morning. We invited all the people who had given evidence to come and tell us what they thought of the report. That was a high-risk strategy because they might have told us that it was rubbish. Certainly, weaknesses in it were highlighted but, after hearing what people had to say following their reading of the report, we were confident that we had found the areas that people were most concerned about.

That is why I am confident that, although we were unable to support everything that was suggested, those in the industry and those who represent the individuals who depend on community transport believe that we heard what they had to say and that we intend to achieve all that we can on their behalf.

16:30

James Kelly (Rutherglen) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to close this afternoon's debate on behalf of the Labour Party. It has been an interesting and informative debate.

Like Maureen Watt, I start by thanking the committee, the clerks and the witnesses who contributed to such a substantive report. It is clear from listening to members' speeches and reading the report that community transport plays a valuable role in Scotland's communities, and that that will continue to be the case, predominantly because of the age profile of Scotland's population. As Mark Griffin correctly pointed out, the over-65s will increase by 21 per cent between 2006 and 2016, and the over-85s by 38 per cent in that period. That gives us specific challenges. In addition, as Cameron Buchanan pointed out, a lot of individuals and communities feel isolated from the bus network, and Scotland's demographic means that we have a substantial number of rural communities.

Dennis Robertson: Does Mr Kelly agree that the problem is not just that people are isolated, but that people are sometimes wary of using commercial transport because they do not know what service they are going to get, even if they can access it in the first place?

James Kelly: That is true. It brings me to my next point and reiterates why 16 per cent of the users of community transport are disabled people. That is probably because they are a bit wary of the commercial network and what they will find there.

Elaine Murray pointed out to us the extent and range of community transport. It is not just buses. It can be minibuses and also taxis. Margaret McCulloch correctly identified what a lifeline community transport provides to many communities throughout Scotland.

Part of the committee's work involved looking at the funding challenges. There is no doubt that the decision by the SNP Government in 2007-08 to collapse ring fencing has presented challenges in terms of the money that has then been available to community transport. It strikes me that the minister just wrings his hands when he looks at what is happening here. There is no doubt that there are quite a lot of differences across the country, and that is a direct result of the collapsing of ring fencing.

Keith Brown: Do the member's comments suggest that he would support the reintroduction of ring fencing in this regard? If not, does he think that we should put in more money to support those local authorities that have invested less than others in community transport?

James Kelly: I am not supporting the reintroduction of ring fencing. I am saying that the minister's attitude seems to be like that of one of the passengers on a bus; as it goes along, he is looking outside and saying, "Look what's happened there. Well, there's not much that I can

do about it." I suggest that he needs to show a bit of innovation and a bit of leadership.

I will give the minister a practical suggestion. One thing that witnesses told the committee was that the change fund is not being used properly and people are not aware of it. Perhaps he could look at how that could be extended or even used, with more information becoming available, to get funding to those community transport organisations that need it.

One of the other issues that was identified in a comprehensive speech by Gordon MacDonald was the need for asset replacement and the challenges that the asset base of the community transport fleet faces. If the assets are not replaced timeously, maintenance costs begin to run up. Some members, including Joan McAlpine, highlighted situations in which many buses have broken down during a journey. I welcome the fact that the minister and the Government will look at asset replacement.

More certainty around funding would be helpful. I agree with Alex Johnstone's suggestion that we should look at multiyear funding.

A number of members, including Roderick Campbell and Dennis Robertson, rightly praised the work of volunteers. It is clear that there are challenges for volunteers around the licence arrangements. More could be done to co-ordinate and join up the training of those minibuses drivers who are on these licences so that the voluntary organisations' costs could be cut.

Any discussion about community transport cannot take place in isolation. We need to look at what is happening with buses generally. The reality is that the Government's cuts to the bus service operators grant and the changes to reimbursement for the concessionary travel scheme, which will be reduced to 58 per cent next year, mean fewer bus routes and buses throughout Scotland. There has been a 12.5 per cent reduction in annual bus mileage since 2008, which means that fewer buses are operating in our communities. That puts more pressure on community transport organisations. The Government cannot look at community transport in isolation. It needs to look at its record on buses generally. Buses are being underfunded and passengers are being left at bus stops without buses to service the routes.

The committee has made a number of practical suggestions and informed us all about the debate. I look forward to seeing how some of those suggestions will be implemented.

16:37

Keith Brown: I have listened with interest to all the contributions and, although they have been diverse, they have largely been consensual, and there is some consensus around this issue as has been mentioned by previous speakers. I had hoped to be able to say that James Kelly's speech was absolutely smashing but, as his subsequent comments about the Scottish Government prove, he is a glass-half-empty—or a glass-completely-empty—kind of guy.

I want to respond to some of those comments. Mr Kelly talked about me wringing my hands. The very essence of wringing one's hands is complaining about the effects of dropping ring fencing while not proposing to reintroduce it. Similarly, if Mr Kelly disagrees with the rate of reimbursement, which has been independently arrived at and jointly agreed with the bus industry, it is open to him to propose a different rate of reimbursement during the budget process. I look forward to seeing whether he has the conviction to make that proposal.

I will now concentrate on some of the points of consensus. There has been a lot of recognition of the value of the contribution that has been made by the community transport sector. I am aware that the transport sector has been described by many members as particularly diverse. It has no predetermined shape but it springs from local communities working together to meet transport needs in a particular way. To endorse Alex Johnstone's comments, community transport does not want or need a centrally driven agenda, but I acknowledge that, in these tough economic times, it could benefit from some further help. Because of that, the Scottish Government will work with the CTA and other stakeholders to strengthen the support that we provide.

I return to one or two of the points that have been raised by individual members. Perhaps I did not understand the import of Roderick Campbell's question when he asked it, but I confirm that the Scottish Government does not accept that a failure to provide a concessionary travel scheme covering community transport is in any way unlawful under equality law.

On a point that was made by Duncan McNeil, the Scottish Government is providing approximately £400,000 over two years for at least two pilots—one urban and one rural—in healthcare transport. We will seek applications from NHS boards as the lead authority, acting in collaboration with relevant local authorities, regional transport partnerships and the Scottish Ambulance Service. As Duncan McNeil suggested, those pilots will explore new approaches to the provision and integration of health and social care transport. That is therefore

being implemented and I take on board Duncan McNeil's points.

Cameron Buchanan mentioned the suggestion made in his area that we should try to simplify BSOG applications. If he wants to write to me on exactly what the proposed modifications that would be helpful to operators are, I am more than willing to have officials look at that and get back to him.

Alex Johnstone criticised one-year funding. We have heard about that many times before from different authorities, especially from the third sector. Although that charge could be levelled at the Scottish Government or local government, we are currently in the process of a one-year spending review from Westminster. Much flows from that; under the current situation, what we do flows from that, which influences what local authorities do. There has to be a joint approach if we are to get the longer-term, more stable funding that has been mentioned.

Mark Griffin made many of us very envious when he said that he sat his driving test after 1997, and I am very grateful that he did not say how long it was after 1997 that he sat his test. I could have sat my test when I was 17, gone back to zero and then sat it again before 1997, so I am very envious. He made an important point about people who qualified to drive after 1997 not being able to drive minibuses. We will look at that and I have mentioned some of the measures that we have said that we should take to ensure that we have enough trained and qualified people to undertake driving voluntarily. We should not be putting obstacles in the way; we should try to make it as easy as possible.

Elaine Murray made the point that the situations that she finds herself in would make it wrong for her to benefit from the concessionary travel scheme; that demonstrates the difference between us, although it is a sincere point and I know that she is frustrated at the reaction that she gets. Many in the SNP have gone through many elections being told that we were going to cut the concessionary travel scheme, which perhaps explains some of the sensitivity around that area. Of course, Elaine Murray is quite right to say that debates such as this are times to put forward contentious points of view; I do not disagree with that at all.

I am sorry that I cannot remember who made the very important point about using the procurement powers of local authorities and the Scottish Government to make it easier for community transport organisations to procure, for example, new buses. I have looked into that in some detail, and I was very keen that if the Scottish Government was able to help out with the provision of new assets, we should do so—as we

are doing with the green bus fund—by buying vehicles that are much more environmentally friendly. However, if members look into that, they will see that there are very few or no vehicles on the market that achieve that to any extent. There is no guarantee that even new buses will be more environmentally friendly than the ones that they replace—I understand that point. The buses that have been bought through the general bus fund have in many cases been hybrids, which are much more environmentally friendly. I looked into the issue with Alexander Dennis, which said that it would have to have 200 to 300 buses on order to make it viable for it to develop a bus of that kind. If we can work together with local authorities and the Scottish Government, as has been suggested, and start to give that certainty of orders to some of the suppliers, we could achieve even more of that.

That will not stand in the way of us very quickly coming to a conclusion on what support we can give through a grant scheme to help some operators replace their current vehicles.

Mark Griffin made a point about the level of funding for local government. I asked for the figures and, in 2006-07, it was around 34.7 per cent of Scottish Government expenditure. The figure is currently 38 per cent and it has been more than 37 per cent in every year in between, which shows the commitment that we have made to local authorities.

James Kelly: Does the minister accept that last year more than 50 per cent of the cuts that were passed down from Westminster were passed on to local government, and in the preceding year more than 80 per cent of the Westminster cuts were passed down? Local government has been penalised under the SNP Government.

Keith Brown: Those figures completely contradict one of the first points that I made. The Scottish Government has had an increase of 6.4 per cent and the increase in the local government budget has been 8.9 per cent. It is not possible to square that with the allegation that cuts have been passed on to local government to the extent that James Kelly said. He is wrong on that.

I am very grateful that Dennis Robertson mentioned Duncan Pearson in my constituency for his work and the award that was made. I also mention quickly Kathleen Welsh, who was a woman with substantial disabilities in my constituency. I represented her as a councillor and an MSP for the best part of 17 years. She worked tirelessly with the dial-a-journey service for many years to help people to access such services and her death is a real loss to the sector. I record my thanks for what she did.

I reiterate the points that I made at the start about what we are doing. James Kelly mentioned

leadership. We are providing leadership through providing the research on the community transport sector that has been talked about and improving the support and advice to the sector. We are also doubling the moneys that are made payable to the CTA, which will allow it to get a better database of information for how we go forward; many members talked about that. There is also what we might still be able to do on bus investment through a grant scheme.

The Scottish Government is doing a great deal. We are showing leadership. The committee by and large agreed that we had responded positively to the important points that it made.

In the first year of the new bus investment fund that I mentioned, a number of community transport projects have already submitted big bids for funding. As I said, I am hopeful that they will be successful.

We have shifted the basis for BSOG to mileage rather than fuel used, which makes sense to me. To some extent, that was opposed, but it has worked out extremely well. We were right to do it. It has tended to benefit operators, especially those in more rural environments.

There is a great deal that is positive in the debate. It is good to see the level of consensus that has emerged. If it was possible, I would like to get absolute unanimity on one thing: the point that Duncan McNeil made about the jungle of acronyms. He mentioned, for example, ICI—a name from the past—and the SAS, although that was the Scottish Ambulance Service, rather than anything else. Duncan McNeil also said that I should not be categorised with Jim Hacker, who was alleged by Sir Humphrey to have been unable to tell his ACAS from his NALGO. As an ex-shop steward and member of NALGO, I am glad that I am not categorised in that way.

The debate has been genuinely positive. It is important that we learn the lessons from the comments that members made in the debate and from the committee's report. We have responded to a number of the requests that the committee made but we have not finished at that point. There is more that we can do and, on behalf of the Scottish Government, I undertake to do that.

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): I call Adam Ingram to wind up the debate. Mr Ingram, if you could continue to about 4.59 or thereabouts, that would be helpful.

16:47

Adam Ingram (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I will endeavour to do that, Presiding Officer.

I am pleased to wind up the debate, which has been constructive, on behalf of the committee. It is clear that there is, and has been, cross-party support for most of the committee's findings and the recommendations that it made to the Scottish Government. There is obvious recognition of the valuable role that community transport plays in the lives of service users, and of the importance of providing support to those who volunteer or work in the sector in order to keep those lifeline services running, especially in the context of rising demand from an ageing population, as Maureen Watt highlighted in her opening speech.

Many members emphasised that greater security and reliability of funding, which provides the ability to plan for the future, is vital in order to assure the future of the community transport sector. Inconsistency of funding, regardless of where it comes from, is one of the biggest burdens on the sector and one of the greatest drains on its resources. Greater funding security would allow operators to focus their energies on providing and developing services.

Gordon MacDonald made a particularly effective speech, especially with regard to the need for three-year funding to replace the one-year system that we tend to have at the moment, as did Joan McAlpine when she highlighted the burden of administration and bureaucracy on the small operators. That was raised with me directly by Coalfield Community Transport, which Elaine Murray mentioned she had visited during the committee's inquiry.

Local authorities have difficult decisions to make about funding priorities for their areas, but questions must be asked about the obvious variation in funding for the community transport sector around Scotland when, as has been made clear, many of the same problems of access to transport exist the length and breadth of the country. The Scottish Government's consideration of a grant scheme for replacement vehicles is to be commended; it might go a considerable way towards allowing operators to plan with greater confidence for the future of their services. We look forward to an update from the Scottish Government on those plans.

As members know, community transport organisations tend to develop organically and to arise in response to perceived local need. The commitment of operators and volunteers to meeting those needs is to be strongly commended—Dennis Robertson made a notable speech in which he highlighted operations in the minister's constituency. The committee heard that the risk is that groups that emerge in isolation can lack the guidance and resources that would enable them to meet their full potential.

However, there are people in the sector who have the knowledge and background to support groups, which are often very small, and to provide sectoral leadership. The last thing that the committee wants is for the community emphasis of transport groups to be lost, so it is felt that a national strategy would be inappropriate.

The Community Transport Association in Scotland has been widely acknowledged as the sector expert; the committee knows from evidence that operators depend heavily on the CTA's advice and guidance. On that basis, the committee recommended that the Scottish Government support the CTA in taking on an expanded role. I very much welcome—as will other committee members—the minister's announcement that annual funding support for the CTA will double. That will help the sector to develop a shared vision and, perhaps more important, shared standards of service, while remaining responsive to specific local needs and circumstances.

"The CTA State of the Sector Report for Scotland 2012" provided an interesting and illustrative snapshot of community transport provision. However, the report itself acknowledged that it was by no means comprehensive and that there were many gaps in the data—that applies not just to quantitative information, such as the number of services or the number of journeys that are provided, but to qualitative issues, which need to be fully understood.

There is a need to establish beyond anecdotal evidence the impact that community transport has on the health, social engagement and welfare of service users, and the wider impacts that it can have on communities and public services. A deeper understanding of the sector is needed, as was emphasised by Rod Campbell and Margaret McCulloch.

In its response to the committee's recommendations, the Scottish Government said that it proposes

"to commission a new piece of qualitative research to collect information from a selection of community transport providers in Scotland on their services, including benefits and costs"

and to deepen

"our understanding of what services are currently available."

We look forward to getting feedback from the Government on that in due course.

As many members have said, the challenges for community transport that are associated with driver licensing and its cost are already significant and are growing year on year. There is no easy solution, because the changes to minibus driver licensing were brought about by changes in

European regulations. The pool of people who can drive minibuses without obtaining a licence qualification is ever decreasing. The costs that are associated with training an individual to obtain the necessary licence—as the committee heard in evidence—can be quite significant, especially for transport providers, for whom an £800 to £1,000 cost represents a significant impact on their available resources. In evidence, the minister said that it would be possible for the Government to provide support to reduce the cost to organisations. The committee welcomed the willingness of the Scottish Government to consider that and recommended that training co-ordination be looked at in the context of developing a wider means of support for community transport in Scotland.

In its response, the Scottish Government agreed to explore future demand for D1 qualified drivers with the CTA, community transport groups, other minibus operators—including local authorities—and training providers and, in the light of that, to look at options for securing D1 training more efficiently. That issue was also raised with me by my local Coalfield Community Transport provider in Cumnock, which suggested that it would make a fine trainer for other community transport providers.

On joint working, it was very encouraging to see—throughout the committee's own evidence-taking and in the evidence that was heard by the Health and Sport Committee—that there are good examples of joint working between community transport groups and partnership agencies. Indeed, the benefits of joint working have already been highlighted in high-level reports by Audit Scotland and by the Scottish Government's short-life working group on healthcare transport. Duncan McNeil today made a particularly effective speech on that. The Scottish Government has indicated that it will continue to work with regional transport partnerships and NHS Scotland to implement the recommendations of the short-life working group, which are largely echoed by the committee's recommendations.

As we have heard over the course of the afternoon, perhaps the most hotly debated aspect of the committee's report is concessionary travel. There is consensus that inequity exists, which is experienced by those who, although they are entitled to concessionary travel, cannot access the forms of transport to which that concessionary scheme applies. We had a good argument going on between Jim Eadie, Elaine Murray, Alex Johnstone, and Cameron Buchanan this afternoon that gave a flavour of the issues that are involved.

However, there is no doubt that certain people can find it difficult to access services—they may find it difficult to walk to a bus stop or they may live

in an isolated or rural area where there are no bus services. For those individuals, if they lack access to public transport or to a car the choice is between community transport and taxis, neither of which is free. Age Scotland's still waiting campaign has done a good job of bringing to the attention of members and the wider public the consequences on Scotland's elderly and disabled population of isolation that results from lack of transport. The campaign has called for an extension of the concessionary travel scheme to all community transport schemes.

The Presiding Officer: You can bring your remarks to a close any time now, Mr Ingram.

Adam Ingram: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

On the surface, that extension would appear to be a simple and natural solution to the problem. However, as the committee heard during the course of its evidence taking, the issue is significantly more complex than that. We have recommended that the Scottish Government come up with alternative appropriate means to address the inequities. I thank my colleagues for their speeches and I hope that Parliament has found our report to be a useful contribution to the wider debate. Thank you.

Business Motion

16:59

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S4M-08093, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following programme of business—

Tuesday 5 November 2013

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Person Centred Healthcare

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 6 November 2013

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Portfolio Questions
Health and Wellbeing

followed by Scottish Labour Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 7 November 2013

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

12.30 pm Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Stage 1 Debate: Tribunals (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 12 November 2013

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 13 November 2013

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions
Infrastructure, Investment and Cities;
Culture and External Affairs

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 14 November 2013

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

12.30 pm Members' Business

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Stage 3 Proceedings: Scottish
Independence Referendum Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time—[*Joe FitzPatrick.*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

16:59

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of a Parliamentary Bureau motion. I ask Joe FitzPatrick to move motion S4M-08091, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Protected Trust Deeds (Scotland) Regulations 2013 [draft] be approved.—
[Joe FitzPatrick.]

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

Decision Time

17:00

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

The first question is, that motion S4M-08079, in the name of Maureen Watt, on the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee's "7th Report, 2013 (Session 4): Report on Community transport", be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee's 7th Report, 2013 (Session 4): *Report on Community transport* (SP Paper 377).

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-08091, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Protected Trust Deeds (Scotland) Regulations 2013 [draft] be approved.

Scottish Woodlot Association

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-07627, in the name of Aileen McLeod, on Scottish Woodlot Association, a first for Galloway. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes that a new form of forest tenure has been introduced in Galloway with the establishment of what it understands is Scotland's first woodlot licence on the Corsewall Estate near Stranraer; considers that the concept of woodlots as a means of ensuring a diverse forestry sector has been proved over 30 years in British Columbia; considers that promoting a diverse Scottish forestry sector that encourages people to become involved in managing woodland for themselves is a positive development for rural Scotland; congratulates the Scottish Woodlot Association and the owner of Corsewall Estate, Angus Carrick-Buchanan, on agreeing the first Scottish woodlot licence, and hopes that this will be the first of many more to come.

17:02

Aileen McLeod (South Scotland) (SNP): I am delighted to lead the debate on a first for Scotland that is happening in the far west of Dumfries and Galloway. I am also delighted to welcome members of the Scottish Woodlot Association to the public gallery; I thank them and Scottish Land & Estates for the helpful briefings that were sent to members ahead of the debate.

I think that members will readily associate Dumfries and Galloway with forestry. In fact, the region produces approximately 30 per cent of Scotland's annual timber harvest and has a significant timber processing industry. Having visited the sawmills at Lockerbie and Dalbeattie—the latter being the largest single-site sawmill in Europe—I must say how impressed I was by the huge scale of the operations.

The region also has smaller sawmills and forestry contractors, and the industry plays an important role in tourism as the Forestry Commission hosts two of the popular 7stanes mountain bike trails at Kirroughtree and Dalbeattie. Dumfries and Galloway Council estimates that the sector employs approximately 3,000 people in the region, with numerous further economic benefits associated with public access, sporting activities and nature tourism.

Of course, forestry in Dumfries and Galloway also faces challenges. Larch tree disease is a particularly significant challenge, so I welcome the Government's commitment of resources to tackle the infestation in Galloway and I thank the Minister for Environment and Climate Change for his visit with me in August so that we could see for

ourselves the full extent of the disease in the Galloway forest.

In the short term, larch disease will keep much of the industry very busy, but it will also present future challenges. Even with those challenges, forestry is a big business, which is part of the issue that the Scottish Woodlot Association has identified. It is very difficult for someone who works in forestry to manage woodland for themselves.

Scotland has the most concentrated forest ownership in Europe. By way of example, Ireland has around a fifth of the forest area of Scotland but more than five times as many forest owners. The Netherlands also has a forest area of around a fifth of Scotland's but with seven times as many owners. That is an issue because the concentration of ownership and large average plot sizes go hand in hand. In Scotland, our average private forest ownership area is 232 hectares. In the Scandinavian countries, small-scale forestry thrives: in Norway, the average forest smallholding is 50 hectares; in Sweden, it is 43 hectares; and in Finland it is just 32 hectares. Scotland, on the other hand, also has about 300,000 hectares of undermanaged woodlands. Clearly, the problem is that there are few opportunities for people to manage forests for themselves, while there is a substantial amount of woodland that is not productive.

That is where woodlot licences come in. A woodlot licence allows a landowner to agree a long-term rolling lease with the Scottish Woodlot Association, which then divides the woodland into one or more woodlot licences and sets a rent for each based on its annual allowable cut. The licence holders manage the woodland and can fell, process and sell the timber for themselves.

The idea is that the licence holder should be able to make money out of the proposition—not enough to give up the day job, perhaps, but certainly enough to be a significant addition to their income. The benefit to the landowner is that an area of forestry, which might otherwise become a problem that the landowner might not have the skills to manage or might be prohibitively expensive to deal with, is taken off the landowner's hands. What was a potential liability becomes a source of lease income.

The concept of woodlots is not new, as they date back to 1948 in British Columbia. However, the concept did not really take off until the 1970s. In 1976, there were only 37 woodlot licences in British Columbia, but there are now 836 licences, which manage 0.5 million hectares of forestry and provide all or part of an income for 12,000 people. Therefore, it would be fair to say that the model has a proven track record.

Woodlot licences will not only offer an opportunity to engage many more people in the active management of Scotland's forests but allow undermanaged woodland to be brought back into production. They can also help to tackle the very real threat to Scotland's forestry industry that is posed by the shrinking workforce, which is generally composed of older people and has few young people coming into the sector. The sort of direct hands-on experience that woodlot licences offer could play a crucial role in attracting a new generation into the forest industry, at a time when we need them most.

One benefit of a woodlot movement would be the possibility to pool experience and even equipment, so that not every new woodlot licence holder need be an experienced forester with expensive gear. The Scottish Woodlot Association briefing calls that "open-source forestry". That is an attractive idea, which is certainly more likely to attract people with an interest in forestry into developing that interest further.

Of course, there would be no woodlot licences in Scotland if it were not for Angus Carrick-Buchanan, owner of the Corsewall estate near Stranraer, who has taken a leap of faith in setting up the very first woodlot licence. That licence covers 37 hectares of mixed woodland on the Corsewall estate, initially for an 18-month period to establish the concept, although all parties are committed to a longer-term agreement.

The licence holder, Mark Rowe, will be responsible for managing the woodland according to a management plan that has been drawn up by the landowner. That includes felling and extracting timber, which the licence holder will be able to process and sell for himself as firewood and sawn timber. I hope that, together, Angus Carrick-Buchanan, Mark Rowe and the Scottish Woodlot Association will be able to demonstrate that woodlot licences are ready to go, so that all the potential benefits that I have outlined can start to be realised sooner rather than later.

I also warmly welcome the support that Scottish Land & Estates has expressed for the concept of woodlot licences. I hope that its willingness to promote and encourage the uptake of woodlot licences among landowners will help to roll out the concept across Scotland.

That said, the Scottish Woodlot Association is a small organisation with a big idea—an idea that is receiving lots of interest and lots of requests. If the concept is to be rolled out across Scotland, as I hope it will, the association will need help to make that happen. Therefore, I invite the minister to have a meeting with the Scottish Woodlot Association, so that we can explore further what contribution the use of woodlot licences on a wider scale could make towards achieving the Scottish

Government's policy objectives for forestry and what they could do not only to connect people to their local woodlands but to help stimulate rural enterprise, create more local jobs and support the forestry environment.

I commend the hard work and dedication of the Scottish Woodlot Association, and Will Allen and Andy Brown in particular. Galloway now has the first Scottish woodlot licence and I hope that it will be home to many more. The idea could have substantial benefits for the forestry industry across Scotland. Woodlot licences could become as common a practice in rural Scotland as they are in British Columbia, and the whole of rural Scotland could benefit from their existence.

17:10

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Every now and again we come across an initiative that seems so obvious and so right that we cannot understand why we did not think of it ourselves or why we have not come across it somewhere else. That is very much the case with woodlots.

In my farming days, the land that I farmed had some 100 acres of woodland in various stages of—to be frank—mismanagement. It was spread over areas that varied from as little as half an acre to more than 25 acres in one wood. They would have been planted to enhance the shooting asset of what was at one time a small sporting estate—long before my time, I hasten to add—but they would also have been planted with a commercial aim in mind.

The woods were attractive and pleasing to the eye, and they undoubtedly enhanced the overall attraction of the fairly steep-sided valley in which they were placed. They would have been a lot more attractive and pleasing to the eye if I had managed them better, but my efforts were entirely focused on the farming aspect of the business and I freely confess that the proper management of the not-inconsiderable amount of woodland that was my responsibility was very low on my list of priorities.

What I would have given for the Scottish Woodlot Association in those days! How typical of most of my life it is that, almost as soon as I have given up on a problem or found another way of disposing of it, the answer appears in front of me, as if by magic. My farming circumstances would have lent themselves to a woodlot licensee as perfectly as a duck to water. I dearly wish that woodlots had made an appearance in Scotland 40 or 50 years before now.

As I said, the whole concept seems so simple that we wonder why it has taken so long to surface here in Scotland. That should not prevent us from

whole-heartedly welcoming the development of woodlots, and I am more than happy to lend my voice to others in support of the initiative.

As Aileen McLeod did, I congratulate my constituent Angus Carrick-Buchanan and the first Scottish woodlot licence-holder, Mark Rowe, for taking the first step in what I am convinced will soon become a common model of woodland and forestry management across Scotland. I have known Angus for some years, and I had the great pleasure of meeting Mark at the Galloway country fair in summer, along with other members of the Scottish Woodlot Association. Their enthusiasm and sheer joy at the project will set a fine benchmark for others to follow, as I am certain that they will do.

As the Scottish Woodlot Association's welcome briefing says, woodlot licences are an exciting new way of managing Scotland's forests and connecting people to woodland, while providing a mechanism for people of all ages to have easier access to forest land. They will boost local economies, stimulate rural development and create employment. They will increase the availability of firewood and biomass fuel and—this is important—they will encourage the development of small-scale, decentralised forest enterprises across the country, in a way that can only be beneficial for everyone concerned.

I can see no downside to the initiative. It has been welcomed by all the representative bodies that I am aware have commented on it, not least Scottish Land & Estates. The motion that is before us highlights that rarest of outcomes: a genuine win-win situation, in which there are no losers. I congratulate Aileen McLeod on lodging the motion. It might be 40 years too late for me, but this is surely an initiative that has found its proper time.

17:14

Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in the debate, not just because a high percentage of Scotland's forestry estate is in my home county, Argyll, but because in my previous career I had the joy of working with wood as a material for building houses and for making furniture.

I am sorry to say that, over my lifespan, I have seen a significant decline in locally added value in our timber industry in Argyll. Nowadays, sawn logs are exported with little or no added value, and an industry that was once labour intensive and which supported whole communities is now one in which most of the work is done by machines. Not so many years ago, there were several small sawmills in Argyll, creating employment and adding the significant value that is available when

timber is converted. Now, there is none. Those sawmills went out of business not because there was no demand for their products but because they were unable to make the significant investments that were necessary for them to keep up to date and remain competitive.

Timber technology has been driven by advances that have been made in the Scandinavian countries, where significant investments have been made in small-scale sawmills, thus making an important socioeconomic contribution to their rural economies. One result of our failure to do that came to light when the new community hall was being built on the island of Colonsay a few years ago. The community was unable to source the laminated roof timbers in Scotland and had to import them from Norway. Engineered timber is a very useful material with better strength to weight ratios than steel. It is also one of our most sustainable building materials, locking up carbon for its lifespan—and, with good design and reasonable maintenance, that lifespan can be considerable. Our forefathers understood that. I have personally repaired sash and case windows that were over 100 years old and which will, I hope, last for another 100 years.

Woodlots are therefore important not only because they offer opportunities for better management of this valuable resource, creating better-quality and higher-amenity woodlands, but because they offer a means of adding significant local value to the resources, giving rise to meaningful and rewarding employment and supporting fragile rural economies. Too often in the past, our forestry has been driven by tax advantages manifesting themselves in fast-growing spruce plantations. Mixed and less dense planting, especially of native hardwoods, offers a much higher albeit longer-term return not just in economic terms but in terms of biodiversity and landscape quality. In well-managed woodlands, timber can be a source not just of firewood or sawn logs for pulp but of a high-quality material for building as well as a source material for crafts such as furniture making.

Woodlots offer an opportunity for the kind of good management that has been noticeably absent from much of our forest land in recent years. I therefore wish the Scottish Woodlot Association every success in taking this innovative concept forward.

17:18

Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands) (Ind): I, too, congratulate Aileen McLeod on bringing the debate to the chamber. I am pleased to speak about woodlot licences and family forestry in Scotland, both of which I support because of their potential value to Scotland's rural economy

through job creation and forest management. As a member with a keen interest in woodland crofting, I understand the need for woodlot licensing and support it fully. Like Alex Fergusson, I wish that I had thought of the idea myself. I believe that a diverse forestry sector could come as a result of the licences and family forestry, and we should recognise the merits of both.

I will speak generally about the potential benefits of the licences but, before I do so, I express my delight at the awarding of Scotland's first woodlot licence in August for land on the Corsewall estate, near Stranraer. I am delighted by all that I have read about Mark Rowe and Angus Carrick-Buchanan and their agreement to have a fantastic management plan for 37 hectares on that estate. The plan allows Mr Rowe to engage in the felling and abstraction of timber, which he will then be allowed to process and sell as firewood and sawn timber. In return, Mr Rowe will pay an annual rental for the woodlot to Mr Carrick-Buchanan.

That is a good method of managing land and, as Mr Carrick-Buchanan said,

"This pilot project with the Scottish Woodlot Association sets out to prove that the woodlot licence holder, the woodland owner, the environment and the local economy can all win."

Woodlot licences will be important because they will potentially link local people, land management professionals, forest owners, timber processors and buyers in a co-operative working arrangement, which will provide benefits to existing forest owners and rural communities alike. Woodlot licences could provide the means to create many new jobs in the rural economy and could encourage people to live and work in rural areas.

In British Columbia, where woodlot licensing was pioneered, 12,000 people make all or part of their living from woodlot licences. I am sure that members will agree that that is an impressive statistic. It is rightly acknowledged that woodlot licences will bring undermanaged woodland into production, which will lead to more forest management activity than at present. That will involve the input of new machinery and existing and new contractors and will open up new supply chains. Woodlot licences also have the potential to produce thousands of tonnes of wood that could be used locally as firewood or for small-scale log processing or fed into supply chains for large-scale timber processors and renewable energy generators.

Family forestry is another aspect of any debate about woodlot licences. Woodlot licences can connect many more young families to the resourceful land that we have. Families have been squeezed out of land leasing because most land

use is dominated by large-scale industrial agriculture and industrial forestry and because the price of land and forest has been rising. For example, it can cost more than £10,000 for the purchase of just one hectare of forest. Until now, forestry has not had any prospect of a mechanism for leasing land through farm rental as is the case in agriculture but, with woodlot licences, that can change. They will allow small-scale, decentralised forestry to thrive, and will act as an important stepping stone in the creation of a new woodland culture for Scotland in the 21st century.

17:22

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): I add my congratulations to Aileen McLeod on securing the debate and to Mark Rowe on becoming the first holder of a woodlot licence issued by the Scottish Woodlot Association. I also thank the landowner on the Corsewall estate, Angus Carrick-Buchanan, for having the vision to be involved in this landmark pilot programme.

As Aileen McLeod and Jean Urquhart have outlined, the concept of woodlot licences has been inspired by the situation in British Columbia. The benefits there have been considerable and are inspiring. Woodlot licences have enabled local people to manage areas of state forest as small-scale forest enterprises. They have been proven to bring massive benefits to local economy, empowered rural people, and won many awards for excellence in forest management. It is therefore exciting that the Scottish Woodlot Association has been established to take forward the concept in Scotland in the region that I represent. One of my constituents, Andy Brown, will be a leading figure in the pilot, and I take the opportunity to commend the hard work that he, Will Allen, and everyone involved with the Scottish Woodlot Association have put into bringing the project to fruition.

Forestry and trees are an important part of our cultural and natural heritage. They inspire artists and connect us with our natural environment. Dumfries and Galloway has a fantastic range of forestry and a rich tapestry of different landscapes, which form an important part of the historic environment, as well as contributing hugely to the economy by supporting both forestry and tourism.

Although many of my constituents in the south-west of Scotland rely on woodland in some way, the sad irony is that, until now, few would have the chance to own or manage their own forest. As we have heard, Scotland has the most concentrated forest ownership in Europe. Not for the first time, a glance towards the Nordic countries shows us how things could be done differently and for the better. In those countries forest ownership is dominated by small-scale holdings. As has been said, the

average area of private ownership in Norway and Sweden is 40 and 43 hectares respectively, to which our average of 232 hectares does not compare at all favourably.

Scottish woodlot licences provide us with an opportunity to right the situation. They will enable individuals, for the first time, to lease woodland, to gain more experience in forestry, and to share this experience with others in a co-operative way.

One of the most important advantages of that process is that it will engage young people in the sector. Like most rural communities, many communities across the south of Scotland sometimes struggle to provide sustainable employment and suffer depopulation as a consequence. Although forestry is already integral to the economy of Dumfries and Galloway, too often work such as planting and felling is carried out by contractors who rarely use local labour. Woodlot licences offer fresh hope for keeping people living and working in their communities while maximising the economic and social benefits that forestry can bring to an area.

The concept of woodlot licences also fits well with the aims that are set out in Scotland's first-ever land use strategy. Published in 2011, it outlines principles for sustainable land use and emphasises the importance of linking people with the land, with the overarching aim of bringing about

"the beginning of a process which will change the way that we think and the ways that we work."

In Scotland, it is clear that that process has already begun. There is ever-growing support for community ownership and management, and in 2013 more than 200 community groups now manage woodland. I believe that Scotland has an exciting opportunity to take the lead in developing and demonstrating new ways of managing forests, and I await future developments with interest. I would like to wish Mark Rowe, Andy Brown, Will Allen and all those who are involved in the Scottish Woodlot Association all the very best with this worthwhile project.

17:26

Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): I add my congratulations to Aileen McLeod on securing the debate. Although it has attracted only a small number of members compared with some debates, it deals with an issue that can affect every part of Scotland. That is why I am pleased to make a few remarks in support of the motion.

The Scottish Woodlot Association would be welcome to come to the north of Scotland. I would be very happy to host it, because a constituent approached me about the difficulties of gaining

access to firewood on a private estate and the way in which the Forestry Commission offers firewood licences. The issuing of woodlot licences is a step forward from that, because they are about more than just extraction—they are about management, ecosystems and so on.

The Scottish Woodlot Association is to be hugely congratulated on its efforts. As it says in its briefing, it is a small organisation that has to learn to walk before it can run. We must try to help it to do so in different parts of the country. I think that that would best be done by promoting the excellent example at Corsewall.

In that regard, the briefing paper from Scottish Land & Estates is very enlightened. It welcomes the project's promotion. Indeed, it says:

"The rise in timber prices, demand for firewood and an increasing awareness of the economic value of previously abandoned woodland on farms and estates will ensure that the SWA has a great future."

There is a huge amount of woodland that can be managed, and I welcome Alex Fergusson's remarks about his practical experience on his previous holdings. That situation must be replicated in many parts of the country.

I would like the caveats about getting into more formal lease arrangements that Scottish Land & Estates mentions in the section of its briefing on building confidence to be put aside because, in the first instance, the informality of the woodlot licence arrangements gives them strength. They do not involve the contractual issue that landowners find difficult. Scottish Land & Estates mentions its fear of the threat that people gaining tenants' rights might turn into some kind of bid for ownership. We should lay that aside. I hope that the land reform process will allow us to get past the stage of thinking that every piece of land must be one that is bought. Although I believe that the issue of hereditary tenants in the farming sector must be given serious consideration, informal leases of the type that we are discussing will not lead to the same situation.

I repeat what I have said in the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee. The Crofting Reform (Scotland) Act 2010 ensured that it would be possible to create new crofts without having the ability to buy them, so it is possible to have leases of all sorts without that leading to a demand to buy at some time in the future. We should reassure Scottish Land & Estates on that matter but ask it to be proactive in dealing with existing tenant farming problems.

This represents a great offer for every part of the country, and I hope that the Scottish Woodlot Association thrives. Of course, it has to walk before it can run and I, for one, would be very happy to host it further north. I once again

congratulate Aileen McLeod on getting this debate on to the books. I will be taking copies of the *Official Report* to constituents to let them see what is possible.

17:30

The Minister for Environment and Climate Change (Paul Wheelhouse): I am most grateful to members for their valuable speeches in this debate and congratulate Dr Aileen McLeod on bringing forward this important issue. I know from my recent visit to the Galloway forest that Aileen McLeod takes a very keen interest in forestry issues, and that interest has been demonstrated by the depth and quality of her speech.

Aileen McLeod's motion invites us to recognise the establishment of Scotland's first woodlot licence and the value of encouraging initiatives that enable more people to share in the benefits of Scotland's trees, woods and forests and through that to contribute to the stewardship of our woodland resources. I should say that I commend the collaboration between the Scottish Woodlot Association and Mr Carrick-Buchanan and will watch its progress with great interest. Breaking new ground and establishing new ways of working require commitment and I am glad to hear that, although the collaboration was initially viewed as a pilot, the aspiration is for it to become a longer-term arrangement.

Given that our nation has used and benefited from several native Canadian trees such as the Sitka spruce and Douglas fir, it is perhaps appropriate that we seek to learn from Canadian forest management techniques. I acknowledge Alex Fergusson's comment that we should perhaps have invented the idea ourselves, but it is great that it has come to light and I thank the association for bringing it to our attention. Although the Canadian woodlots model has not been imported in its exact form from British Columbia to Dumfries and Galloway and although the scale of the woodlots is perhaps smaller in Scotland, the two approaches share a number of similar aspirations, including a desire to increase people's involvement in forestry and improve the condition of unmanaged woods. Indeed, that latter point is crucial, given how diseases such as *Dothistroma* pine needle blight can thrive in poorly managed conifer plantations. This is therefore a very practical measure that can be taken.

The association's website illustrates the desire of both parties involved in the first licence to make the project work and the clear ambition to reintroduce sustainable forest management to areas of forest that, for whatever reason, have been neglected in the past. I am therefore pleased and greatly encouraged by the fact that private woodland owners are embracing this novel

initiative. With 60 per cent of our country's woodlands in private ownership, there is much scope to develop these kinds of models and apply them more widely with, as a number of members have pointed out, a number of benefits to people and our environment.

Private sector support has been echoed by Scottish Land & Estates, which has told me that it supports this initiative and wants to explore it further with its members. In fact, it has commended the Scottish Woodlot Association for its pragmatic approach to developing this idea. I also applaud the way in which the pilot has sought to marry up people interested and skilled in managing forests with areas of woodland that need such management. It is an example of how to make the best use of another of our country's greatest assets—its people—in the stewardship of our natural resources.

If managed appropriately and sustainably, our trees, woods and forests can deliver significant benefits. They provide, as Mike MacKenzie, Alex Fergusson and Joan McAlpine have pointed out, economic value from timber products and jobs; provide health and wellbeing benefits to those who use and enjoy them; and are, of course, home to some of our country's iconic and important wildlife such as the red squirrel and the capercaillie. Our challenge is to ensure that such benefits are available to people across the country, whether they be owners, managers or users. I greatly welcome the fact that, although the issue has been raised in a south of Scotland context, Jean Urquhart, Mike MacKenzie and Rob Gibson have shown support for the initiative and I hope that it is taken forward elsewhere in the country. The link between people and their forest land is a core element of the Scottish Government's land use strategy, a key objective of which is to promote

"Responsible stewardship of Scotland's natural resources delivering more benefits to Scotland's people",

and this project is as good a demonstration as we can find of that objective in practice.

The commitment to engage people in ways that best suit the participants and circumstances is also a core focus of the Scottish forestry strategy, which has at its heart the principle of

"Forestry for and with people."

The initiative that we have been debating is an excellent example of what we hope to achieve through the strategies, led and supported by enterprising, energetic and enthusiastic people. It adds to the growing number of approaches that are being taken by woodland owners, whether they are private, community or public woodland owners. It is very good to see such diversity developing. I am also greatly encouraged by the leadership that is being demonstrated by the

private sector in helping to deliver our collective ambition to make the forestry resource

“a central part of our culture, economy and environment.”

For the record, I hope that it will be taken into account that it is also possible for community owners to adopt the model and to deploy a similar approach to facilitating woodlots. Perhaps acquiring part of a site that is woodland is not necessarily the core function of their community ownership model, but that is a good way of ensuring that that asset is managed properly and that we can—to address a point that Joan McAlpine raised, I think—try to reverse depopulation in some communities in which that has been a significant issue.

The particular woodlot initiative that we are discussing marks another step in our collective journey to help urban and rural people and their communities to become better connected to the land. The strengthening links between Scotland's land and its people will help to build resilient communities and make the most of our rich natural assets for all Scotland's people to flourish.

I will use my remaining time to make a couple of plugs. As we have talked about trees and Joan McAlpine is in the chamber, I remind people that the consultation on Scotland's national tree is still open. We would welcome any further inputs into that consultation. I also welcome the point that Joan McAlpine made about opportunities to engage young people in the sector. There are important opportunities for training and getting young people into the sector and developing their skills.

Alex Fergusson, Mike MacKenzie and Jean Urquhart talked about small-scale, decentralised forestry operations and the Scandinavian model. Indeed, Jean Urquhart talked about family forestry. Those were all important points. The initiative offers an opportunity to strengthen and facilitate that agenda.

I agree 100 per cent with Mike MacKenzie's point about the use of timber in construction. That is why I strongly encourage the development of the wood first initiative in our second report on proposals and policies as a means by which we can try to make more use of timber in the construction process. Mike MacKenzie is absolutely right about its low-carbon potential.

Aileen McLeod made valid points about the linkage to tourism and the fact that the 7stanes project across the south of Scotland is a tremendous asset.

Tackling *Phytophthora ramorum* in larch might not be directly linked to what we are discussing, but, as I mentioned, there is a general message regarding *Dothistroma*, which is that by managing

the forests more appropriately we can manage disease risks in a changing climate.

I will take up Aileen McLeod's offer to meet the Scottish Woodlot Association at a time that suits it. I am very interested in hearing more from it.

In conclusion, I greatly look forward to following the progress of the first woodlot initiative in Galloway, and most important, I look forward to discovering how it can be taken forward more widely.

I thank Aileen McLeod for bringing the issue to the chamber.

Meeting closed at 17:38.

Correction

Kenny MacAskill has identified an error in his contribution and provided the following correction.

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Kenny MacAskill):

At col 23764, paragraph 2—

Original text—

We have a prison replacement programme under way. HMP Inverclyde will replace HMP Greenock and there will be a new prison in the Highlands to replace HMP Inverness.

Corrected text—

We have a prison replacement programme under way. HMP Inverclyde will replace HMP and YOI Cornton Vale and there will be a new prison in the Highlands to replace HMP Inverness.

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