



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 13 March 2014

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 13 March 2014

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

General Question Time

Independent Expert Panel on Unconventional Oil and Gas

1. Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what progress is being made by the independent expert scientific panel on unconventional oil and gas. (S4O-03007)

The Minister for Energy, Enterprise and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): The independent expert scientific panel was convened by the Scottish Government with a remit to review the scientific evidence on unconventional oil and gas and provide a report. The panel has met several times and is considering evidence from a variety of interested stakeholders, covering planning, economics, geology and environmental issues.

Joan McAlpine: The minister will be aware of the concerns of my constituents in Canonbie, where permission to explore for coalbed methane was granted under delegated powers. My constituents are concerned that the make-up of the expert panel focuses too much on those with a background in petrochemicals and not enough on those with a background in toxicology and the impact of such developments on communities. Can the minister offer any reassurances in this instance?

Fergus Ewing: I reassure the member that the membership of the expert scientific panel was based on recommendations that were made by the chief scientific adviser, and the panel's expertise spans a breadth of disciplines in unconventional oil and gas, environmental, geological and engineering processes and resource extraction.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The Ineos plant at Grangemouth is depending for its feedstock on shale gas being shipped across the Atlantic from the USA in a fleet of tankers that are being constructed in China. Surely it would make more sense with regard to the viability of that business and, indeed, its carbon footprint if it could instead depend on a source of domestic unconventional gas. Does the minister agree that the Scottish Government should be encouraging that?

Fergus Ewing: I hear what the member says. It is a matter for the company how it sources its feedstock. I understand that it has made a

decision to proceed with the importation from the USA, and we note that. Of course, we take an evidence-based approach to all these matters. That is the correct approach. We await the findings, later this year, of the panel of experts, who include people with expertise across a range of issues. That evidence-based approach is one that the Scottish Conservatives adopted when they said that all new technologies must be evidence led. I agree with the Conservatives in that respect.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): The problem is that the energy minister tends to regard all fossil fuels as an economic resource while the climate change minister accepts the global evidence that most fossil fuels must remain unused if we are going to have a chance of preventing catastrophic climate change. Is the Government any closer to resolving that contradiction between its climate and energy policies?

Fergus Ewing: We do not accept that the contradiction exists.

Glasgow Queen Street Station (Upgrade)

2. Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with stakeholders regarding the upgrade of Glasgow Queen Street station. (S4O-03008)

The Minister for Transport and Veterans (Keith Brown): Transport Scotland, working with Network Rail, has had productive discussions with a number of stakeholders. These include First ScotRail, the Buchanan Partnership, the Millennium hotel, Glasgow City Council and Strathclyde partnership for transport. We will continue to work closely with our key stakeholders as we progress the transformation of Queen Street station.

Sandra White: The minister will be aware of the announcement by Network Rail that Queen Street station will be closed for four months—an announcement that was not conveyed to Glasgow Chamber of Commerce or any local businesses. What contingency plans have been made for users of the station? Will there be a consultation? Who will be involved in it?

Keith Brown: It is important to be clear that the closure by Network Rail is not part of the Edinburgh to Glasgow improvement programme. Rather, it is related to the renewal of the existing trackbed in the Queen Street tunnel. We would certainly want to have further discussions with Network Rail on the points that the member raises.

On disruption in and around Queen Street, a disruption management forum is to be convened by Transport Scotland, involving stakeholders such as Glasgow City Council, SPT, Network Rail,

First ScotRail and Passenger Focus. That group will be tasked with minimising the impact of any disruption to the travelling public, including Sandra White's constituents.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): As has been said, Queen Street station's upper level will be closed for approximately 17 weeks, according to officials who are working on the project, as a result of the replacement of the slab track. What level of disruption are passengers likely to experience in terms of journey-time increases or service reduction, and will the closure coincide with the closure of the Winchburgh tunnel?

Keith Brown: I am not sure whether Mark Griffin heard my response to the second question from Sandra White. I have just made it clear that this closure by Network Rail is to do with maintenance, not EGIP. If he is referring to the disruption that will result from EGIP, I advise him that, as I have mentioned, there is a group looking at how best we can minimise that disruption. *[Interruption.]* The member is shouting from a sedentary position, but I am not sure what he is saying. Nor am I sure what the question was if it was not about disruption resulting from EGIP or the maintenance of the tunnels. EGIP is a £3 billion investment in infrastructure—an investment that should have been made many years ago—that will create many jobs and will dramatically improve the service. *[Keith Brown has corrected this contribution. See end of report.]* The project will necessarily cause some disruption, but we will minimise that disruption by taking the measures that I have outlined.

Rail Travel (South Scotland)

3. Jim Hume (South Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to support rail travel in the South Scotland region. (S4O-03009)

The Minister for Transport and Veterans (Keith Brown): The Government is delivering substantial improvements to the rail network in the south of Scotland. We are investing £353 million in delivering the Borders railway, which is due in 2015 and will re-establish passenger services for the first time since 1969. We are also re-letting the £2.5 billion ScotRail franchise that aims to deliver faster and more efficient passenger services, which will strengthen connections between our cities and regions.

Jim Hume: The minister will be aware of the campaign to have Beattock railway station, near Moffat, reinstated. Does the minister agree that a rail link to Beattock and other stations in the south-west, such as Thornhill, Eastriggs and Glenluce, would be a huge boost for tourism, local commuters and business? Does he support the reinstatement of those four stations, and will he

agree to have a short meeting with the Beattock station action group to hear about its plans?

Keith Brown: As the member is aware, in re-letting the franchise we have created a £30 million fund for either improvements to existing stations or the establishment of new stations. That is the appropriate way for proposals for new stations to be made. I have seen the representations relating to Beattock, and I will continue to follow that situation. However, the fact that £2.5 billion is going into a new franchise that will improve services, with a subset of £30 million for new stations, shows that we are addressing what Patrick McLaughlin recently conceded has been “decades of underinvestment” in our transport infrastructure in Scotland in a way that has not been seen before.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): The minister and Transport Scotland officials recently met RailQwest, which is seeking to promote greater connectivity between Ayrshire and the south of Scotland, and eastern Scotland—an aspiration that I share, as it could also benefit the future of Prestwick airport. Does the minister share that aspiration? If he does, how might the electrification project be taken forward?

Keith Brown: I was interested to meet the representatives of RailQwest and listen to the points that they made. I made the point to them that the way to take the matter forward would be to take it to the regional transport partnership or local authority in order that a proper appraisal could be undertaken so that the proposal could be properly considered. It is an interesting proposal, but it would not quite do what some people imagine that it would do, which is connect the two main stations in Glasgow. Nevertheless, it is an interesting proposal and the correct way to pursue is to have it assessed objectively against the Scottish transport appraisal guidance criteria.

E-commerce

4. Gavin Brown (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to boost e-commerce. (S4O-03010)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The Scottish Government has established a business excellence partnership to help Scottish businesses to develop the confidence, capabilities and skills that are required to take advantage of digital opportunities. One good example of the work that our enterprise agencies are already doing is the partnership between Scottish Enterprise, ScotlandIS and the smart exporter programme to deliver the e-commerce Scotland programme. That provides practical support and ideas for all types of businesses and is designed to help them to grow

their online sales both at home and throughout the world.

Gavin Brown: According to the Office for National Statistics, total e-commerce sales for the UK reached £492 billion. What is the Scottish Government's estimate of annual total e-commerce sales in Scotland?

John Swinney: The Government's assessment, which was contained in the SQW report on Scottish e-commerce that was published in May 2012, is that e-commerce sales in Scotland totalled £31 billion per annum.

Scotland Food & Drink (Export Plan)

5. Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how Scotland Food & Drink's new export plan will support Scottish produce abroad. (S4O-03011)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment (Richard Lochhead): Last week, I was delighted to launch Scotland Food & Drink's new export plan at Nairn's Oatcakes in Edinburgh. The plan is a fantastic example of collaboration between the industry and Government and it will capitalise on the industry's tremendous success by focusing on key export markets over the next five years. That will be done by deploying a team of global experts across those markets to open up new opportunities and drive up international sales. I am fully confident that that will reap huge rewards for Scotland in the coming years and help the industry to meet its new ambitious export target of £7.1 billion by 2017.

Christina McKelvie: We all know that barriers are put in the way of Scotland using United Kingdom embassies, which charge us for their services. Does the cabinet secretary agree that, with more effective overseas representation, we would promote our produce abroad better and tackle barriers to trade that are not prioritised by the Westminster Government?

Richard Lochhead: An independent Scotland would be able to do a lot more to increase exports and to ensure that we target key markets. I recall that, during a visit to Tokyo in 2012 with Scotland's biggest food and drink mission, the UK consul general in Tokyo told me, much to the alarm and surprise of the Scottish delegation, that getting Scottish beef into the Japanese market was not a priority. Scottish representatives would ensure that getting Scottish beef into the Japanese market would be a priority. That is just one of many examples how we could boost international export sales with independence.

Structural Defects (Assistance for Home Owners and Council Tenants)

6. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what assistance is available for home owners and council tenants when structural defects are identified in their homes. (S4O-03012)

The Minister for Housing and Welfare (Margaret Burgess): Local authorities have a statutory duty to ensure that homes that are let to their tenants are wind and watertight and otherwise fit for human habitation and that any work that is needed to comply with that duty is carried out in a reasonable time. Private home owners are primarily responsible for work that is required on their own homes, but the local authority has discretionary powers to provide a broad range of assistance.

Jackie Baillie: The minister will be aware that up to 90 properties in Silverton in Dumbarton have unforeseen structural problems, leading to a number of families being decanted. The cost of rectifying the structural problems is beyond many of the home owners despite the council's pledge of assistance. Will the minister meet me, the council and a small of residents to explore possible solutions?

Margaret Burgess: I am aware of the issue that the member raises and I have sympathy with the situation that many home owners are in. My officials have offered to meet the local authority to look at solutions. However, I am willing to take up the member's request and meet her and the residents to hear about their issues.

Tuition Fees (Scottish and non-Scottish Students)

7. Drew Smith (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the comment by the European Commissioner for education that any attempt to treat Scottish and non-Scottish students differently could be regarded as "a covert form of discrimination on grounds of nationality". (S4O-03013)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): I read, with great interest, Commissioner Vassiliou's response of 7 February to the question that was posed by David Martin MEP. Her response makes it clear that it would be possible for an independent Scotland, as part of the European Union, to maintain our policy of enabling universities to charge students from the rest of the United Kingdom tuition fees by objectively justifying that position. That is what we have set out on page 199 of "Scotland's Future".

Our policy approach has been made necessary by the imposition of fees of up to £27,000 over

three years on students in other parts of the UK. In order to protect places for Scotland-domiciled students, we had no option but to take decisive action.

Drew Smith is wrong in his assertion that Scottish and non-Scottish students are treated differently. That is the case now and it would be the case in an independent Scotland. Our policy is based on residence, not nationality.

Drew Smith: When it has been pointed out previously that the Scottish National Party's plans to discriminate against English students in an independent Scotland are illegal under EU law, the cabinet secretary has suggested that University Scotland's legal advice backs up his position. How does he explain the fact that University Scotland is publicly calling for

"robust and legally defensible certainty"?

Is it not the case that the organisation that he claimed backs him up is calling for him to avoid protracted court action, leaving him to defend an indefensible policy and a £150 million black hole in university finance?

Michael Russell: No. All that is simply not the case. [*Interruption.*] It is not the case and it does not become the case simply because Drew Smith says that it is the case. It is misleading to quote Commissioner Vassiliou's opinion without quoting all her opinion. She says:

"Unless justified by objective considerations independent of the nationality of the persons concerned and proportionate to the legitimate aim pursued".

She also says at the start of her answer:

"It is not the role of the Commission to express a position on questions of internal organisation relating to the constitutional arrangements of a particular Member State."

Therefore, I think that Commissioner Vassiliou would be unhappy with Mr Smith. Indeed, many people in Universities Scotland would also be unhappy with him, because he has misrepresented their position as well.

Scottish League Cup Final (Supporters from the North and North-east)

8. Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what special measures are being put in place to allow families from the north and north-east of Scotland to attend the Scottish league cup final in Glasgow on 16 March 2014. (S4O-03014)

The Minister for Commonwealth Games and Sport (Shona Robison): I can advise that special train services for supporters from Aberdeen and Inverness to Glasgow have been arranged between the clubs and ScotRail, with a significantly reduced fare for children travelling with adults.

On the roads, Traffic Scotland will provide a higher level of monitoring on all routes leading to Glasgow. The overhead variable message signs will be used to highlight any delays and queueing traffic as required. The use of all the other platforms, such as Traffic Scotland radio, website and Twitter alerts, will highlight the increased traffic on the day.

Lewis Macdonald: The minister will be aware that ScotRail is now filling a third football special from Aberdeen to Glasgow on Sunday, which is welcome. She will also be aware that its reduced fares policy allows a parent to buy a specially priced ticket for only one accompanying child. Will she thank ScotRail for its efforts so far but ask it to reconsider its family tickets policy before the next time Aberdeen fans travel in such large numbers to a cup final in Glasgow, which may not be long?

Shona Robison: I will certainly thank ScotRail. Of course, it always keeps such issues under review.

I wish both teams—Inverness Caledonian Thistle and Aberdeen—all the best in what I am sure will be a good show for Scottish football on Sunday.

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): I call the other half: Dave Stewart.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I share Mr Macdonald's concerns. Sunday will see a modern-day Highland clearance as thousands of Caley Thistle fans decant in Glasgow for a special day. However, traffic congestion, delays and hold-ups are a worry to many supporters. Does the minister share the concerns of a young Caley Thistle fan, who told me this morning:

"Caleythistle may go ballistic but the A9 is atrocious"?

Shona Robison: As I said, a lot of work and effort has been put in on the rail and road networks to ensure that both sets of fans get to the game safely. I am sure that we will see a great display of football come Sunday.

Independence (Economic Benefits)

9. James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the economic benefits of independence. (S4O-03015)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): Yes, I am delighted to provide an economic update. The Scottish Government has set out in "Scotland's Future" and the economic choices paper a detailed analysis of the potential opportunities and benefits of independence. Independence will allow Scotland to use its

resources and shape its fiscal and economic policies to meet the needs of its people.

James Dornan: Does the cabinet secretary agree that, following the citing by credit rating agency Standard & Poor's of

"high-quality human capital, flexible product and labor markets, and transparent institutions"

as reasons for confidence in the Scottish economy, it is time for opponents of independence to realise that Scotland is wealthy enough to be an independent country and that it is time that we used that wealth to improve Scotland rather than sending it to be squandered by the Westminster Treasury in London?

John Swinney: Mr Dornan makes a fair and dispassionate point. [*Laughter.*] He is right to cite the evidence advanced by Standard & Poor's, which noted that, even without North Sea oil and calculating per capita gross domestic product based only on on-shore income, Scotland would qualify for its highest economic assessment. That demonstrates what we all know: Scotland is a strong and wealthy country that is able to contribute to the international community, deliver prosperity for its people and tackle the inequality that has been a hallmark of the United Kingdom.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary confirm that Scottish spending as a percentage of UK spending was greater last year than Scottish revenues as a percentage of UK revenues? Will he confirm that that has been the case for 17 out of the past 23 years, contrary to the distorted claims of the yes campaign?

John Swinney: I am delighted to confirm to Mr Chisholm that, when we look at the past five years' performance—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

John Swinney: When we look at the past five years' performance, we see that public expenditure as a share of GDP was 45.4 per cent in the UK, while in Scotland it was 44.2 per cent. That deflates the nonsense that Mr Chisholm has just come out with.

First Minister's Question Time

Engagements

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

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

Johann Lamont: The Government's revenue and spending figures show that Scotland is in deficit to the tune of £12 billion, which is the equivalent of all our health spending. Oil revenues have gone down by more than £4 billion in just one year, which is the equivalent of all our spending on schools. If Scotland were independent, how would the First Minister cope with that revenue drop—by cutting services or by raising taxes?

The First Minister: I do not know whether Johann Lamont has come across the fact, but the United Kingdom is in deficit to the tune of more than £100 billion in the years that she has noted. The key point, which we have put forward before, is who is in the relatively stronger position. Johann Lamont knows—we have discussed this many times—that, if we look at the past five years, as John Swinney has just mentioned, or at the past 30 years, the answer is that Scotland has been in the stronger fiscal position relative to the United Kingdom.

That is, of course, in the context of the United Kingdom. Our case for independence is that by marshalling the great natural and human resources of Scotland we can build a fair and just society in this country.

As so many of the better together notaries have said on so many occasions that they do not doubt that Scotland is an economically viable successful country, and given that Standard & Poor's, which is not noted for its optimism on such matters, said it only two weeks ago, can Johann Lamont not bring herself to concede that, economically, this country can build that prosperous and just future for the Scottish people?

Johann Lamont: All that was very interesting, but that was not the question that I asked—there is nothing new there.

The First Minister has in the past criticised me, but it appears that he is saying today that a £4 billion revenue drop is just a wee thing: something that we do not have to worry about.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): A great wee line.

Johann Lamont: Indeed—exactly. I have learned my lesson, and perhaps he should do the same.

The First Minister has talked of a stabilisation fund, but he could put money in that only by cutting services or by raising taxes. Last year, he said that Scotland had a relative surplus in comparison with the rest of the United Kingdom. Will he now confirm that the rest of the United Kingdom has a relative surplus in comparison with Scotland's relative deficit? Can he explain how he would maintain our schools when he has lost the equivalent of an entire schools budget? Would he cut services or raise taxes? *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Order.

The First Minister: I am delighted that we will no longer hear about the wee things. For those who did not understand the allusion, Johann Lamont is referring to when she seemed to think that employment policy, competition policy, control of oil and gas revenues and control of nuclear weapons were just the “wee things”, which it did not matter if Scotland controlled.

Those are of course the big things, but now that that lesson has been learned—

James Kelly (Rutherglen) (Lab): Answer the question.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Kelly.

The First Minister: Now that that lesson has been learned, the something-for-nothing society will, I hope, also disappear from the Johann Lamont lexicon.

Let us look at the relative position of Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. If we look at the years going backwards, there was a difference of £283 per head last year, which was the figure that was published yesterday. However, there was a positive £489 difference the year before, £214 the year before that, £75 the year before that and £1,100 in 2008-09. That is a total of £1,600 per head. Over the past five years, that is how Scotland would have been relatively better off than the UK as a whole.

Given that—because it amounts to £8,000 million—would it not be possible that Johann Lamont would concede that, over that period of time, we could have borrowed less or invested more, or had the stabilisation fund to make sure that, over that period, we could use that wealth to benefit the people of Scotland? Or does she still think that it is a wee thing that we would have been £8 billion better off, or £1,600 per head?

Johann Lamont: It is the First Minister who seems to be entirely relaxed about the fact that he would have £4 billion less to spend on jobs, education and support for our young people than

we would have otherwise. This is the man who lectures us about economics, and he gives us an answer like that—numbers that make no sense whatsoever.

I am not even asking the First Minister something difficult, such as what currency he would raise taxes in. Whether it is groats, bawbees or Armenian drams—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Johann Lamont: —in the past 12 months, Scotland has lost more than £4 billion of oil revenue. At the moment, that loss is borne across the United Kingdom because we are in the United Kingdom. If Scotland were outside the United Kingdom, I ask again: how would the First Minister pay for that loss in revenue—by cutting services or by raising taxes?

The First Minister: I point out that Scotland loses out on £5.5 billion of oil revenues, because they are the oil revenues for the past year from Scottish waters that are siphoned down to the London Treasury. Over the past 30 years, we have lost out on several hundred billion pounds. It is an indication of the strength of the Scottish economy that, over the past five years, we would have been £8 billion better off if we had been running our own finances rather than having them run for us by London.

I know that Johann Lamont believes that oil and gas is a dreadful burden on the Scottish economy. There are many oil and gas producers around the world, and every single one of them regards the hydrocarbon industry and the revenues that flow from it as a valuable resource that they are benefiting from. Why is it that, according to better together—Labour and Tory, Tory and Labour—it is only Scotland for whom oil and gas is this incredible curse?

If, over the past five years, we had been £8 billion better off, can we not all think of some wee things that we would have liked to invest in in the economy, such as jobs for the people and a fairer society? That is why Johann Lamont's campaign to tell people in Scotland that they are too poor to be independent will get the same giant raspberry as it did in the *Daily Record* poll this morning. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Johann Lamont: I think that that must be a record number of straw men that the First Minister put up in order to defend himself. Of course, I have never said that oil is a burden to Scotland, because without oil, Scotland's deficit would be £16 billion. What we got from the First Minister there is what they call on television quiz shows a pointless answer, although in fact it is charitable to call it an answer at all.

We know what the First Minister would not do. He would not be able to borrow his way out of trouble, because who would lend to a country that had just walked away from its debts? [Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Johann Lamont: That is not scaremongering; that is quoting the First Minister himself.

We also know that the First Minister would not raise taxes on the rich, because he ruled that out last week. He would not raise taxes on banks and big business, because he is committed to cutting tax for them lower than George Osborne is. The First Minister has lost the equivalent of the entire schools budget. I ask again: how would he pay for our schools—by cutting services elsewhere or by raising taxes on every family in Scotland? [Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: Johann Lamont asked who would lend money to an independent Scotland. Two weeks ago, the ratings agency Standard & Poor's noted that

"even without North Sea oil and calculating per capita GDP only by looking at onshore income Scotland would qualify for their highest economic assessment."

If an international ratings agency can say that, can the leader of the Labour Party in Scotland not bring herself to say it?

Of course, it was not so long ago that the better together parties told us that we could not be independent because we would lose our AAA rating. In fact, I have here the leaflet about the AAA rating that went round the doors. Then, of course, the UK lost its AAA rating from two of the agencies.

The reason why there is confidence from so many people on Scotland's economic prospects comes from looking at the figures that Johann Lamont has been given. Over the past five years, there has been a relative surplus of £8 billion. Scotland has been £8 billion stronger—almost £1,600 a head for every man, woman and child—than the UK as a whole.

Johann Lamont did not seem to appreciate the reference to the *Daily Record* poll this morning. That poll showed the "highest" support for independence recorded this year and that the Scottish National Party is "the most popular party" by some considerable distance. Most interesting of all, it showed that a quarter of the remaining Labour supporters in Scotland intend to vote for independence. Perhaps one of the reasons for that is the miserable, doom-laden running-down of our country that Johann Lamont has come to every day this week. [Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

2. Ruth Davidson (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister. (S4F-01945)

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

Ruth Davidson: This time last year, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth, John Swinney, said that there was "little doubt" that Scotland was

"moving into a second oil boom".

Yesterday, we found out that annual oil revenues dropped by 44 per cent, leaving a £4.5 billion black hole. [Interruption.]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Ruth Davidson: That is the price of funding every school in Scotland. However, that black hole did not affect Scotland's public spending because we can, as part of the United Kingdom, absorb those shocks.

We want the North Sea to produce more, and the UK Government is fast-tracking all recommendations from the industry expert Sir Ian Wood to squeeze out every last drop. We have the support from the UK Government to keep the North Sea industry going, and we have the support of a nation with broad shoulders to absorb the shocks. Does the First Minister accept that the last thing we need right now is to end both those advantages?

The First Minister: I absolutely loved that.

"We have the support from the UK Government"

to sustain "the North Sea industry". In fact, the North Sea industry has supported the UK Government for the past 30 years.

As for the unbridled optimism of John Swinney on the prospects for the North Sea, let me read what David Cameron has said about North Sea oil. He has said that

"There are many, many years left of this great resource"

and that

"It is a huge national advantage having such a brilliant oil and gas industry."

I know that I should not associate John Swinney with the Prime Minister in any shape or form whatever.

How come the industry is such a huge advantage for the United Kingdom, but a huge burden for an independent Scotland? Ruth Davidson criticised John Swinney's comment on the North Sea boom. Is she not aware that it is

precisely because of the £14 billion of investment, which has lowered revenues in the short term, that both production and revenues will be increased in the long term? The oil companies are investing precisely to get more oil and gas out of the North Sea. There will certainly be profits for oil companies, but there will also be revenues for the Scottish people—assuming that we have the common sense to ensure that a Scottish exchequer receives the revenues, as opposed to their burdening future Tory Chancellors of the Exchequer in London. I would not want to impose such a burden on them.

Ruth Davidson: Let us talk about the revenues. The First Minister says that he wants control of North Sea oil revenue in order to fund transformational policies, but let us look at his credibility. His flagship pledge was to extend childcare. We all want that but, this week, we found out that his white paper plans had been plucked out of thin air without any sums being done. The First Minister might think that that is credible, but I do not. Scots know a chancer when they see one. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Ruth Davidson: The First Minister would have us believe in an oil boom that does not exist and in an oil fund with no money to pay for policies that he has not even costed. The First Minister pretends that he is holding a full house, but is it not the case that, after yesterday, his plans are a busted flush?

The First Minister: After yesterday, we know that, over the past five years, Scotland would have been better off by £8 billion, which is £1,600 a head for every man, woman and child in the country.

Let you talk about childcare, because it is an important issue. We have argued—and substantiated it through production of the calculations—that we can afford a sustainable transformation of childcare by using the mobilisation of women back into the workforce and the 6 per cent increase in employment and participation to generate £700 million of revenues. The difficulty that we have at present is that only a small fraction of those additional revenues would accrue to the Scottish finance minister, while the vast majority would go to George Osborne in London.

If Ruth Davidson could pledge that, if we can effect the transformation in childcare and the increased participation of women in the workforce in Scotland, George Osborne's first priority will be to say, "Oh, I'm receiving an extra £700 million; I must immediately give it to the Scottish Parliament to make the policy sustainable," that would be something. However, we know otherwise from all

the evidence, including from the last 30 years in which successive chancellors who have had £300 billion of oil revenues have said, "Here are the massive natural resources of Scotland. Let's spend them on nuclear submarines."

Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): In the light of an inaccurate report in the House of Commons on the discharge of alpha-emitting particulate from HMS Vulcan's nuclear test reactor two years ago, can the First Minister assure my constituents and the wider public that we can trust the Ministry of Defence and the United Kingdom Government with our environmental safety?

The First Minister: The Scottish Environment Protection Agency has informed stakeholders of an incident in the civil aspects of Dounreay and will report today on that. The agency does not expect the incident to have wide environmental implications; indeed, it seems to have been safely contained. However, that provides an illustration of openness and transparency, which is hugely important in dealing with such matters. What a contrast between the ability to report on a civil incident and the inability, that is caused by the secrecy of the Ministry of Defence, to report on something that is covered by Crown immunity. Richard Lochhead put it extremely well in the statement that he made the other day.

Since then, we have had two developments. Mr Hammond has now corrected in *Hansard* the information that he gave to members of the United Kingdom Parliament last week. Now that the Secretary of State for Defence has corrected the record, perhaps Conservative MSPs—I heard Murdo Fraser talking about the issue this very morning—will now acknowledge that there was a mistake in the information that was given so belatedly to the House of Commons last week. In the defence secretary's correction, he says that there was

"no measurable change in the alpha-emitting particulate discharge."—[*Official Report, House of Commons*, 11 March 2014; Vol 577, c 4MC.]

That has caused great consternation in SEPA, because Vulcan has no agreed authorised level of alpha particle emissions and, to SEPA's best knowledge, Vulcan does not emit any of those particles. So, even in the correction, there still seems to be a dedication to obfuscation and to concealing information.

That is why Richard Lochhead outlined the process of removing that last vestige of Crown immunity, which seems to be the most satisfactory way forward so that as a community, Parliament and the Government in Scotland can be secure in the knowledge that we get proper information timeously, which will mean that we can understand and contain any risk to our natural environment.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD):

To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S4F-01947)

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

Willie Rennie: The skill and ingenuity of people in Scotland mean that 130,000 more people are in work. That is inside the United Kingdom—not outside it. The “Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland (2014)” figures yesterday showed the stability of the broad-based UK economy compared to the volatility of the Scottish finances. One year’s problem with oil means that £4 billion would need to be found from somewhere. Instead of searching for a crumb of comfort, why will the First Minister not answer the questions that he has been dodging for the past 15 minutes? Which taxes would go up and which services would be cut?

The First Minister: I think that Willie Rennie should have revised his questions after hearing my answers to the earlier questions. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: I pointed out that over the past five years, we would have been relatively better off by £8 billion, which is £1,600 a head for every man, woman and child.

Incidentally, I welcome—as we have said on so many occasions—the positive increases in the Scottish economy, the record business confidence that was reported last week and the record demand for labour that was reported this week.

I wonder whether Willie Rennie noticed in the figures that were published yesterday that even with the £4 billion fall in oil revenues, the current budget balance for Scotland and the UK were virtually identical. What made the difference was an almost 1 per cent greater increase in capital investment in Scotland than in the UK. I think that that increase was something to do with the finance secretary, Mr John Swinney, and how he has managed to sustain capital investment despite UK cutbacks. Maybe that partly explains why the Scottish recession has been less deep than the UK recession and why we are now enjoying—according to all the indicators—a substantial recovery.

Willie Rennie: I did not change my questions because the First Minister did not answer the earlier questions.

The First Minister will say absolutely anything. His expert community mission says that the fiscal deficit needs to go down in order to create an oil fund, but yesterday his party celebrated when the

deficit went up. In January, he said that we should ignore the economic figures for the past five years; today, he says that they are the only ones that count.

Last year, the SNP paraded the numbers for a single isolated year; today, the First Minister says that only an idiot would do such a thing. He used to say, “Look at the facts.” Now all that he has are excuses.

The First Minister likes to quote the Bible. He usually casts himself as Moses, but should it not be the book of Daniel that he quotes on this occasion? He has been measured and he has been found wanting.

The First Minister: I think that Willie Rennie must be confusing me with somebody else. I quote from many sources; no doubt I have quoted from the Bible, but I do not think that I have ever been a great biblical quoter. Perhaps he is confusing me with one of his colleagues. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: I have absolutely no idea what Willie Rennie is talking about, to be absolutely frank—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: However, on Willie Rennie’s argument that we have just for the first time decided to talk about the five years of figures, I talked about the past five years of figures at First Minister’s question time in January, less than two months ago, and I have over the past few years made a range of references with which I can supply Willie Rennie. It is obvious why we know that looking at figures over a term is important. It is because GERS publishes the figures for five years. Does not that give Willie Rennie a clue that the five-year figure is actually quite important?

Willie Rennie says that he does not like hearing about the £8 billion over the past five years. However, it is pertinent to the answer to his question. Instead of saying what we would have had to cut more than the UK over the past five years, I will say that we would have had either £8 billion less borrowing—which would have been a pretty good idea—£8 billion more investment or, which is the most likely, a combination of the two. If we had had access to that £8 billion, I am sure that even some of Johann Lamont’s “wee things” could have been done in Scottish society to generate more employment, to get more participation, and to make some progress towards the prosperous and just society that might or might not be in the Bible, but to which I am sure Willie Rennie aspires as much as I do.

Child Poverty

4. Jim Eadie (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the Child Poverty Action Group's finding that up to 100,000 children in Scotland could be pushed into poverty by 2020 as a result of the United Kingdom Government's austerity measures. (S4F-01951)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): It is unacceptable that any child should be living in poverty in a country that is as prosperous as Scotland is. In recent years, the number of children in child poverty has fallen because this Parliament, as a whole, has taken an approach that is focused on maximising household resources and improving children's life chances. The forecast from a number of groups, including the Child Poverty Action Group, that up to 100,000 children in Scotland could be pushed into poverty by 2020 should give every single member of this Parliament great concern.

As people rightfully look favourably and positively at the better indications that we are seeing in the economy, which we have listed and which I debated with Willie Rennie a few seconds ago, they should also look carefully at the social aspects of the welfare changes that economic institutes and the Child Poverty Action Group are predicting for us.

Jim Eadie: Is it not a scandal that, 40 years on from the National Children's Bureau report "Born to Fail", so many of our children are still living in absolute poverty, with poor educational achievement, diminished job prospects and shortened life expectancy? Is it not now time that we took the powers over taxation and welfare into our own hands so that no more children are born to fail?

The First Minister: It is important to remind members of the progress that has been in made. In 2001, 27 per cent of children—280,000 children—were born into relative child poverty in Scotland. Progressively, over the years—particularly, it should be said, during the past few years—that number has been reduced to 15 per cent, or 150,000 children. I am sure that we would all say that we want the figure to be zero.

Substantial progress has been made over the lifetime of this Parliament, and it is very substantial progress from 21 per cent in 2006-07 to 15 per cent in 2011-12. However, the difficulty is that the Child Poverty Action Group forecasts that the greater part of that progress is at risk of being lost by 2020. That is the point. Regardless of people's politics or views, are we going to tolerate a situation in which, according to the Child Poverty Action Group's forecast, that progress will be reversed, or should we in this country take the

ability to control the welfare system and ensure that, whatever else happens, the children of Scotland will not be made to suffer the brunt of the economic recession that we have endured?

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The Deputy First Minister and I attended the launch of "Poverty in Scotland 2014" this morning, and CPAG made it clear that it does not want the Scottish Government's focus on the independence debate to cloud its view of the things that we should be doing now. Given the things the Government can control now, such as the Scottish welfare fund and discretionary housing payments—things that can make a difference to households that have children—why can it not get money out of the door and into the pockets of the people who need it most?

The First Minister: The substantial majority of people across the voluntary sector appreciate and support the Scottish Government's efforts to mitigate the impact of Westminster's welfare changes. Jackie Baillie stands alone in not arguing that this Parliament and Government are doing everything that they can to take the edge off the welfare changes.

The ultimate reason why Jackie Baillie is in no position to deliver any strictures on the matter is that she is the one who said that although Scotland could control social security, it should not control social security. If she is prepared to maintain that position in the face of the forecasts, that tells us that she is someone who is prepared to put her constitutional obsession with the Westminster Government before the interests of the Scottish people.

Antisocial Behaviour Orders

5. Graeme Pearson: To ask the First Minister what steps the Scottish Government is taking to ensure that antisocial behaviour orders are not breached. (S4F-01956)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The 2009 strategy for tackling antisocial behaviour, "Promoting Positive Outcomes", marked a real shift in policy towards better solutions and recognised that prevention, early and effective intervention and diversion should be at the heart of approaches to tackling antisocial behaviour. The number of crimes recorded by Police Scotland as breaches of antisocial behaviour orders has fallen by 30 per cent from 2007-08 to 2012-13.

Graeme Pearson: In 2005, Mr MacAskill described ASBOs as "a short-term fix". On his watch, there have been more than 4,220 breaches of ASBOs, many of which are repeated breaches, and Government ignorance of the number of ASBOs currently issued in Scotland. Only two thirds of councils even bother to reply to freedom

of information requests on the issue. Can the First Minister confirm whether tackling antisocial behaviour is still a priority for his Government today? Does he plan to implement any changes to deal with those breaches?

The First Minister: Is it not a good thing that we have had a fall of 30 per cent in the number of breaches from 2007-08 to 2012-13? If Graeme Pearson's position is that the level is unacceptable and could be improved, I would certainly agree—let us see whether we can improve it further. Equally, however, it must be his position that the level that we inherited, which was 30 per cent higher, was an even worse situation. Perhaps he could have a conversation with people who were in government at that time, such as his leader.

Given that Graeme Pearson has great knowledge of these things, I know that he will acknowledge that recorded crime in Scotland is at its lowest level for 40 years—it is down by 35 per cent over that period. Above all, the statistics show that fear of crime is decreasing. Given his professional experience, he knows that fear of crime—people being worried about their safety—is hugely debilitating, particularly for older people in the population. Therefore, I know that the encouraging statistics that we are seeing on the decrease in the fear of crime and on people in Scotland being more positive about their local areas are things that he will be highly encouraged by—while, of course, urging the Government on to even greater improvements.

Housing Investment (Lloyds Bank Affordable Cities Review)

6. Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):

To ask the First Minister whether the Scottish Government will take account of the findings of the Lloyds Bank affordable cities review when allocating housing investment. (S4F-01955)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): We have introduced a formula for allocating housing resources on the basis of need. Affordability is certainly one of the factors that should be taken into account, along with deprivation, rural affairs and homelessness.

Kevin Stewart: House prices in Aberdeen have almost doubled over the past 10 years, private sector rental rates are the highest in Scotland, and there is a lack of affordable social housing because of the Thatcher sell-offs. Will the First Minister assure me that Aberdeen's almost unique circumstances will be taken into account when resources for investment in housing are allocated? Can more be done to boost mid-market rental opportunities?

The First Minister: I am pleased to tell Kevin Stewart that the new formula that I have described

means that the share of affordable housing funding for Aberdeen's local programme will increase by almost 25 per cent over the period between last year and 2017, which I think will be welcome news for people in Aberdeen.

In addition, Aberdeen benefits from schemes such as help to buy, the open market shared equity scheme and the innovative national housing trust initiative. Indeed, 85 homes for mid-market rent are being delivered through the trust initiative alone.

I am sure that the local member will welcome that news of the 25 per cent increase in funding for the affordable housing programme.

Greener Kirkcaldy

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-08928, in the name of Claire Baker, on recognising the work of Greener Kirkcaldy. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament congratulates Greener Kirkcaldy on what it considers its continued good work on taking action on environmental issues in the Kirkcaldy area; understands that the community-led charity gives advice and support to help people reduce fuel bills, grow and cook with seasonal local food and reduce waste as well as holding events for community groups and schools to encourage and involve them in improving their local environment; congratulates Greener Kirkcaldy on its involvement in such projects as Shine on Fife, Cosy Kirkcaldy and Orchard, a community orchard in Ravenscraig Walled Garden in Kirkcaldy; notes that the organisation recently held its annual gathering to discuss its achievements over the last year and look forward to its plans for 2014 and beyond, including its consultation on a community food hub; congratulates all the volunteers whose time and efforts contribute to making the charity such a success in the local community; notes the contribution made by its funding partners, including the Central Scotland Green Network, People's Postcode Trust and the Climate Challenge Fund; wishes the organisation every success in the future, and looks forward to its continuing contribution to Kirkcaldy and the wider Fife community.

12:35

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

Last week was climate week, although I am sure that the minister will agree that, looking at business in the chamber this week, it feels like this is climate week in Parliament. Climate week is an event aimed at inspiring action to be taken throughout Britain to tackle climate change.

We often use terms in the chamber such as "a million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent" yet our constituents are more likely than not—particularly at a time when pay packets are stretched—to be more interested in lowering their household bills. The reality is that we can do both. It is possible to lower fuel bills while staying warm. Many people just need a helping hand to give them the proper advice to make that change. That is why I am pleased today to acknowledge the fantastic work of Greener Kirkcaldy and its staff and volunteers. I welcome Lisa Farrell, Fraser Nicol, Heather Petrie, Jackie Vural and Allan Levack to the chamber.

Scotland has ambitious climate change targets, but passing them was the easy part. While Government and Parliament are vital in establishing the correct policy framework and the tools that are needed to deliver, it is the people who work on the ground in our communities who will make the real difference. Greener Kirkcaldy is

a community-led charity that is committed to taking action on environmental issues, particularly climate change. Formed in 2009, at a time when people throughout Scotland, including here in the Parliament, were seriously debating the challenges that we as a society face in lowering our emissions, Greener Kirkcaldy began its work to benefit its community and help Kirkcaldy to turn green.

Through the hard work of staff and volunteers, Greener Kirkcaldy helps households and organisations to make important changes to ensure a more sustainable and greener environment. It offers courses and workshops that aim to encourage Fifers to lower their food bills, reduce their waste and grow, cook and eat seasonal, local food. It works in community settings and schools, encouraging people to make positive changes and raising awareness of our environmental responsibilities.

Based on Kirkcaldy High Street, Greener Kirkcaldy has an advice centre and eco-shop that promote fair trade produce and provide practical advice and support. I was in there last week and it has a great display of low-energy light bulbs so that people can see what type of light a bulb produces before they buy it. That might seem simple, but some people, particularly elderly people, are reluctant to change because of a perception or experience of dim lighting. That practical display helps people to make that change.

Greener Kirkcaldy's initiative cosy Kirkcaldy aims to help locals to keep warm for less, with free impartial advice that provides a home energy makeover. I have signed up for a home energy check, as the service has been expanded throughout Fife. By making a home visit, staff are able to find ways to save the household money while reducing energy waste. Greener Kirkcaldy will check whether the home is eligible for any grants and offers, such as a free insulation top-up, and help households to understand better their energy bills and tariffs. Often, adjustment to a thermostat or a better understanding of how a boiler works can make a big difference.

As part of its Fife healthy heating network, Greener Kirkcaldy offers a handyman service. Often, relatively small and inexpensive changes, such as putting up a curtain rail and a pair of heavy curtains, can make a significant improvement in keeping a room or home cosy.

It is important that Greener Kirkcaldy's advice is free and impartial. It provides a first port of call for anyone who is thinking about installing new technologies. Home renewables is a growing industry and people can be put under too much pressure from door-to-door sales. It can be difficult to identify what an acceptable market price is for

the offer and to tell whether one is getting a good deal. Greener Kirkcaldy can help people through that maze.

Greener Kirkcaldy is also a partner in shine on Fife, which offers locals the opportunity to find out whether solar panels are right for their home. Some may suggest that the sun always shines on Fife—it is ideally placed on the beautiful east coast to take advantage of solar energy. Greener Kirkcaldy, working with home energy Scotland, Fife Council and St Andrews environmental network, provides the information and assessment that people need to make an informed choice. It is able to tell locals what is right for their homes but, equally important, it can advise on what is not right, and then highlight the full range of funding options and help to ensure that a certified installer is chosen.

In December, Greener Kirkcaldy was awarded money from the Big Lottery Fund to roll out the Fife healthy heating network throughout the kingdom of Fife. Working with St Andrews environmental network, Citizens Advice and Rights Fife, and Fife Council's fuel poverty officer, the project is expected to help 1,000 people to stay warm while keeping their fuel bills under control.

I recently went to Greener Kirkcaldy's annual gathering, and I was so impressed by the range and diversity of the work that it does. Staff and volunteers at the gathering talked about their projects, and their enthusiasm and commitment were great to see, particularly that of the volunteers who work in the community orchard and the training area at Ravenscraig's walled garden. It was clear to me that their work is not just about addressing climate change, but about developing people's skills, forming friendships and growing a community. Their impact punches well above the size and weight of the organisation.

There are new projects on the horizon. There are great plans to develop an edible wild garden in Dunnikier park. We know that all towns have parks that have swathes of green. The Dunnikier project is thinking imaginatively about how to use some of that space to provide greater community benefit and improve the area's biodiversity. The project is also developing early plans for a community food hub. That is a very positive venture that seeks to address issues of food sustainability, affordability and healthy eating. I look forward to playing any part that I can in making it a success.

Greener Kirkcaldy has been funded principally by the climate challenge fund, which has provided vital support for organisations working on local solutions. However, the voluntary and community sectors are on a continual funding search, and I am sure that the minister appreciates the challenges that exist for an organisation to

become sustainable. Greener Kirkcaldy has a level of funding security over the next wee while and the Big Lottery Fund support is very welcome. However, how does the minister see the future for organisations working in this sector? Where will the opportunities for support come from?

I thank again the staff and volunteers of Greener Kirkcaldy, including those who are in the public gallery today. The formation of an idea is only the beginning, and sometimes it is the easiest part of launching a new venture. What is then needed is the time and effort to turn that idea into a reality. Greener Kirkcaldy is successful because it is a great project with hard-working and dedicated staff and volunteers. If it was not for their contribution, our communities would be poorer places. They play such an important part in empowering communities and building their capacity and resilience. I am delighted to have had the opportunity to share knowledge of their work with members today.

12:42

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I thank Claire Baker for bringing the motion to Parliament and I welcome the members of Greener Kirkcaldy to the gallery.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to talk about Greener Kirkcaldy, because I have been following the project for several years. The community-focused organisation first opened its doors in 2009 after receiving funding through the Scottish Government's climate challenge fund. Since that day, Greener Kirkcaldy has supported individuals, families and companies in reducing their carbon footprints and fuel bills. The free and individualised advice that is offered by the organisation has truly helped many of my constituents.

Considering that all major energy companies significantly increased their prices in 2013, I believe that the work that is done by Greener Kirkcaldy is of even greater importance. Statistics indicate that simple measures to save energy can have a huge impact. They include actions ranging from being more conscious about a household's energy consumption to adapting homes to modern environmental standards. For example, the addition of 270mm of loft insulation can reduce annual heating costs by up to £175. That sum of money could make an incredible difference to vulnerable families in the community. Cognisant of such potential savings, an ever-increasing number of people are interested in reducing their carbon footprint and thereby cutting fuel bills. Accordingly, Greener Kirkcaldy has seen an increase in individuals seeking advice, with a record high of 1,030 cases between October and December 2013.

Integral to the success of Greener Kirkcaldy is its flexible and personalised approach to offering support. People who are seeking help can contact the advice centre directly and attend events and talks organised by Greener Kirkcaldy, as well as ask for an in-depth home energy advice visit. During such visits, a wide range of topics is discussed, including needs for implementing insulation and options for using renewable energy or switching tariffs.

Moreover, the organisation not only aims to treat each client equally, but develops individually tailored solutions for each case. The hundreds of people who contact Greener Kirkcaldy every month provide many examples that perfectly illustrate that philosophy. On my visit to Greener Kirkcaldy last Friday, I was made aware of two special cases that highlight how beneficial the organisation's work is to many families.

An elderly lady in my constituency was concerned about her husband's medical condition making a home visit from Greener Kirkcaldy complicated. However, the couple were reassured and allowed an energy adviser to visit their semi-detached house. During the visit, the family were advised to implement basic draught proofing. Shortly after a decision was taken to do that, the organisation's free handyman service installed radiator panels, draught proofing, LED light bulbs and a thermal door curtain. The couple were extremely pleased by how simple and uncomplicated it was to put into practice the advice that Greener Kirkcaldy gave and they have successfully reduced their fuel bills.

Reducing the share of expenditure that is reserved for fuel bills was also the main concern of a single mother who approached Greener Kirkcaldy last July. She lived in a privately rented house and had to minimise heating to keep her fuel costs low. As she faced another winter in a cold house, she was determined to change her situation and improve her heating system. An energy adviser from Greener Kirkcaldy visited her and identified the old boiler and a lack of insulation that allowed heat to escape as the main causes of high fuel costs. She was made aware that, because of her limited financial possibilities, she could qualify for a boiler upgrade as well as free insulation from the affordable warmth scheme that is offered through the Energy Saving Trust. Thrilled by those options, she applied to receive assistance and, only four days after the initial call, her home was provided with cavity wall insulation.

Besides helping people to create environmentally friendly homes, Greener Kirkcaldy has launched a diverse set of projects to promote greener living, which include running an eco-shop, establishing an orchard and working in co-operation with schools. Working in conjunction

with schools has proven to be a successful strategy in educating young people on basic energy-saving methods and the importance of buying locally sourced food. I hope that they will take that knowledge into adulthood, which will benefit not only their communities but the wider environment. Regular workshops for interested citizens of all age groups are being held at Ravenscraig walled garden, where they are shown how to grow their own vegetables, fruit and herbs.

The Greener Kirkcaldy team participated in celebrating national climate week last week. Members and volunteers intensified their efforts to approach the citizens of Kirkcaldy directly, and the handyman service and energy advisers gave families further advice on how to make their homes cosier and more environmentally friendly. In particular, they addressed mothers by giving them tips on how to cut fuel bills.

I commend Greener Kirkcaldy's great work in promoting more environmentally friendly and cost-efficient living in my constituency. The organisation is an excellent example of a successful community-led project and I wish all its members and volunteers the best of luck for the future.

12:47

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I congratulate Claire Baker on securing the debate and I join her and David Torrance in commending Greener Kirkcaldy's work. The debate is important, because we know that the green movement starts at home. It is all very well for us to pass lots of legislation, but we must take practical measures ourselves, which is exactly what Greener Kirkcaldy does.

Greener Kirkcaldy is driving change and serving as an inspiration for environmental groups elsewhere in Scotland. As we have heard, reducing waste, slashing bills and increasing energy efficiency are at the heart of what Greener Kirkcaldy is trying to achieve. By providing a free, friendly and accessible service, Greener Kirkcaldy advisers are driving positive change in their community.

Encouraging people to be more energy efficient and less wasteful will be crucial in managing carbon emissions. In 2012, Scottish households produced more than 80 million tonnes of carbon dioxide, of which 8.6 million tonnes were generated from household heating. That is why initiatives such as cosy Kirkcaldy are important.

Everybody wants a warm home, but nearly 40 per cent of Scots families are plunged into fuel poverty in trying to provide one. In the past year, Greener Kirkcaldy has helped thousands of Fifers with insulation and energy advice through home

visits or outreach events or in its advice shop. Between October and December 2013, 1,030 people contacted Greener Kirkcaldy advisers for energy advice.

For residents who are looking for insulation solutions, Greener Kirkcaldy runs advice courses that offer tips on do-it-yourself draught proofing and loft insulation. The latest such event was held last Saturday and I understand that it was well attended. Advisers provide free, impartial advice on a range of energy issues and can help residents receive a free insulation top-up, clarify energy tariffs and simplify the application process for Government insulation grants.

With energy bills rising faster than any other commodity, home owners are rightfully concerned about their costs. The United Kingdom Government, via the green deal, has helped make more money available for insulation schemes than any other Government in history. However, for many people accessing those funds is a confusing and complicated process. By simplifying the process, Greener Kirkcaldy is helping residents access funds that can help lower emissions and, perhaps more important, lower bills.

Another important aspect of Greener Kirkcaldy is its work to reduce food waste. UK households wasted 7 million tonnes of food last year, half of which was avoidable. To put that in context, it is the equivalent of 80 million wheelie bins full of food. If we stopped wasting edible food, the reduction in emissions would be the equivalent of taking one in four cars off the road. If those incentives are not enough, it is also the case that wasting food costs the average household between £500 and £700 annually.

To help combat that problem, Greener Kirkcaldy has set up a series of cookery workshops aimed at setting out good practice on food preparation, which are free and open to anyone. Lovely leftovers is a soon-to-be-held course that will teach residents how to cook appetising meals from yesterday's dinner. Meal planning is central to avoiding food waste and Greener Kirkcaldy is keen to help residents better organise their weekly shops. Other courses will include tips on batch cooking and cooking for children, which will be particularly helpful for young mothers.

The Ravenscraig orchard is another example of the community spirit that Greener Kirkcaldy has helped foster. The site was covered in nettles and weeds, and volunteers from the charity cleared the site, built paths and planted more than 50 fruit trees. The garden will serve as a classroom for teaching interested residents the dos and don'ts of gardening, which will not only be incredibly rewarding but will help to cut food bills.

Everyone can do their bit to be environmentally friendly, and Greener Kirkcaldy has taken that concept and shown residents the simple ways in which to do it. Going green often saves money and that has broad appeal. Volunteers have given up their time to advance the green movement and I commend them for that. Greener Kirkcaldy has worked tirelessly to raise public awareness and I hope that its efforts can continue past 2016. I encourage the Scottish Government to commit funding to the climate challenge fund beyond 2016 to help community initiatives such as Greener Kirkcaldy, which will be central to reducing waste and increasing energy efficiency across Scotland.

Again, I commend Claire Baker for securing the debate and I congratulate Greener Kirkcaldy on everything that it has done so far. I wish it future success.

12:52

Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

Like my colleagues, I congratulate Claire Baker on securing this debate to recognise the achievements of Greener Kirkcaldy and I echo her welcome to members of the community organisation who have joined us in the gallery today.

Community groups are the backbone of many communities in Fife. As an MSP and local councillor, I know only too well that an active and engaged community sector is a tremendous asset for collectively meeting the aims of Fife Council and Fife's community plans. In the past year I have visited and spoken about a number of community organisations in Fife that have a focus on environment and wellbeing, including the Ecology Centre at Kinghorn, Broomhill community gardens in Burntisland, and the evergreen service in Kirkcaldy.

Greener Kirkcaldy, like those other groups, is showing the way in local communities by working with local partner organisations such as the Fife diet. Vitally, it is helping to deliver the message about building strong, sustainable communities and that the best way to do that is through the combined impact of each of us doing a little in order to effect a bigger change. By operating locally and engaging with schools and local groups, it adds value to what others are doing. Greener Kirkcaldy has been very skilful in how it reaches out to the community: it knows that it is not all about meetings. People can go to an event or workshop, visit the advantageice centre, or book a home energy advice visit. If someone has a little spare time, they can become a volunteer or they can become a signed-up member of a growing community of people who are learning about and working towards a greener Kirkcaldy.

Groups such as Greener Kirkcaldy are vital, as they enable people to begin to implement changes that could make a material improvement to their wellbeing, their neighbourhood and their planet. Without such projects, we would find it very difficult to see the high-level strategies and aspirations of complex yet important legislation translate into the reality of people's everyday lives. People's lives are often lived at a fast, stressful pace with the emphasis on getting through the day, managing on a budget and doing several things at once.

Against that background, how do we politicians sell the concept of reduce, reuse, recycle to busy families? Further, thinking about yesterday's debate on air quality and last year's consideration of the report on proposals and policies 2, how do we make those proposals real for communities like those in and around Kirkcaldy? When we look at last week's district heating and decarbonising heating debate, it becomes clear. People might well find themselves thinking, "What's all that about? It sounds a bit technical. It's not really for me." However, during that debate, we learned that an estimated £2.6 billion is spent each year in Scotland on keeping the temperature in our homes and businesses to our liking. Therefore, it is, financially, a very significant issue.

In my contribution to that debate last week, I spoke about the anaerobic digestion plant and district heating systems elsewhere in Fife that are helping to create the energy that we need to heat our homes. However, I also recognised the challenges of fuel poverty and energy inefficient homes, and the negative impact that they can have on people's lives. That is why I particularly like Greener Kirkcaldy's cosy Kirkcaldy project, which Claire Baker and others have mentioned. Not only does it provide advice on ways to minimise a family's energy wastage, but it helps people to understand their energy bills and to see what tariffs are out there for them, as well as offering support for insulation top-ups and other schemes that could help keep the temperature up and the bills down in people's homes. Therefore, it is not just cosy Kirkcaldy but clever Kirkcaldy.

One of the pleasures of a members' business debate is that the hard work and successes of local groups can be formally recognised by all parties across the chamber. Therefore, once again, I add my support to the motion, and I look forward to seeing the project go from strength to strength.

12:56

The Minister for Environment and Climate Change (Paul Wheelhouse): I am grateful to Claire Baker for highlighting for us today the continuing success of Greener Kirkcaldy and for

detailing the many projects that the organisation is undertaking on behalf of the people of Fife. I convey my congratulations to Greener Kirkcaldy on the tremendous work that it is doing, and offer it my thanks. I hope that those who are involved take great pride in their achievements; indeed, I encourage them to do so because they are worthy of pride. Greener Kirkcaldy and groups like it are at the forefront of the delivery of action on climate change and the environment in Scotland.

Kirkcaldy is perhaps most famous as the birthplace of the great 18th century Scottish philosopher, Adam Smith, the father of modern economics and author of "The Wealth of Nations". He and fellow Scottish thinker David Hume were two of the most important figures in the history of Western philosophy and the Scottish enlightenment. Hume spent his time thinking about the psychological basis of human nature. He concluded that desire and passion, rather than reason and logic, govern human behaviour. Although I am hesitant to take a different view from that of an eminent man such as David Hume, I believe that there is a real place for passion in climate change action and, from everything that I have read and heard about Greener Kirkcaldy, I can say that the people who are involved in it are nothing if not passionate.

However, I think that we can all agree with Hume that actions that are rooted only in desire, without reasoned consideration of their likely consequences, are likely, in many cases, to lead to trouble. We see the effects of some such actions in the severe weather patterns that are being unleashed around the world and on our doorsteps and which are causing immeasurable damage and despair. In our defence, we may say that, as a society and across the globe, we did not realise that the CO₂ emissions from our activities would have such a terrible legacy. However, we know the truth of the matter now, and we also know that, to keep global warming within tolerable limits, we need to make transformational changes in how we—as individuals, as communities and as a wider society—live and interact with our wider environment. That is why, in a spirit of enlightenment, the Scottish Parliament passed our world-leading climate change legislation and emission reduction targets.

The Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 not only sets necessarily ambitious and challenging targets but requires us to report to the Parliament annually on progress towards them. No other country in the world has such demanding legislation. Although international leadership carries great responsibilities, it is also something in which the Scottish Parliament can take great pride.

Today, representatives of WWF are with us in Parliament to encourage our continuing support for the organisation's worldwide earth hour initiative. Particularly in 2014, when the eyes of the world will fall on Scotland, I encourage all members to attend the promotional earth hour event and to lend their support to its global reach and symbolism. The Scottish Government will again play its part this year, switching off non-essential lighting in our properties, and we anticipate a great response from the rest of the public sector, too. I urge all my colleagues across the Parliament—sadly, too few of whom are here today—and the people of Scotland to play their part in earth hour.

I have talked about political leadership and also touched on, through my reference to earth hour, the role that the public sector can play in delivering climate change action. However, we all know that, as Murdo Fraser, Claire Baker and Jayne Baxter said, we need the support of the whole of Scottish society. That is why the leadership that is shown by community groups such as Greener Kirkcaldy is essential. Greener Kirkcaldy has received funding from a variety of sources; its three climate challenge fund projects have been in receipt of just over £797,000 over three years. Greener Kirkcaldy is a well-deserving recipient of climate challenge funding. Having successfully delivered its first project, the organisation is working on a further two complementary projects that are promoting energy efficiency and local food in two contrasting areas of the town.

As a mature CCF project, Greener Kirkcaldy also provides leadership, inspiration and a valuable example to the wider climate action sector in Scotland. It is involved in the Scottish communities climate action network and supports the CCF's community action and support network, playing a lead role in developing a regional network of CCF projects in Fife. That is the first of 12 CCF regional networks, which are designed to share and cascade experience and good practice across communities.

Since we launched the climate challenge fund in 2008, awards totalling nearly £55 million have been made to 468 communities in support of 635 individual projects that are tackling climate change. Those include energy efficiency advice and food projects such as Greener Kirkcaldy—I was interested in the examples that David Torrance gave of individuals having seen substantial impacts on their costs of living—along with projects to improve community-owned buildings, to promote waste recycling and composting and to promote sustainable travel, including car clubs and increased cycling. Many projects are multistranded and all are expected to be resilient, building in adaptation to our changing climate as well as emissions reduction. The Fife

diet, which is one of the partners of Greener Kirkcaldy, has received almost £804,000 in climate challenge funding for three projects.

The projects take place across Scotland in our cities, towns and villages, on the mainland and on our islands. With the junior climate challenge fund, we are successfully involving younger age groups and, since refreshing the CCF in November 2012, we have increased the reach of the fund to support, in particular, more disadvantaged and hard-to-reach groups including black and minority ethnic communities. Murdo Fraser talked about the Government committing to longer-term finance, and Claire Baker also asked about such support. We are trying to make it possible for CCF projects to become self-financing. We have to be careful about doing that within European state aid limits, but we are encouraging projects to come forward with ideas about how they can recycle income to ensure that they are sustainable in the longer term.

The climate challenge fund has supported more than 240 projects that have included some element of food growing. Interest in local food has grown over the past few years, along with a desire to know where our food comes from. Demand for suitable land to allow people to grow their own food is high. A commitment was made in the 2011 Scottish National Party manifesto to updating the allotment legislation, and proposals for that have been included in the draft community empowerment (Scotland) bill. Communities can be empowered by ensuring that people have access to land that can provide both health and social benefits and a connection to the local environment. Our proposals for new allotment legislation have been set out to encourage local authorities to take a more proactive approach to allotment provision, with the ultimate aim of increasing access to allotments in places such as Kirkcaldy and elsewhere, so helping to increase access to healthy, sustainable food for all.

In the time that I have remaining, I would like to pick up a couple of points that were made in the debate. I have addressed the funding issue. Beyond 2016, we will be into a new session of Parliament. We will consider the issue that Murdo Fraser raised and provide feedback, but we will be into a different spending review period in 2016 and it will perhaps not be as easy to commit to that funding as it may seem.

I missed the district heating debate, unfortunately, but Jayne Baxter's point about the £2.6 billion cost of heating our homes in this country shows the scale of the prize that is available to communities if we can cut the cost of our heating and get that money recycled through the economy in other ways. That will help not only to address fuel poverty, but to provide people with

more disposable income to give them a better standard of living.

There are real prizes to be gained from the work that is being done by groups such as Greener Kirkcaldy. The success of the climate challenge fund in generating such community action and leadership on climate change is heartening. I commend all climate challenge fund communities, such as Greener Kirkcaldy, for their efforts. They deserve our on-going praise and encouragement.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As our proceedings are broadcast live around the parliamentary complex, I am sure that our MSP colleagues will have heard the minister's message about earth hour.

13:04

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Local Government Finance (Scotland) Amendment Order 2014 [Draft]

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is a debate on motion S4M-09274, in the name of John Swinney, on the draft Local Government Finance (Scotland) Amendment Order 2014.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): On 6 February, Parliament approved the draft Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2014, which enabled Scotland's local authorities to set their revenue budgets for the forthcoming financial year, 2014-15.

Local authorities were asked, in return for the full funding package available, to agree to freeze council tax levels for a seventh consecutive year and to maintain teacher numbers in line with pupil numbers, while securing places for all probationer teachers who require one. I made it clear that if any local authority took the decision not to set aside funding in its 2014-15 budget to enable those two commitments to be fulfilled, that authority must have written to me before 10 March, setting out the position that it intended to adopt. I can confirm to Parliament that I have not received any such letters. In fact, the decisions that local authorities have arrived at are entirely consistent with the two points of commitment that I have just set out.

I am therefore pleased to say that all 32 local authority budgets contain provision to enable both of those commitments to be fulfilled. The continuation of the council tax freeze for a seventh year will be particularly welcome news for hard-pressed council tax-paying households across Scotland.

In view of the 2014-15 budget process having been concluded, the draft amendment order seeks approval for the payment of each local authority's share of the £70 million that has been set aside to compensate councils for the council tax income forgone as a result of the continued council tax freeze.

Today's draft amendment order also seeks parliamentary approval for the £274.4 million that represents the initial 80 per cent allocation of the council tax reduction scheme funding for next year. The arrangement of distributing the majority of the funding until such time as more up-to-date information becomes available has been agreed with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which repeats the process that was first introduced for the current financial year. Linked to that, the amendment order also includes

more than £7 million for council tax reduction scheme administration costs, which are distributed to local authorities.

There is also an extra £400,000 for councils as part of the establishment of the single fraud investigation service. Following receipt of more up-to-date information that was made available by the Department for Work and Pensions, we are able to reallocate the £20 million of discretionary housing payments money for next year on a more accurate basis.

It should be noted that the draft amendment order does not include the funding for free school meals and the extension of childcare to two-year-olds, as was set out in the debate in January, as discussions on the distribution of those sums are continuing.

Taken together, the changes will add almost £352 million to the amount of general revenue grant that we will be distributing to local authorities next year over and above the sums included in the original 2014 order. That means that the total revenue funding in 2014-15 will be almost £9.85 billion, and the overall total funding package, including capital, will be over £10.6 billion.

I take this opportunity to make one further adjustment to the 2013-14 revenue funding allocations since the draft Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2014 was approved on 6 February. Similar to the position with the 2014-15 financial year, we have received more up-to-date information from the Department for Work and Pensions, which enables me to distribute the £70.2 million that represents the 20 per cent of the first year of the council tax reduction scheme that we had held back until such time as we had sufficiently accurate and detailed information to enable us to distribute the resources on an accurate basis, local authority by local authority, to meet the needs of and demand for the council tax reduction scheme.

Those final additions mean that local government will have received a further £70.2 million this year, on top of the net increase of £20.4 million that was included in the February order.

Although it is not part of the amendment order, I take the opportunity also to update Parliament on the position relating to the distribution of the 2015-16 local government finance settlement. On 21 February, I wrote to all COSLA leaders, setting out that I was minded to approve COSLA's proposal not to uprate the relevant indicators but saying that I considered that in the interests of transparency council leaders should be aware of the implications of such a course of action. I received the COSLA president's reply on 3 March, in which he informed me that COSLA leaders had agreed

collectively to reconsider their position at their meeting on 25 April, once they have had the opportunity to scrutinise the detailed calculations behind the two sets of figures. My officials have now provided COSLA with all the relevant information that is required to enable that consideration to take place. Further discussions are under way with COSLA in relation to those particular points.

I remain of the view that the needs-based indicators should be uprated. However, in line with the importance that I attach to our joint partnership working, I have indicated that I would be prepared to accept the COSLA leaders' proposal not to uprate the indicators until after all local authorities have had the opportunity to consider the financial implications in a transparent way and in light of all the relevant facts.

I am aware that this distribution issue has been linked to a number of local authorities indicating a desire to leave COSLA. Membership of COSLA is a matter for individual councils to resolve. The Scottish Government remains committed to working in partnership with COSLA and we firmly believe that that is what people across Scotland would expect from both their central and local government organisations.

The approval of this amendment order will authorise the distribution of a further almost £352 million for 2014-15 and a further £70.2 million for this year to local government to support the essential services that our local authorities deliver for our communities. The approval of the amendment order today is absolutely vital, as the funding included in it has already been taken into account by local authorities in setting their 2014-15 budgets. The loss of over £422 million in funding would have serious consequences for all local authorities, the communities that they serve and the people of Scotland who rely on those vital services.

Given that I have not received notification that any individual local authority has not budgeted to fund the Scottish Government's commitments relating to the council tax freeze and the maintenance of teacher numbers in line with pupil numbers, which I outlined earlier, I take that to mean that local government is satisfied with the overall funding package and the specific commitments that this Government asks for in return. A vote against this amendment order would go against the wishes of each and every local authority across Scotland and would deprive local authorities of over £422 million of essential services support to assist in the provision of education, social work services and the council tax reduction scheme and to protect those most at risk from the bedroom tax, as Parliament intended in its budget earlier this year.

I fully accept that in an ideal world of endless resources local government could make use of extra money, but I firmly believe that Scotland's local authorities have been treated fairly. I think that my view was very clearly underlined by the chairman of the Local Government Association, Sir Merrick Cockell, who said following the 2013 UK spending review:

"Every year I meet my opposite numbers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and they listen to us in wide-eyed disbelief at the budget cuts we are enduring and they are not."

The distribution of funding set out in the amendment order is essential to enable Scotland's local authorities to implement their approved budgets.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Amendment Order 2014 [draft] be approved.

14:38

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): Last year when we discussed the local government settlement, I moved a reasoned amendment on the bedroom tax. Scottish National Party speakers completely ignored the Labour amendment. They made no reference to it in their speeches and they voted it down without a word. I moved that amendment last year because I had received briefings from my colleagues in local government about the impact that they feared the bedroom tax would have: playing havoc with their budgets and those of housing associations, and playing havoc with the finances of social housing tenants. They predicted that even tenants who had never been in debt would be pushed into debt, indignity and hardship. Their predictions, sadly, came to pass.

That is why we made sorting out the bedroom tax our top priority in this year's budget, so we welcomed the deal that John Swinney agreed to. However, pressured local government faces real underfunding and centralisation. The key issues raised with me this year by local government colleagues are the underfunding of the school meals pledge and the pledge on extra childcare, and the long-running issue of rural schools. COSLA has made representations on all of those to the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth.

The common denominator in those three issues is the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning. I hope that the finance secretary will ask his colleague to accept the reality of funding those new commitments and to work with COSLA to sort out the problems.

Last week, I asked the finance secretary whether he felt that it was acceptable to pit council

against council with the estimates that he had produced on local government funding rather than address the yawning gap between the rising costs of local government services and the underfunded settlement that he proposes this year. He responded by challenging the figures that I quoted to him and demanding that I write to him to explain myself, yet he wrote to me within hours to correct the figures that he used in his reply.

We are voting today on an order that we cannot amend. However, we can raise concerns, and it is our job as the Opposition to do so.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): If the member had the power to amend the order, from where would she take money to give local government more?

Sarah Boyack: Commentators, research institutes and organisation after organisation have made the point that the SNP has left council finance in a completely unsustainable position. That issue must be addressed in fixing what is happening in local government.

Throughout the past year, I have challenged SNP assertions about local government finance. My questions have been formulated as a result of research and reports from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Audit Scotland, Unison and the Scottish Parliament information centre, among others. A raft of organisations is asking pertinent questions about the unsustainability of local government funding.

Nearly 40,000 jobs have gone from local government since the SNP came to power, and front-line staff are under increasing pressure.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Will Ms Boyack give way?

Sarah Boyack: No, thank you.

There are the growing challenges of supporting people on low incomes, deprivation and providing care for the increasing numbers of older people who need it.

Last year, the finance secretary claimed that he had allocated a flat cash settlement in his plans in the autumn. However, analysis from SPICe of the year-on-year impact of the cuts—whether we take the period from 2008-09 to 2012-13, not including police and fire funding, or the period from 2007-08 to 2014-15—shows that, on the basis of its best estimate of the reality of the figures in relation to the general resource grant, local government finance has been hit. As the First Minister said today, we want to look not just at one year but at the general trend.

The real-terms cuts come when councils face a 10 per cent increase in costs. That does not add up. There is general underfunding, underfunding

of the council tax freeze and specific underfunding this year of SNP education commitments.

COSLA's partnership with the Scottish Government works only when the Scottish Government listens to and does not disregard the concerns that local government raises. I call on the Scottish Government to acknowledge the concerns that COSLA has raised, which it agreed to put to the finance secretary at a meeting two weeks ago, about the issues that I have put on the record today. The cabinet secretary has not addressed all the issues that COSLA put to him. The figures that he has laid in front of us will not fix the progressive underfunding of local government or the centralisation that has occurred since the SNP came to power.

The SNP Government has a track record of denying that there is a problem with funding but, when it gets representations from people who say how bad its proposals are, finding more money to put into the pot—not enough, but a bit more. That is how the SNP has addressed underfunding in housing and colleges and how it has addressed the bedroom tax.

I hope that the debate will lead to the finance secretary responding more positively over the months to the representations from local councils and our constituents. The crucial point is that our constituents and local organisations have had to deal with the impact of cuts and service reductions across the country. People are finding that services no longer exist or that they cannot afford to pay for them and therefore cannot use them.

I hope that we will get a positive response from the finance secretary. He poses a challenge with his centralisation agenda, which is leading to the loss of jobs across the country and to increasing pressure on local authority staff. We need our local councils to be properly resourced, so that they can deliver the services that they were elected to provide.

I move amendment S4M-09274.1, to insert at end:

"but, in so doing, notes the concerns expressed by COSLA about the underfunding of local government, and calls on the Scottish Government to take further action to address the real and increasing financial challenges faced by local government due to increased cost pressures, including deprivation, demographic pressures and the underfunded council tax freeze."

14:44

Cameron Buchanan (Lothian) (Con): Like the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2014, which we debated last month, this amendment order merely formalises the transfer of moneys already agreed by the Parliament and authorises the cash held back for the purposes of the council

tax freeze. For that reason, the Scottish Conservatives will support the approval of the order, but the debate gives me the opportunity to flag up once again some of the difficulties that lie ahead.

As highlighted previously, we supported the council tax freeze at the time of its introduction, as it made a difference to so many hard-pressed families across Scotland. However, we recognise that maintaining it and providing our vital front-line services is increasingly proving a challenge for councils. For that reason it is very important that in future we have transparency in the funding of our local authorities, not least as taxpayers must be able to hold them to account, and to do that there must be full disclosure of which services are being prioritised and how councils are funding them, which is not presently happening. In that respect I have some sympathy with Sarah Boyack's amendment.

However, it was when making that very point on transparency last time that I lamented COSLA's performance in that regard. I remind Sarah Boyack that in its consideration of local authority funding as part of the budget process, the Local Government and Regeneration Committee gave COSLA the opportunity to give evidence and highlight any concerns that it had about the budget. That opportunity was squandered, a fact that we should not lose sight of.

I note that the cabinet secretary drew attention to COSLA's strong partnership with the Scottish Government. However, COSLA's record on working with other partners, including members of this Parliament, is a good deal less positive. In particular, its tendency to hide behind a veil of secrecy whenever challenged or asked for information is unacceptable. COSLA, as the representative body for local government, should lead by example in setting the tone for transparency and openness across government; it should not hide.

Since we last discussed COSLA in the chamber, West Lothian Council has become the seventh local authority to confirm its intention to leave the body, further throwing into doubt its future. The crisis facing COSLA must be in part a reflection of growing disquiet over local government funding in Scotland. As I have said before in the chamber, we cannot ignore the fact that councils are signalling their intention to leave, nor the implications of that. If more than a quarter of the population is not resident in a COSLA-represented council, COSLA cannot continue legitimately to represent local authorities when dealing with the Scottish Government. However, to date there seems little willingness on the part of the Government to accept that or make any contingency plans.

Aside from its legitimacy, COSLA's credibility has also taken a hammering. As my Local Government and Regeneration Committee colleague and convener, Kevin Stewart, pointed out in relation to Aberdeen City Council last week, representatives of Labour-led authorities have been voting for the so-called flat cash settlement, which would see so many of them lose out—albeit that the position is to be reviewed in April. That is surely indicative of an organisation in which at least some members are putting the interests of their party before those of their local authority. The simple fact of the matter is that COSLA will cease to function as a representative body if that attitude is allowed to prevail.

However—with or without COSLA—there is a need for the Government to engage constructively with local authorities. It is true that the present crisis also stems from some councils' belief that COSLA is being reduced to acting as a rubber stamp on Scottish Government spending plans rather than an organisation providing robust representation.

Accordingly, although I support the finance order that is before us today, I agree that we must be aware of the scale of the challenges ahead for both local authorities and the Scottish Government in reaching such agreement in future. Whether that future will feature COSLA will depend on whether the organisation stops being part of the problem and decides to become part of the solution.

14:48

Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD):

The crisis at COSLA is a serious matter and I hope that the finance secretary will play a constructive role in ensuring that the wounds in the organisation and the rift between the organisation and the Government are healed. I do not think that anybody is really sure what the dispute is about; perhaps that will become clear over time. I hope that the finance secretary plays a constructive role in healing COSLA, because we need a robust local government organisation to represent local government across the country.

I stand here again to make my regular plea to the finance secretary to meet the manifesto commitment that he made at the last election: the commitment to Aberdeen City Council to meet the 85 per cent floor. It is sad that it takes a Fifer, yet again, to stand up to make the case for the great city of Aberdeen, but in the absence of SNP members from the city doing that, we need Fifers to do so.

Kevin Stewart: Does Mr Rennie realise that the 85 per cent floor was in the manifesto because of MSPs from the north-east of Scotland, including

the late Brian Adam? Beyond that, my colleagues and I continue to fight for what is best for Aberdeen—unlike the current Labour-led administration.

Willie Rennie: I would not find much in common with the Aberdeen Labour-led administration, but that is probably the only thing that I have in common with Kevin Stewart on this matter. Although he said that the commitment was in his party's manifesto at the last election, there is no point—as we know—in making a manifesto commitment if it is not actually delivered, and it has not been delivered in this case.

The reality is that the removal of fire and police funding from Aberdeen City Council's funding simply revealed how low the level of funding is for that city. That funding has now plummeted to 79 per cent of the average for Scotland. That is inadequate, and does not meet the manifesto commitment that John Swinney and Kevin Stewart made at the last election. It equates to £20 million, or £89 for every person in the city. When we consider the economic contribution that that city makes to the wellbeing of Scotland and the United Kingdom, we must consider that the least that it deserves is that the manifesto commitment that was made by the SNP at the last election is fulfilled in full. I remind members that 79 per cent is not 85 per cent and that the shortfall is £20 million. The funding is completely inadequate and the situation must be changed. That was the manifesto commitment on which Kevin Stewart stood and he must follow through on it.

When the cabinet secretary makes his concluding remarks, I would welcome an update about how the negotiations on funding for childcare and school meals are progressing. Obviously, I am anxious about those matters. They are close to my heart and I want to ensure that the funding for the roll-out of nursery education for two-year-olds is met in full. I am alarmed by some of the reports in recent days about the disputes between the Government and local government.

14:52

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I have been following today's COSLA and Improvement Service conference on Twitter—that is the kind of anorak that I am. One tweet said:

"Between 2007 and 2013 resources available to Scotland through settlement have increased by 6.4%".

The subsequent tweet said:

"...over the same period, local government's budget has increased by 8.9%. This demonstrates success..."

The speaker who was being quoted in those tweets was Councillor David O'Neill, the president

of COSLA and a Labour councillor who recognises that this Government has delivered for local government in Scotland. If, as the cabinet secretary has already done, we compare that situation to the one south of the border, where budgets have been slashed dramatically, we can see that we are doing pretty well, particularly under the circumstances of austerity that come from the Tory-Liberal Democrat Government.

While I am on the subject of the fact that the Liberal demonstrationcrats are propping up the austerity measures, I say that I find it quite bizarre for Mr Rennie to stand here and pontificate about Aberdeen, given that, when his colleagues were in coalition with Labour in Holyrood, they refused point-blank to sort out the Aberdeen situation. At least this Government has put in place a fairer settlement for the city of Aberdeen and I, for one, will continue to fight for that. I point out that that settlement was put in place in the face of opposition from many others. Gordon Matheson was quoted in the *Evening Times* on 13 December 2011 as saying:

“As quickly as we work to protect schools, jobs and the vulnerable of this city the SNP Government bleed money away to other parts of the country for political gain. They have given up on Glasgow and decided to concentrate the nation’s resources on winning Edinburgh and Aberdeen for the SNP.”

The people of Aberdeen certainly do not think that. One of the reasons why we have a huge kerfuffle in COSLA at the moment is that, normally, a change in the indicator update would go through on the nod, but people from the central belt, backed up by colleagues from the north-east, are stopping that extra money—£7.5 million—from coming to Aberdeen.

The Labour-led council in Aberdeen should hang its head in shame for its part in that action, as well as for trying to ban ministers from going up there to try and help Aberdeen, and for putting out propaganda using council tax payers’ money.

The Presiding Officer: I think that you are straying a bit, Mr Stewart. Can you get back to the motion?

Kevin Stewart: It is all about council money, Presiding Officer, but I will get back to the motion.

Sarah Boyack’s amendment shows that she has clearly not listened to David O’Neill on the subject. I will repeat what he said. Between 2007 and 2013, the Scottish settlement has increased by 6.4 per cent while

“local government’s budget has increased by 8.9%. This demonstrates success”.

I am pleased that, as well as recognising the needs of local government, the Scottish Government has managed to freeze council tax for the seventh year in a row. That represents a

saving, on average, of £1,682 for every household in Scotland. That is to be celebrated, and I support the cabinet secretary today.

14:56

Alex Rowley (Cowdenbeath) (Lab): Services that are delivered by local government across Scotland impact on people every day of their lives. That impact is crucial, whether it comes through social or education services. It is important to recognise the pressure that local authorities are working under. Although, as the cabinet secretary says, the Local Government Association and others in the south may say that it is a better settlement than they have got, it would be going a bit far to say that local authority leaders in Scotland are satisfied with the funding. That is not to say that the settlement is not better than the settlement in some parts of the country, but the fact is that local authorities are under massive pressure.

Right across the country, there is pressure on services because of the need to take children into care. In my local authority, Fife Council, there was a massive overspend last year because of the number of children who were taken into care. As the cabinet secretary said last week in answer to my question, part of the way to tackle that is to look at new ways of working, to pursue early intervention and to spend more money on the early years. I say to the cabinet secretary that, in my experience of local government, councils right across Scotland want to work in partnership with the Scottish Government.

Kevin Stewart: Will Mr Rowley give way on that point?

Alex Rowley: I will continue, thanks.

The key point is that there must be recognition on both sides that the settlement still leaves local authorities in a really difficult position. Willie Rennie spoke about putting the case for Aberdeen as a Fifer. Over the next four years, Fife Council will face a £92 million budget gap. It is not the Labour administration saying that; that is what the executive director of finance has reported to the council, and the situation is the same in local authorities everywhere. Local authorities are working hard to balance the books and continue to provide services. In that spirit, we need to recognise that the settlement is still a very tough one for councils and that tough decisions will have to be made.

Cameron Buchanan spoke about the council tax freeze. Local authorities are saying that, at some point, we will need to find a way forward. COSLA has kicked off the review of how we finance local government and Labour welcomes that. There needs to be a discussion and debate about how

we move forward in financing local government. The council tax freeze itself does not achieve equality; it promotes inequality because people with properties in band H save £1,535 while people with properties in band A save £258. Those who have the most have gained the most, and those who have the least have gained the least. At the same time, additional charges have come in for local government services and it is often the very poor and vulnerable in communities, such as the elderly and the housebound, who must pay those charges. That is a true picture of local government. Some of the Government's decisions are creating greater inequality.

I hope that the cabinet secretary, although he may not agree to the Labour amendment, will work with local government and recognise that the settlement is very tough and that cuts will be made to services in every council regardless of who is in political control of it. I also hope that he will look for long-term solutions for the future of local government. Not to do that would be to let down the people of Scotland.

15:00

John Swinney: It is not long since Mr Rowley joined the Scottish Parliament and I do not want in any way to destroy his career at this early stage, but his was a refreshing speech that reflects the weight of experience that he brings to the Parliament from his leadership of Fife Council. I hope that he will acknowledge—I make the same point in response to Mr Rennie—that in the almost seven years that I have occupied this post and in which I have held particular responsibility for the Government's relationship with local government, one of my highest priorities has been to ensure that that relationship is better than the one that I inherited. I accept completely Mr Rowley's point that we will only succeed in addressing the genuine and substantial financial challenges that we all face—it is not just local government that faces those challenges—if we have a cohesive and agreed agenda on which we can maximise co-operation among all levels of government. I therefore reaffirm the Government's determination to ensure that we work co-operatively and effectively with local government to agree those joint objectives.

Mr Rennie raised a couple of points about the dialogue on free school meals and childcare. I have seen the commentary that he mentioned. The foundation of the financial assumptions on the roll-out of childcare for two-year-olds is the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill's financial memorandum. I do not want to overstate the position, but I describe those assessments as having been co-produced between local and national Government. I am a bit surprised that

childcare funding is an issue, given that we simply used the same approach that we used jointly with local government to agree to their satisfaction the assumptions in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill. That said, and in the spirit of the point that I made to Mr Rowley, I will say that there is space for us to discuss the issues on the roll-out of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill and the provisions on free school meals to ensure that, if there is an issue about financial support, we address it properly so that the commitments that we have made to the Parliament are fulfilled and implemented as we said that they would be.

Mr Rennie and I have rehearsed on a number of occasions the issues about Aberdeen. The one point that I want to lift from his speech is what he said about the "least that it deserves". I do not know what the people of Aberdeen have done to deserve the administration that they have in the city. That is all that I will say antisocial behaviour on the matter.

Hugh Henry (Renfrewshire South) (Lab): That is democracy.

John Swinney: Mr Henry says that that is democracy. We remember how he used to lead Renfrewshire Council and that spoke for itself.

I will deal with the substance of the issue on the available financial settlement. Sarah Boyack returned to the same commentary about that. John Mason asked her where the extra money would come from and there was no answer. I will read to her from the speech that was delivered this morning by COSLA's president in St Andrew's house:

"Local government's share of public expenditure has risen and when cuts had to be made in Scotland, local government has been relatively protected at the expense of other parts of the public sector."

He went on to say—this relates to Mr Rowley's point—that

"Council leaders must know that this year the actual resources they received are greater than predicted by directors of finance, the Centre for Public Policy for Regions, our own Improvement Service and others."

I know that there are financial pressures. I have to deal with a budget that is reducing in real terms, but we have attached greater priority to support local government funding because we realise how important local authority services are. I commit to the Parliament to work with local government and COSLA to ensure that we maximise the effectiveness of those resources in meeting the needs of the people of Scotland.

Welfare Reform

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-09190, in the name of Michael McMahon, on the impact of welfare reform.

15:05

Michael McMahon (Uddingston and Bellshill)

(Lab): I am pleased to open the debate on behalf of the Welfare Reform Committee.

I am sure that members remember from their school days the end-of-year school report, in which their teachers assessed their achievements, failures and areas for development for the next year. As the motion notes, it is almost a year since many of the provisions of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 came into force on 1 April 2013. The debate presents us with an opportunity to report on the performance of those United Kingdom Government welfare reforms, and I am afraid that the end-of-year report is riddled with “fail”, “could do better” and “needs to pay more attention to those whom welfare reform is affecting”. We also have a great deal of concern about welfare reform’s future performance.

I hasten to add that that view is shared by the majority, but not all, of the committee. I am sure that Alex Johnstone will not agree with that assessment of UK Government welfare reforms, and I hope that those differences of opinion will be aired during the debate. I can see Mr Johnstone licking his lips already.

If we assessed welfare reform on its contribution in class, it would be awarded an F. In economic terms, it is taking money out of the Scottish economy. In April last year, the committee was presented with research commissioned from Sheffield Hallam University on the impact of the Welfare Reform Act 2012. The headline figure had the UK Government’s package of welfare reforms losing the Scottish economy a staggering £1.6 billion per year. The committee recently commissioned Sheffield Hallam University to conduct further work, this time examining the impact of welfare reform at ward level.

The impact of welfare reform on the individual has been a key focus for the committee’s work to date. We have delved below those alarming figures to assess the impact on the people of Scotland. Through the your say initiative, we have tried to give a voice to ordinary people to tell us what welfare reform means for them. We have invited anyone who wishes to write to us with their personal stories, and they have certainly done that.

To date, well over 100 individuals have taken the time and effort to contact us with their experiences about the impact of welfare reform on their everyday lives. We have held four formal committee meetings at which individuals have delivered their personal testimonies to the committee. In 15 years as an MSP, I have never heard such extraordinary, moving, shocking and painful evidence.

I refer to the evidence from Scott Wilson, a 46-year-old with young-onset Parkinson’s who recently separated from his partner of 20 years. Having lived in his home for 25 years, he is now subject to the bedroom tax. When he asked the council where his pregnant daughter and disabled son would sleep when they came to stay if he moved into a one-bedroom flat, he was asked, “Have you ever heard of inflatable beds?”

I refer to the evidence from Henry Sherlock, who is blind and was asked to raise an empty cardboard box in his work capability assessment but not to take it anywhere. He could not, as he needed to hold his white stick in one hand.

I refer to the evidence from Audrey Barnett, who has multiple sclerosis and systemic lupus erythematosus. She worked until 2008, when she was awarded retirement on medical grounds—that is an important point. Her application for employment and support allowance contained details of her medical conditions and a letter from her general practitioner stating that they were progressive, unpredictable and incurable. The Department for Work and Pensions assessed her as being in the work-related activity group and judged her able to prepare to return to work. Her former employer was the DWP.

The courage of the men and women who have come before us has been humbling, and the committee has certainly sought to address the concerns that have been raised in those powerful evidence-taking sessions.

The main focus of our recent work has been the bedroom tax, on which we have taken extensive evidence and commissioned research. The committee’s interim report, which was published at the end of January, concluded that the UK Government should abolish the bedroom tax or give the Scottish Parliament the power to do so. That view was held by the majority of the committee, along with a belief that the cost of the bedroom tax to tenants is

“iniquitous and inhumane and may well breach their human rights”.

I do not believe that treating people’s homes as merely bricks and mortar—the homes of approximately 65,000 disabled people and 15,000 homes with children—is acceptable in this day and age. The reality for many is that they cannot pay

and they cannot move. To make the situation even more frustrating, it is entirely possible that the bedroom tax is costing the public purse more to implement than it is saving. Armed with our evidence and our awareness of the bedroom tax monster in our midst, we have looked in detail at the on-going attempts by local authorities and the Scottish Government to mitigate the impact of the bedroom tax.

As the Scottish Government has detailed in its response to our report, it is committed, if the cap on discretionary housing payments is not removed, to put in place a scheme during 2014-15 that will make funding available to social landlords to mitigate the effects of the bedroom tax. We welcome the steps that the Scottish Government is taking in that regard, but I ask the Minister for Housing and Welfare to provide some further insight into how the scheme would work.

As the scheme is for the next financial year, how would it work for a tenant who has not received or applied for a DHP this year and has not paid some or all of their bedroom tax liability? Would the funding write off those debts? Would the scheme encourage tenants to apply first for a DHP, and then, if they did not receive it, to let the landlord know they would not be paying the bedroom tax? Would the landlord then make a claim on the fund and write off the debt? I am sure that the committee will scrutinise closely the detail of the Scottish Government's scheme, if it is required, in the coming months.

Another key area of the UK Government's welfare reforms that the committee has considered is the employment and support allowance, specifically the impact of the work capability assessment. Welfare rights and disability organisations have raised with the committee concerns about how the assessments take account of mental health problems and fluctuating conditions. Some have termed the assessment centres the equivalent of Lourdes. Many people arrive with debilitating health conditions, but miracles occur in the assessment centres, where decisions are taken that the people who entered with those conditions are now fit for work as their health has miraculously been restored.

A cross-party delegation from the committee visited an Atos healthcare assessment centre in Edinburgh, and we have also seen what happens with the DWP decision makers in Bathgate. We are concerned that, of the nearly 60 per cent of people who have undergone an initial assessment for employment and support allowance who have been declared fit for work, 40 per cent have appealed against the decision and a staggering 38 per cent of those have been successful.

Last year, the committee had to resort to making a freedom of information request to the DWP to

gain access to statistics on return rates for further medical evidence that was requested from GPs as part of the work capability assessment. The statistics suggest that GPs are failing to provide further medical evidence to Atos, which is one of the reasons why a large number of people are being told that they are fit for work only to have that decision overturned on appeal. People are being deemed fit for work when that is clearly not the case.

As Anne Begg, chair of the Work and Pensions Committee at the House of Commons recently stated, Atos has been the

"lightning rod for hatred and upset".

We must not lose sight of the fact that the assessments have been devised by the DWP and are not Atos assessments. Atos desires to leave its contract before August 2015, which gives the DWP an opportunity to adopt a new approach before a new contractor is put in place.

In addition to the bedroom tax and employment and support allowance, we have scrutinised devolved aspects of welfare reform, on which we have more leverage. That includes the council tax reduction scheme and the Scottish welfare fund, both of which have been welcomed by the committee. There has been initial concern that uptake of the welfare fund has not been as high as expected. The committee was pleased to note during its budget scrutiny that the criteria for qualification for community care grants and crisis grants has been amended to take down some initial barriers to access. However, it appears from the first official statistics on the Scottish welfare fund, which cover April to September 2013, that performance is mixed across local authorities. Some are not meeting their spending expectations and there are variations between local authorities on the percentage of applications that they are accepting and the speed with which applications are being processed. The committee will explore all those issues with local authorities and the Minister for Housing and Welfare at its next meeting, on 18 March.

The committee has also turned its attention to other areas of investigation. In its first evidence session on food banks, it received alarming evidence from Ewan Gurr of the Trussell Trust that the number of people who are using food banks in Scotland increased from 17,000 last year to 56,000 this year. Dr Sosenko of Heriot-Watt University told the committee that Lord Freud's statement that the increase in food bank use predates welfare reforms is "factually incorrect". He said that welfare reform

"has become a major factor fuelling demand for food aid."—
[*Official Report, Welfare Reform Committee*, 4 March 2014; c 1308.]

The committee will also look to explore the related issue of benefit sanctions and consider the level and appropriateness of their use by Jobcentre Plus. We will start by taking evidence directly from people in Glasgow who have been subject to sanctions, and before the summer we will visit the DWP to consider the implementation of the universal credit pathfinder area in Scotland. We will consider the concerns that have been raised about how people will cope with universal credit, especially with the direct monthly payments for rent, and the difficulties that are involved in equipping people with sufficient digital ability to complete forms for benefit applications.

The final issue that I will raise in relation to welfare reform's report card is attendance. Attendance is a vital component of performance, but to date we have seen no attendance from the UK Government ministers at public meetings of the Welfare Reform Committee. We have issued a number of invitations to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Welfare Reform and, most recently, the Minister of State for Employment to come and give evidence to the committee, but to date all have been declined. We have an outstanding invitation to the Secretary of State for Scotland, and I only hope that this debate highlights why his attendance and that of his colleagues is vital to our work.

The reforms are failing to achieve their aims. They are failing to pay attention to the people who are directly affected and failing to offer a safety net to the most vulnerable people in society when they require it. This end-of-year report card concludes "must do better".

I move,

That the Parliament notes that many provisions of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 came into force almost one year ago, on 1 April 2013, and that the Welfare Reform Committee has, over the past year, examined the impact of these, including the under-occupancy charge (commonly referred to as the bedroom tax), passported benefits and the Scottish Welfare Fund, and is committed to examining the role of foodbanks and increased sanctions, as well as the introduction of personal independence payments and universal credit.

15:18

The Minister for Housing and Welfare (Margaret Burgess): I welcome this Welfare Reform Committee debate and I commend the committee for the work that is has done, which has provided a valuable contribution to the evidence on the impact of the UK Government's welfare reforms in Scotland. As Michael McMahon said, the stories that the committee has heard from front-line services and people who are affected have told the story of the impact that welfare reform is having on citizens throughout Scotland,

some of whom are extremely vulnerable. The committee is to be commended for managing to get people to come forward and tell those stories. We appreciate that doing so has been very difficult for many of them.

The motion notes that many of the provisions in the Welfare Reform Act 2012 came into force on 1 April last year. They include the abolition of discretionary social fund payments and responsibility for council tax benefit successor arrangements being localised to Scotland. The Scottish Government successfully put in place arrangements for both of those things. A lot of work went on behind the scenes to get the schemes in place in time. In April last year, we established the Scottish welfare fund, and we topped up by more than £9 million the money that the DWP passed on to us for local welfare provision. We have also committed to maintain the fund at £33 million for 2014-15 and 2015-16. Our actions will ensure that we continue to support some of the most vulnerable people in Scotland.

I know that there has been some criticism of the fund—Michael McMahon raised some of the issues—but we must remember that it is a new scheme, it was set up in time, the money has gone out to local authorities in time, and they have worked hard to get the money out there. After a slow start, the fund is now picking up, and we are clearly on track to reach the monthly spend that we expected local authorities to have. It is also clear that, had we not topped up the fund by £9.2 million, it would have been exhausted before the end of the financial year.

I know that the Welfare Reform Committee has taken a keen interest in the development of the fund, and I am grateful to it for its input throughout the process. It has offered thoughtful insights from the early days of establishing the section 30 order that allowed for the introduction of the fund. More recently, it has offered support for our approach in its report on the draft budget, which was published in December last year. I look forward to engaging further with the committee when we introduce the welfare funds (Scotland) bill later this year.

As Michael McMahon mentioned, last year we created Scotland's national council tax reduction scheme following the UK Government's abolition of council tax benefit. Working with local government, we are providing an extra £40 million for 2013-14 to protect more than half a million people from the UK Government's 10 per cent cut in funding and maintain entitlement to support. We and our local government partners will roll forward our commitment to mitigate the funding gap next year, and our continued joint working with local government will enable us to maintain our support for the scheme. I appreciate the committee's

support for the council tax reduction scheme and the Scottish welfare fund.

As the committee has heard in its evidence sessions and as we all know, many of the cuts and changes continue to cause extreme anxiety to people in Scotland. There is growing evidence of real hardship as those changes take effect.

As has been said, last week the committee discussed food banks with key stakeholders. I note that that discussion explored concerns about the significant increase in the numbers of people who use food banks. I have said previously and repeat that it is unacceptable that anyone in a country as prosperous as Scotland should have to rely on food banks, and I, too, share the committee's concerns.

Following the publication in December of the report that the Scottish Government commissioned, much more is known about the extent of emergency food aid in Scotland and the major role of UK welfare and benefit changes as causes of that substantial increase. Stakeholder evidence last week reflected the findings that welfare reform, benefit delays, benefit sanctions and falling incomes have been the main factors that have driven the increase in demand. The UK is already one of the most unequal societies in the developed world, and this simply provides further worrying evidence of the unfair impacts of the Westminster Government's welfare cuts programme on some of the most vulnerable members of our society.

Of all the changes that have been introduced, there is one that is particularly unfair: the bedroom tax. I welcome the committee's interim report on that, which was published on 31 January. I have written to the convener, and for the benefit of members I want to make a few comments in response to that report. I also want to reiterate the Scottish Government's clear position that the UK Government should abolish the bedroom tax. That position is supported by the Welfare Reform Committee's report; a majority of Scottish MPs in Westminster; the Scottish Affairs Committee's interim report; the United Nations rapporteur; a majority in the Scottish Parliament; and, I believe, the majority of the Scottish people.

The committee's report looked at the impact on local authorities, housing associations and voluntary agencies, all of which are incurring additional costs as a direct result of the bedroom tax. Although the Scottish Government is taking action to protect those who are affected, it is the UK Treasury and the DWP that will see savings that result from the bedroom tax in Scotland. Those savings will have been made at the expense of not only individuals and families across Scotland but local and devolved budgets.

In the meantime, we are spending significant amounts of Scotland's money—at least £258 million over 2013-14 to 2015-16—to mitigate the worst impacts of the reforms, which include, of course, the bedroom tax.

As I said to Parliament last week, we could have used the money for other things, such as investing more in health and education for our people and in growing Scotland's economy. It cannot be right that we have to divert money away from other services to deal with the consequences of policies that we do not want in Scotland.

I have also made it clear on more than one occasion that the Scottish Government cannot fully mitigate the impacts of all the UK Government's cuts and reforms. We are now beginning to see the effect of the stricter sanctions regime. We heard from Michael McMahon about the impact that the work capability assessment is having, particularly on disabled people and those with mental health issues and long-term illness. As I said last week, this is about the UK Government's policies. Atos does not set the policies; it is the UK Government that sets the policies and Atos carries them out on its behalf.

We have to recognise that the work capability assessment is not working; it has been reviewed four times and there must come a point when the UK Government has to recognise that it is not fit for purpose. It has been tinkered with and tampered with—the UK Government has tried all sorts of things—but it is simply not fit for purpose. We all know about—and the committee has heard about—the severe impact that it is having, particularly on disabled people.

I spoke a bit about the bedroom tax, which has been a major focus of discussion and a focus of the committee's work but represents only a small portion of the projected cuts that will take place across the Scottish economy. We are about to see the impact of the 1 per cent uprating of benefits. When that starts to kick in, it will put more pressure on already struggling families and on front-line advice services. I am sure that the committee will also follow that issue with interest.

I look forward to taking part in the committee's evidence session next week, and to taking part in further debates initiated by the committee and listening to members talk about the impact that welfare reforms are having the length and breadth of Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Jackie Baillie, who has six minutes or thereby. There is quite a bit of time for interventions, if anybody wants to have a go.

15:27

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Thanks very much, Presiding Officer.

I begin by complimenting the Welfare Reform Committee on all its hard work. It has been diligent and has carried out robust scrutiny of the welfare proposals from the UK and Scottish Governments. As Michael McMahon rightly pointed out, the committee has taken a considerable amount of first-hand testimony from people who are experiencing the hard edge of welfare reform, which I think has been particularly instructive for our debates.

As I said when we debated the issue previously, I do not disagree with the need to reform welfare, but I fundamentally disagree with the use of reform as a guise for nothing more than cuts. Without any shadow of a doubt, the reforms are swingeing cuts that are completely arbitrary and which hit the disabled and the poorest in our community the hardest. So much for David Cameron saying that the cuts would be borne by those with the broadest shoulders.

This morning, the Deputy First Minister and I attended the launch of the publication "Poverty in Scotland 2014—The independence referendum and beyond", which sets out the challenges and some of the policy choices that we face in the context of the swathe of welfare reform that is coming at us. One thing that was clear among those at the launch was that they did not want the Scottish Government's focus on the independence referendum to cloud its view of the action that needs to be taken now. There was agreement on that point.

I will say a little about the opportunities, starting with the bedroom tax. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that it is a completely wrong-headed policy. I hope that the Tories abolish it with immediate effect. Using such a crude financial instrument to fix a problem with public sector housing supply is actually quite daft. For the avoidance of doubt, I point out that there was no option at all in Scotland for all the people who are affected to move to smaller properties. I have been told that only 20,000 one-bedroom properties are available for let and that we would need a further 60,000 to effect all the moves that are required. The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations has suggested that as few as 3,500 smaller properties could be available in any given year. Whatever the figure, it is clearly not enough.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I totally agree with the member about one-bedroom properties, but does she agree that, even if they are built, they are not a terribly good idea? Housing associations have not been building them

for some time now, and in any case most people want a spare room for a variety of purposes.

Jackie Baillie: I could not agree more, not least because housing policy in Scotland has been moving in the direction of building lifetime housing and allowing flexibility in room numbers. As I think Linda Fabiani said in a previous debate, we might talk about properties and housing, but the fact is that these are people's homes. We should not lose sight of that.

It has taken the best part of a year and the persistence of my colleagues on the Labour benches, Govan Law Centre and the no2bedroomtax campaign, which brought a petition to the Public Petitions Committee, to get the Scottish Government to respond to our call for full mitigation of the bedroom tax. I want it to be scrapped and I am very pleased that both the Scottish National Party and Labour are committed to its abolition. However, I have to say that it is not good enough to make people wait until 2015 for a general election—or 2016, in the event of independence—for it to be abolished. People need and deserve our help now, and I was very pleased that John Swinney set money aside in the budget to mitigate the bedroom tax fully. That shows what we in the Parliament can do when we come together.

The bedroom tax should never have been a referendum issue, and the SNP should not have left people with a growing burden of debt and little comfort until 2016. I am pleased, therefore, that the SNP has recognised as much. After all, the Scottish Parliament was created exactly for times such as these, and our combined action has effectively banished the bedroom tax from Scotland.

Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Jackie Baillie: I will in a second.

I have two remaining concerns. First, the discretionary housing payment budget appears to be heading for an underspend. I know of authorities such as West Dunbartonshire and Renfrewshire that have been very proactive in seeking out those who are likely to qualify, but that is not happening in Argyll and Bute and beyond. I hope that the minister will investigate the cause of that and will assure us that as much money as is available will be fully spent.

Secondly, I understand that when the minister met the Scottish Affairs Committee on Monday, she ruled out any possibility of helping people who fell into bedroom tax arrears this year.

Margaret Burgess: Will the member give way?

Jackie Baillie: I am happy to do so.

Margaret Burgess: I point out that although I am not accountable to the Scottish Affairs Committee I showed it the courtesy of attending, which is not a courtesy that ministers down there will show the Welfare Reform Committee. I assure the member—I think that the record will show this—that I did not, as the *Press and Journal* said, rule that out. I make it clear that that is simply not the case.

Jackie Baillie: I am very grateful for that intervention, which I will take in the positive spirit in which it was intended. I hope that we can open discussions about the possibility of using some of the underspend that clearly exists to help people who have been badly affected by the bedroom tax this year. I take that comment as a very positive commitment.

With regard to the discussions that John Swinney promised we would be involved in on the mechanism for agreeing the money to mitigate the bedroom tax and getting that out to local authorities and housing associations, I do not want to be difficult but April is rapidly approaching and I have not had a phone call, an email or even a text. Perhaps the minister can take that away with her.

The minister has already said that the Scottish welfare fund has a projected deficit this year. In this case, power has been devolved to the Scottish Government, yet it has had difficulty in getting the money out of the door. I understand the minister's point that it is a new scheme, but the need is self-evident—people are queuing at food banks. Although I am pleased that the minister has reported progress and said that there will be an evaluation of the fund, I think that we are in danger of turning back the clock in our understanding of welfare. Instead of giving people money, we are handing out goods. That is incredibly disempowering and should not be the norm if we believe in the principle of independent living. There have been reports of delays in the payment of crisis grants, a lack of flexibility in interpreting the guidelines and problems with local authorities not giving grants to people who have been sanctioned by the DWP. Many of those people have mental health problems or learning disabilities.

In closing, Presiding Officer—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Swiftly, please.

Jackie Baillie: There is no doubt in my mind that welfare reform has had a devastating impact on people across Scotland. We must do our best to soften that impact, and we call on the Conservative Government to change its mind.

15:35

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): We return to welfare reform as an issue for debate in the Parliament for the second time in just over a week. Our debate last week was, by its very nature, somewhat adversarial but, despite the committee convener's comments in the early part of today's debate, I will try not to be as adversarial as I was last week.

It is important that we recognise the necessity of welfare reform. The welfare system in the United Kingdom has evolved over a very long period of time, often as a result of need or necessity and sometimes as a result of a political desire to achieve objectives that did not reflect a welfare need. Too often when people who worked in redundant industries became unemployed, successive Governments that found it too difficult to find them jobs developed the habit of reclassifying them and moving them on to the scrapheap. The unfortunate individuals who found themselves being bypassed by the economy were the motivation for the work that Iain Duncan Smith has done in attempting to reform the welfare system.

I therefore start with the need for reform. The reforming zeal of Iain Duncan Smith has not found friends in the Scottish Parliament. Although I am an admirer of the man, I realise that many in the Scottish Parliament do not believe that he has taken the correct route. The first thing that the Scottish Parliament needs to do is realise that welfare reform is necessary and must be addressed. I commend the Labour Party and Jackie Baillie in particular for the way in which they have acknowledged the need for reform, but I recognise that my kind of reform and Jackie Baillie's kind of reform might be very different indeed.

We need to talk about how we will reform the welfare system over time. In Scotland and in the Scottish Parliament, we have something to contribute to that process, and I would like us to do more in a positive sense rather than simply oppose the changes that are being implemented.

John Mason: Will the member give way?

Alex Johnstone: No, thank you. Not at the moment.

The issue of welfare reform is developing an additional dimension in Scotland, where it has been gradually moving up the agenda of the referendum debate. In Holyrood, members of the Government and, in particular, SNP back benchers talk persistently about welfare reform as if it is somehow unnecessary or undesirable. Rather than hear from the SNP about its opposition to any kind of reform whatsoever, I

want to hear more from it about how it would like to reform the welfare system.

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Will you give way?

John Mason: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Johnstone: I want also to hear a lot more about how welfare would be financed. It is suggested too often that in an independent Scotland there will be no welfare reform and no limit to the amount of money that will be ploughed into welfare.

Kevin Stewart: Will you give way?

Alex Johnstone: As a consequence, back benchers must display the figures. I take the opportunity to—

Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Johnstone: No; I will take an intervention from Mr Stewart.

Kevin Stewart: Mr Johnstone, as you are very well aware—I am sorry, Presiding Officer; I should be talking to you.

Mr Johnstone, you are very well aware that this Government spends tonnes of money on trying to get a hold of folks who are cheating the system. I wish you would do the same with the multinationals who are dodging taxes and wasting billions of pounds. We would not have to worry so much about welfare reform then, eh?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I invite everyone to speak through the chair.

Alex Johnstone: I fully agree with the concept that everybody should pay their taxes. As a consequence, we might have more money to spend in the longer term.

However, we must address the issue of cost. If we are to have a different welfare system in Scotland—should the SNP be successful—we must know what it will cost. When the First Minister was asked repeatedly today what the cost of his policies might be in future, he was unable to tell us anything. Our problem is that in an economy in which the money that Government raises is likely to drop rather than rise, we have to be able to understand the likely cost.

There are a number of key issues that we need to address. I think that there is a weakness in the work capability assessment. The number of appeals that take place—particularly the number of successful appeals—indicates that there is a flaw. However, a considerable amount of work has been done to improve the work capability assessment in an attempt to reduce the number of

appeals. In fact, Michael McMahon said that one of the reasons for work capability assessments being overturned was that information becomes available—particularly from GPs—during the appeals process that was not available at the time of the original assessment.

The key thing about the work capability assessment is that we must have some measure of an individual's ability to work. Surely the idea is not that we have some self-referral system.

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member is in his last minute, Mr Robertson.

Alex Johnstone: Rather than make the mistake of having no assessment at all, we must make the assessments work.

There is a long process ahead of us in bringing in universal credit and the personal independence payment, which are complex new benefits. However, I believe that if this Parliament were to work together with the Government south of the border, we could implement the changes much more smoothly than if we simply maintain the current stand-off between the committee, the minister and the Government in the south.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We come to the open debate. I call Annabelle Ewing to speak for six minutes or thereby, to be followed by Mr Macintosh.

15:42

Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): As a member of the Welfare Reform Committee, I am pleased indeed to have been called to speak in the debate. As we heard in the very powerful contribution from the committee convener, the work of the committee has been wide ranging and the committee has been forensic in its attempt to get to the bottom of the impact of the UK welfare reform agenda on the lives of our citizens and, indeed, on devolved policy areas.

The title of the debate is “Welfare Reform”, but that is a bit of a misnomer, because the fact of the matter is that we are talking about welfare cuts. What has clearly emerged from the committee's work so far is that the cumulative impact of Westminster welfare policy is unfair and corrosive, and embodies a dismantling of the safety net that should underpin the welfare system of a civilised country. What is striking, too, is that that is not a partisan political view but a view that is held widely across society in Scotland, where fairness is still regarded as a fundamental of how we wish to be and of the kind of country in which we wish to live.

What is fair about forcing someone with motor neurone disease either to take in a lodger or to lose their housing benefit? Why should a recently bereaved widow be harassed by the state to give up her family home or face losing her housing benefit? In all conscience, how can we hold our heads up and argue that forcing someone with a progressive neurological condition to have repeated work capability assessments is a fair and civilised way to proceed? Surely even Mr Johnstone would not seek to defend the indefensible in that regard.

John Mason: I completely agree with what the member says about fairness. That is the big picture. Does she agree that the DWP was set up to be about fairness and caring for people but that it seems to have lost its way and to be all about rigidly imposing and interpreting rules?

Annabelle Ewing: I thank my colleague for his intervention, with which I agree. We must be careful to differentiate the thousands and thousands of excellent hard-working staff in DWP offices, who, when they go home at night, must feel heart-sore indeed, from the policy that is driven by the Westminster Government in Whitehall.

It would have been helpful if we could have explored those issues and other questions with the UK Government directly. As we have heard, however, the UK Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith, and his minister, Lord Freud, have repeatedly refused to come before the Welfare Reform Committee in public session. What insulting and patronising behaviour on the part of those out-of-touch Westminster politicians. Regrettably, as the committee convener informed the chamber, we can now add to that list of insults and slights to the work of our committee, as the Minister of State for Employment, Esther McVey, has now also refused to come before the committee in public session. Who do those people think they are? What have they got to hide? If their policies are so great, why are they not prepared to defend them in Scotland, in public, in our democratically elected Parliament? Whither the respect agenda now?

It is clear to me that those Westminster politicians are running scared. How could they even start to defend, among other policies, the mess that is the personal independence payment? I will say a few words about that policy, which the committee will shortly look into. Leaving to one side the very significant cuts to disabled people's budgets that its implementation will entail—that merits a whole debate in itself—we should also consider the absolutely shambolic way in which that benefit has been rolled out to date.

We need look no further than the National Audit Office report that was published last month, which

stated, *inter alia*, that PIP will cost almost three and a half times more to administer and will take double the amount of time to process than disability living allowance; that, within six months of the PIP's introduction, a backlog of 92,000 cases has built up; and that claimants are waiting an average of 107 days—terminally ill claimants are waiting 28 days—to have their cases decided. What a shambles.

On the ground, even longer delays are being experienced. As Inclusion Scotland said in its very helpful briefing for today's debate, that means that disabled people are being left for very long periods without any benefit support to meet their care and/or mobility needs. That is just not good enough. We are talking about the lives of real people—people who, in order to get on with their daily lives, already have to overcome significant hurdles that many of us cannot even begin to imagine.

I have a constituent—I will not disclose their name today—who has cancer, who has recently had very considerable surgical intervention and who will require further surgical intervention and treatment. Unsurprisingly, they will not make it back to work, at the most optimistic assessment, before August. Let us be clear: my constituent wants to get back to work. No PIP award has yet been made, and my constituent's debts are mounting. What stage have we reached, after nearly four months? We are waiting for the Atos health assessment to be carried out, yet in an email received yesterday afternoon, the DWP said:

"They (ATOS) are unable to provide any timescales due to the volumes they are experiencing."

What aspect of my constituent's very serious and comprehensively recorded treatment for cancer under the national health service is it that Atos, the DWP and the UK Westminster Government need to assess? Why are my constituent's hospital records not sufficient? How can the state treat people in that way?

It does not have to be like that for our country. We have a choice of two futures. We can choose to take control over our own welfare system and ensure that it meets the priorities and beliefs of our people in our country, or we can continue to be controlled by and tied to the Westminster system, which pursues policies such as the bedroom tax—policies that we did not and would never vote for—and treats our vulnerable people so unspeakably.

We can see £12 billion of further welfare cuts coming down the line, and we can see the risk that 100,000 more children will be pushed into poverty in Scotland. It does not have to be like that for our citizens, because we can change our future. We

can have a better future by voting yes on 18 September this year.

15:49

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I am not sure that much has moved on in the week between this debate and our previous one on welfare reform. However, if it does nothing else, the motion before us this afternoon allows us to send out a clear message about how much importance we give to the issue of welfare reform, how much it worries us and how much it is impoverishing not just the constituents we serve but the society in which we live.

I want to pick up where I left off in last week's debate by focusing not simply on the impact of the welfare cuts but on what our response should be. Before I do, I have a couple of points about how misguided and damaging the Tory welfare agenda is that I did not have time to make in my speech last week.

First, I want to highlight the point that just as we have finally come together to unite in resisting the bedroom tax, we are being overtaken by a new threat: the impact of increasing numbers of longer and tougher sanctions. It is not simply that sanctions on benefit claimants have risen from 27,000 a month to more than 69,000 a month; the seemingly arbitrary unfairness of the new regime is particularly hard to stomach. Stories are legion of people being sanctioned for missing jobcentre appointments because they were at an actual job interview or a training programme or for not updating their curriculum vitae properly. The fact that more than half of all appeals against sanctions are successful tells it all.

What I find depressing is that there is no evidence that this, frankly, quite brutal use of sanctions is working. There is no evidence that the accompanying policy of botherability and hassling people who are already under the stress and pressure of joblessness or poverty by threatening to take away their welfare, food or house is getting people back into work. The UK Government's review of the use of sanctions is due to report in spring this year. I hope that ministers will not solely look at improving the system to eliminate poor decisions but will take into account the cumulative effect of the whole welfare reform programme, because just one of the impacts of welfare reform is the threat of a hardening of attitudes against the poor across the country.

To my mind, the welfare reform agenda is a deliberate attempt to paint a false picture of poverty and joblessness, to individualise misfortune and to perpetuate inaccurate stereotypes. It is deliberately designed to undermine and contradict our feelings of empathy,

our understanding and our sense of community. I believe that one of our responses should be to challenge any such attempt to stigmatise the poor. Our main weapon in doing so is simply the truth. An excellent report was produced by the churches last year called "The lies we tell ourselves: ending comfortable myths about poverty", which begins with a quote from the great Methodist John Wesley, reminding us that none of this is new. He said:

"So wickedly, devilishly false is that common objection, 'They are poor, only because they are idle'."

Here we are, 250 years on and the welfare reform agenda promotes that same line of thinking, that same misconception that the poor are lazy, addicted to drink or drugs, profligate, on the fiddle, securing benefits as a lifestyle choice and, in the meantime, driving this country into debt.

Not one of those statements is true—or at least they are no more true about the poor than they are about the rich or the rest of us. However, just last month the Prime Minister himself had to be pulled up—again by the churches—when he tried to claim that the number of workless households had doubled over the past decade, when the increase has actually been around 5 per cent. It is up to all of us here in the Scottish Parliament to challenge those who would divide the poor into the deserving and the undeserving. Welfare is not about them and us; it is just about us.

Alongside the importance of challenging and changing attitudes, we can take a number of practical steps to help those affected by welfare cuts. I believe that most of us have been surprised and troubled by the fact that the funds made available to mitigate the effects of the bedroom tax and to help all those households who might be falling into debt, rent arrears and possible homelessness have not yet been allocated to those in need. Shelter carried out a survey up to the end of December and found that although 10 local authorities had spent the expected two thirds of their discretionary housing payments budget, eight councils had spent less than one third. As Shelter pointed out, the DHP funds that come from the Department for Work and Pensions cannot be carried over into 2014-15: it is use-it-or-lose-it money. Given that we know that there are rising levels of hardship in many communities, one of our priorities must be simply to encourage those who are eligible for assistance to actually apply.

The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations and others have highlighted what we can do to improve the Scottish welfare fund. As with discretionary housing payments, the Scottish welfare fund is undersubscribed. We know that tens of thousands of people are in such dire need of immediate assistance that they are turning to food banks, yet they are somehow not able to

access the SWF, the main vehicle to provide families with crisis funds. Food aid is not a long-term solution, nor a particularly desirable one even in the short term. As I highlighted in Stuart McMillan's recent members' business debate, Oxfam has said that its experience of food shortages around the world is that giving out cash, not emergency food parcels, is a more effective and far more dignified approach.

Barnardo's has suggested that local and national Government need to work in partnership in deciding how to put the SWF into legislation and get that right. They can learn from the food banks how to provide crisis support in as accessible a way as possible. Support should be local and community based and a wide range of organisations, including those in the voluntary sector, should be involved in making referrals. The application process should be simple, not complex, and decisions should be more consistent and more immediate.

I will make one further point. Perhaps the most important announcement in recent days to help us to resist the impact of the welfare reforms has been the one on the Labour Party's guarantee to give a job to all young people who are out of work for more than a year. I recognise that a job by itself is not the full answer. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has pointed out that more than half the people in this country who are in poverty live in a working family, but work is still the best way to help people to help themselves.

In the Scottish Parliament, we can do our bit to turn that job into a decent and rewarding job—a job that provides a sense of wellbeing. Earlier this week, I was disappointed that the Scottish Government accepted none of the amendments to the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Bill that were designed to do exactly that, such as amendments on the living wage, trade union recognition and pay ratios. However, the Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities indicated her sympathy with the intention behind the amendments and I believe that she said that she would work to include such proposals in guidance.

We do not have to merely sit here as passive victims of the Tory welfare reforms; we can take a range of actions. We can mitigate the effect of the worst of the cuts, challenge attempts to stigmatise the poor, support people back into employment and—perhaps most important—give people hope.

15:56

Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP): I agree with a lot that has been said, with the exception of everything that Alex Johnstone said. I am also unlikely to agree with anything that Willie Rennie says, because he is a partner in what is—as Ken

Macintosh said—the demonisation of the poor in our society.

When I joined the Welfare Reform Committee, it had already done some work. The committee's convener, Michael McMahon, does a sterling job. Everybody on the committee—I include even Alex Johnstone in this—cares about what is happening to people. Most of us want to do something about that.

Jackie Baillie is right to say that the Welfare Reform Committee has an innocuous name. It should be called the welfare cuts committee, because cuts are what is happening. We hear from academics—we heard from Sheffield Hallam University and Heriot-Watt University about the impact of welfare reform and the rise in the use of food banks as a result. We also hear from experts and professionals in the field.

As Michael McMahon said, we hear from ordinary people like us—most of us are ordinary people—who are affected by this stuff. It always strikes me, when I tell people what committees I am on—

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Linda Fabiani: No, thank you—I would like to get on.

Stewart Stevenson: Ooh.

Linda Fabiani: Ooh, nothing—I would like to get on.

People ask whether we enjoy the work of our committees, and we can usually say, "Yes—it's interesting," but I absolutely hate the Welfare Reform Committee. I hate going to its meetings, because I find them depressing and heartbreaking. I hate every moment of them. However, that feeling is nothing in comparison with how those who are directly affected by so-called welfare reform feel, such as those who have been so brave as to come to the committee—there are many of them, some of whom have been quoted—and those who come to our constituency offices day and daily to discuss the direct effects on them.

I turn to the bedroom tax. Jackie Baillie mentioned how, in this country, we have always built homes for life. I was a housing professional before I was elected. We were proud that we built homes for life. John Mason was right. We did not build many one-bedroom houses, because we were creating homes where people's families could expand and reduce and where they could remain if they hit hard times and ended up with a disability.

This lot in Westminster have come along and said, "If you are in a social rented house, you just

get a wee shot of it until you cannot afford it any more. Times have got hard—cheerio. Away you go into the private rented sector. And by the way, you're not good enough to have a spare bedroom for your family to come and visit you." It is appalling. I am proud of what we did in housing over many decades.

Iain Duncan Smith does not have the bottle to come to a committee, but he came to an informal meeting and told me that Scottish housing has suffered from mismanagement because we do not have enough one-bedroom houses, then sent his civil servant to the committee to say that in public. It is appalling.

What else have we got? Work capability assessments. A constituent of mine—again, I will not name them—who is a hard-working man with a wonderful family had a terrible accident. It was no fault of his own—the type of thing that could happen to any one of us here—and he is badly damaged by it. He has been called for a work capability assessment by Atos and he is worried sick about it. It is disgusting.

We have heard about sanctions, and personal independence payments and universal credit are coming down the line. We are talking about poverty in our country. The resource-rich country that is Scotland has poverty. Fifty per cent of children who live in poverty are from working households. It is awful.

In this week's *Sunday Herald*, Ian Macwhirter said:

"poverty has returned to Scotland in a way I could never have imagined a decade ago."

He is absolutely right. Who among us would have imagined that in Scotland the use of food banks would increase from 14,318 claimants in 2012-13 to more than 56,000 in 2013-14? Is that the best that we can hope for in Scotland, sitting on a Welfare Reform Committee in a Parliament that is not allowed to take full responsibility for its constituents' welfare? I despair at the knowledge that we could do so much better, but of course we have no control over welfare in Scotland. We can mitigate—the Scottish Government is trying to do that through additional community care grant and crisis grant funding—but only by moving money around within the constraints of an ever-shrinking fixed budget.

Chancellor George Osborne has not finished yet. He has announced that a further £25 billion in public spending cuts will be required after the 2015 Westminster general election. I say sorry to my colleagues on the Labour benches, but I am not convinced that things would be any different with a Labour win. I will say what I am convinced of: I truly believe that an independent Scotland would not elect a Government that would treat

people like this. Regardless which party was elected, it would not treat people like this—it would not be able to.

I will leave the last word to Denis Curran who, with his wife Cathy and other volunteers, runs my local food bank, Loaves & Fishes. It used to help people who were really down. Now it helps ordinary families and hardworking people. Denis told us about those who walk up to 4 miles to get to the food bank and about a recent call from a social work department, asking Loaves & Fishes to give a family of four food that needed no cooking, because the family could not afford the electricity. That is what it is like for people out there. Denis really got to me when he said:

"People come to us and they are broken. Do you know what it is to stand with somebody whose heart is breaking because they cannot feed their weans?"—[*Official Report, Welfare Reform Committee*, 4 March 2014; c 1282.]

That is what is happening while we are sitting on a ridiculous Welfare Reform Committee looking at the effect of what we are allowing those in Westminster to do. It is not good enough. We could do so much better and I want to have the responsibility of so-called welfare reform, to look after the people of Scotland. I want it here.

16:04

Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): I thank Michael McMahon and the committee for undertaking their work. I understand that it has not been easy to hear direct evidence from people who are facing the unintended consequences of welfare reform. I understand that that is difficult.

As an MP for the four years, I saw many people come through my surgeries who faced difficulties as a result of changes in the welfare system. At that time, the changes were being introduced by the Labour Administration. I remember, in one particular case, a young man almost crawling across the floor to present his work capability assessment form, which revealed that he had no points whatsoever, which meant that he was regarded as not having passed that test. We eventually managed to get that decision reversed, so that the system worked in his favour, rather than against him. I have had many people come to me to complain that they had to wait for four months for their claim to be assessed because of the move towards centralised call centres, which was a change to the welfare system that caused absolute chaos.

Difficulties through welfare reform are not new, but I understand that the committee has taken evidence that has in some instances been quite harrowing. All I can say is that Liberal Democrat members—and Conservative members—are listening. I meet representatives from Citizens

Advice Scotland, the Child Poverty Action Group, the Poverty Alliance and many other groups to try to address some of the concerns that they have about the welfare reform programme. I work with them and, in some cases, I have secured changes, just as I have done on a constituency basis.

We need a welfare system that provides a safety net in tough times for people who are in difficulties. However, to hear some of the members in this chamber who say that the welfare system is being dismantled, one might think that the budget is going down. It is not. It is going up—it is increasing. We need to be careful with the language that we are using. I understand that some of the reforms are difficult, but to say that the system is being dismantled is a gross exaggeration. The budget is increasing, and it is doing so because people need support during this difficult time.

John Mason: Does Willie Rennie accept that, although the budget as a whole might be increasing, the budget for individuals is decreasing? He used the term “safety net”, and surely the benefits levels were a safety net. How is it possible to cut out part of the safety net, as is the case with the bedroom tax? How can people possibly live with that cut?

Willie Rennie: All parties in this chamber say that they are in favour of welfare reform, but I hear very few members making practical suggestions about how the cost of welfare can be reduced. There is no doubt that the cost of welfare has to be controlled. Everybody I hear talking in politics says that they do not want an out-of-control welfare budget.

My second point is that we need a system that makes work pay. Many people have come to my advice surgeries and told me that they would not be applying for one job or another because it would not pay them to do so. We cannot have a welfare system that effectively traps people in poverty and on welfare. We need a system that incentivises people and makes work pay.

Stewart Stevenson: Does Willie Rennie agree that for the many individuals who are affected by welfare reform and who suffer from degrees of mental ill health, it is cheaper to allow them to continue to have that occasionally needed extra room in their house than it is to have them end up in the hospital system, the costs of which are substantially higher? Some effects of welfare reform on people with mental ill health are not only harmful to the individuals but are economically illiterate.

Willie Rennie: The reason for the Harrington review within the DWP was to ensure that the issues about mental health that Stewart

Stevenson has rightly identified were taken into account. However, we cannot simply say that because a person has a mental health issue, they should not be given the opportunities that everyone else is given in the system. That is why the system should always be there to support and encourage.

I would like a much more personalised welfare system. I would like people to have the power at local level to make changes. It is a big welfare budget, it is a big system, and we need to take care when we are implementing it.

Linda Fabiani does not have a monopoly on caring. I came into politics because I care about people's livelihoods. I find it rather offensive to hear someone say that I, Alex Johnstone and others do not care about people who are struggling to make ends meet. If Linda Fabiani really believes in what she says, I would say that the SNP's white paper should reflect what she says. However, the reality is that the white paper relies on Ian Duncan Smith's plans being implemented almost in full. Members are shaking their heads—they need to read the white paper.

Linda Fabiani: Will Willie Rennie give way?

Willie Rennie: I will not, just now.

In the first year of independence, the SNP would adopt exactly the same budget as the budget that is predicted for Scotland as part of the United Kingdom. If the £4.5 billion cut was so evil, we might have expected that the decision would be reversed and that that would be reflected in the budget in the white paper, but it is not. Members who accuse others of not caring need to follow their rhetoric with actions. They need to implement their words in policies and to make hard choices—because politics is about hard choices. We cannot simply wish away the difficulties. The reality is that the SNP is committed to implementing Ian Duncan Smith's plans in full. That is what is reflected in the white paper.

A year ago, there was a debate in the chamber about the changes to child benefit. There was fury. The Deputy First Minister said that the changes were fundamentally wrong, but that is not reflected in the white paper. Members in this chamber need to match their rhetoric with actions. If they do not, they do not deserve to be listened to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

I am afraid that I must ask members to keep to six minutes from now on, please.

16:11

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I agree with my colleague Linda Fabiani that most of the speeches in the debate thus far have been

very good. Like Ms Fabiani, however, I think that the speeches from the Tory and Liberal side have left much to be desired.

Willie Rennie has just talked about the increasing spend on welfare. Let me give him some suggestions that would reduce the welfare budget a bit. Atos was handed £208 million for its contract for Scotland and the north of England, and it expects to make a profit of some £40 million from that contract. I believe that the money would have been better spent in providing for the poor folk in our society.

Michael McMahon: I totally agree with Kevin Stewart on that point. However, it is fair to point out that, when the contract for PIP assessments is rolled out, Salus—which is an NHS agency—will also make a profit. It might be worth putting on the record how much Salus expects to make out of the contract.

Kevin Stewart: I do not think that any of these things should be commercialised at all, but that is the system that the DWP has set up. Although many folk blame Atos and others, the reality is that they are following the commands of their masters at the Department for Work and Pensions. I believe that that is wrong.

I say to Alex Johnstone that the Westminster Government will go all-out to find so-called benefits cheats, who are a minuscule number of folk, but will do nothing to catch those—multinationals, in particular—who evade paying tax in this country. We also have the stupidity of some of those companies also being subsidised and paying rock-bottom wages so that folk who are in work are reliant on benefits. If the Westminster Government is to reform the system and make work pay, it must look at the tax system and deal with the minimum wage.

Alex Johnstone: Will Kevin Stewart take an intervention?

Kevin Stewart: No, I will not. I have only six minutes.

However, paying the minimum wage is not what the Tory-led Westminster Government is about; it is about hitting the poor the hardest.

Last week, I spoke of some individual cases in my constituency; I talked about a man with ankylosing spondylitis who was told that it might be best for him to split up with his wife because he would get more money that way. That advice came from a minister; that is a ridiculous situation. I also talked about folk in my constituency who have progressive illnesses but who are having to go for work capability assessments time and again, which is a waste of money and is absolutely soul-destroying for those people. It is all complete and utter nonsense.

I turn to a new subject that has not been raised to any great degree at committee or in the chamber—the local housing allowance. I am very grateful to Crisis for the information with which it has provided me for the debate—in particular, to Neil Guy, who has done a lot of research on the subject.

As a result of the change from the 50th to the 30th percentile for LHA, the extension of the shared accommodation rate to include people aged up to 35, and the uprating of LHA by only 1 per cent a year, another safety net is being taken away from many people, which will cause a huge amount of hardship.

At today's First Minister's question time I talked about housing in Aberdeen, so let us look at the situation there. The average monthly rent for one-bedroom properties is £662, and it is £1,005 for two-bedroom properties. However, the local housing allowance for one-bedroom properties is £525, and it is £650 for two-bedroom properties. People who live in the private rented sector who need to claim housing benefit until they find another job could face a shortfall of £137 a month if they rent a one-bedroom flat, or £355 a month if they live in a two-bedroom flat. What makes the situation even worse is that, because of the extension of the shared accommodation rate, housing benefit for people under 35 who lose their job, are single and are living in a one-bedroom private flat would leave them with a shortfall of £359 a month. The Tory argument to those people would be that they should find themselves a flat in the social rented sector because it may be a little bit cheaper. However, the reality is that such properties are not available and a waiting list of some 8,000 exists for council accommodation in the city.

That ill-thought-out nonsense and the removal of safety net for our poorest people is unacceptable. The sooner we have the powers to deal with welfare in this place, so that we can put a stop to such nonsense, the better.

16:17

Hugh Henry (Renfrewshire South) (Lab): It was sobering to listen to the stories that Michael McMahon recounted about individuals who have been affected by welfare reform. Such stories remind us that at the end of the day, when we have political knockabout in the chamber and try to score points against each other, and when we argue our cases with vehemence or vigour, it is often human beings who are affected by politicians' decisions.

As many members have said, we are not talking about scroungers, malingerers or people who are trying to fiddle the system; rather, we are talking

about ordinary men and women and, unfortunately, children, who are affected by politicians' decisions. Furthermore, they are affected by decisions that do not necessarily have to be made.

I understand that there must be change as Alex Johnstone said. Jackie Baillie and others made that point. The system is imperfect and there is no doubt that improvements could be made. Unlike others, I to some extent do not doubt the sincerity of Iain Duncan Smith when he first started to look at the system. I accept that he was shocked profoundly when he visited Easterhouse and saw how many people are living in poverty. Unfortunately, once he was in a position to do something about that, we saw a mixture of naivety and, in a sense, helplessness from his perspective, because he had lost the argument in the UK Government and with the Treasury about what welfare reform should be about. We are seeing the Treasury driving a process that he is implementing and which is having a very human effect on individuals the length and breadth of the country.

Things could be done differently but, unfortunately, a very particular course of action has been taken. I regret the fact that the Liberal Democrats are giving cover to such a course of action.

I agree that the UK Government should, as Margaret Burgess said, abolish the bedroom tax, and I would like it to go as quickly as possible. However, I say to those who have spoken with such vehemence about what will happen after 2016 that if they want the bedroom tax to go, the earliest opportunity that we will have to abolish it in full—assuming that the Liberal Democrats and Tories do not change their minds on it—will be 2015. I hope that, when it comes to the general election—unlike the last time, when the SNP encouraged people in England to vote for the Liberal Democrats—Margaret Burgess and her colleagues in the SNP will encourage people in England to vote Labour to get rid of the bedroom tax at the earliest opportunity.

Like others, I have mixed views about the contributions that food banks make. As, I am sure, many members have done, I have contributed to the work of food banks in my area and will testify to what I have seen them do in Barrhead and Johnstone in my constituency. However, as many others are I am torn, because it is a disgrace that in 21st century Scotland so many hard-working families have to turn to food banks to survive. Jackie Baillie was right to talk about how demeaning it is for people to have to rely on handouts of food rather than being given the resources to look after their families.

The Trussel Trust, which does a fantastic job, has highlighted some case studies, including the instance of Sarah in Renfrewshire, who was made redundant while she was pregnant. Her husband then had a nervous breakdown and lost his job. The family hit crisis point and lost their home. She became too malnourished to breastfeed her baby. To ensure that their two children could eat, the parents skipped meals and, in two years, lost more than 8 stone between them. They were then affected by a bureaucratic error in the benefits system and, because of that error, faced a six-month sanction, which was overturned only when legal action was threatened. They have since received a backdated payment, but no family should have to face that indignity or bear the consequences of it.

As Jackie Baillie and others have said, irrespective of the debates on the constitution, there are things that we can do now; there are things that the Scottish Government can do. If members want to look at an example of practical things that can be done, they need look only at the sterling work that Renfrewshire Council has been doing. It has a no-evictions policy for tenants who engage with it and has allocated £5 million to combat and mitigate the impact of welfare reform. It has recruited a team of staff to give advice and support to those who are affected, it has put the maximum that it is allowed into the discretionary housing payment fund and will spend all its allocation from the Scottish Government of the Scottish welfare fund. As well as that, it has set up a poverty commission to examine the issue.

However, Renfrewshire Council is one of the minority of councils that, the year after next, will face a reduction in its council funding from the Scottish Government. We cannot expect such councils to do fantastic work helping the poorest people in our society when we are squeezing their budgets. There are things that we could do, and the first one is to free up councils to help people who are in need in their communities.

16:24

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Once again, we are debating welfare reform, as we did recently. I am sure that this will not be the last time.

The subject comes up in many scenarios. This morning, at the Equal Opportunities Committee, we considered fathers' involvement in their children's upbringing and the challenges that fathers face. One issue that was highlighted in that session was the experience of some fathers at the Jobcentre Plus, where they felt that staff were less supportive of single fathers than of single mothers.

The committee heard about a single father with a very troubled child. The child had already spent part of his life in care, but the father was under real pressure to take a job despite the fact that his child needed a parent who was available if the school started having problems. Those issues obviously affect single mothers too; the committee was simply considering them in a particular context at its meeting today.

We debated welfare reform fairly recently, so my approach today will be slightly different from the approach that I took in the previous debate. I asked my staff to highlight a particular case that I could use as an example without mentioning the individual involved. They came up with the following case that they have been dealing with in the past three months.

I am not arguing that my constituent has not made mistakes; my argument concerns how she is being treated and why the system has become so rigid and impersonal that we have lost sight of the bigger picture. Annabelle Ewing spoke about fairness today, and Ken Macintosh took a similar line in his speech, which I whole-heartedly endorse.

The DWP is meant to represent us as wider society in caring for people who have hit hard times, and yet that is not coming across. If anything, the DWP seems to be becoming less caring, and I have to say that I personally find some of the individual cases quite upsetting.

My constituent's letter says:

"Dear John Mason... I got this letter"

—from the DWP—

"the other day about my claim. Just writing to see if you or one of your staff can call them. I have no one else to ask and am due to get paid next week on the Friday. I have appealed against it"

—the letter—

"as I did not go to the assessment as I had a GP appointment on the date. I have sent my appointment card to the DWP and a letter. I have been very ill. I need to be paid next week on the Friday. I do not have money coming in. I have my gas to pay next Friday so I need to be paid and I have kids. Just see if you can call them. I need get paid and am worried sick. I have got kids to get food for. Please help."

My staff and I had already been involved in other aspects of that case, and in February we received a copy of a letter from the DWP addressed to the constituent, which said:

"I have looked in to your claim and any deductions which were being made at that time. Unfortunately I have not been able to view the actual letter which we sent you as this has been deleted from our system."

Given that the letter was written 49 days previously, I find it bizarre that it was deleted from the system.

More encouragingly, the letter went on to say:

"The decision to disallow your ESA was subsequently revised as it was accepted that you had good reason for not attending the WCA and your ESA was reinstated."

We seem to have made some progress on that case, but it should not take an MSP, an MP or anyone else to get involved to ensure that somebody gets the money that they need to live on.

I am delighted that in Scotland we have been able to put together funding to plug some of the gaps, but we are clearly not going to be able to plug all of them. Although the bedroom tax is serious and has hit the headlines, it is only the tip of the iceberg.

The Welfare Reform Committee's report from last April mentions that housing benefit reforms—the bedroom tax—have resulted in modest losses of £50 million. That can be compared with £500 million from incapacity benefit changes, £300 million from tax credits and £290 million from the 1 per cent uprating of most working-age benefits. Those figures are huge, and they do not even include sanctions, which are not officially a cut but are in practice a real cut for real households.

Members received a number of good briefings for today's debate. One came from the SFHA, which mentions that point. The SFHA states:

"We are concerned that sanctioned tenants are unfairly losing their Housing Benefit. Of our members we surveyed, most reported having tenants who have accrued rent arrears directly because they have had their JSA sanctioned. Being unable to prove their income during the period of the sanction, tenants have their benefits stopped and are unable to claim backdated Housing Benefit. With no income, tenants have no money for rent, fuel or food."

Willie Rennie made the point in his speech that the budget is going up. The budget for welfare has to go up because it is countercyclical, but the reality is that individual households—which we have been hearing about today—are having their benefit cut.

Alex Johnstone mentioned Iain Duncan Smith and the fact that reform is needed. I am happy to accept that. I was interested to note that Hugh Henry gave Iain Duncan Smith the benefit of the doubt as to his intentions. I must admit that I am unsure about his intentions. I know that my friend Bob Holman, who happens to be a member of the Labour Party and who has also worked in Easterhouse, is much more sceptical about Iain Duncan Smith.

Kevin Stewart made the point that one of the reforms that is needed is that work has to pay. When I was at Westminster, I was taken aback that the statutory minimum wage is the responsibility of a different department from welfare. I do not see how the two can be separate.

In conclusion, we need to keep our focus on welfare reform but, whatever happens in September, surely this Parliament needs to take on this area.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That brings us to the closing speeches. I call Alex Johnstone, who has six minutes.

16:30

Alex Johnstone: This has been a less bad-tempered debate than the one that we enjoyed last week. It has begun to encourage individuals to start taking a more detailed view of the welfare reform process, yet we have had the same old stories being repeated time after time. As we heard from Willie Rennie, welfare budgets continue to rise very quickly. The welfare budget in Scotland is rising as we speak, so the overall headline figures are certainly positive.

If we look under the surface of a number of issues that were raised during the debate, we discover some confusion and some difficulties. One of those issues is the Scottish welfare fund, which was devolved from the DWP into the hands of the Scottish Government. I concede that the Scottish Government has added substantially to the funds that are administered under that heading. However, in the Welfare Reform Committee last week, one food bank gave us the figure that a third of all its referrals are people who have first gone to the Scottish welfare fund and have, in effect, been turned away and referred to a food bank instead. When we consider that the fund is significantly undersubscribed in many areas, we see that there is a problem that we have to work on.

Ken Macintosh raised that issue, and he also said that the best form of welfare is work. I think that we can all agree about that. We should note that, in spite of many of the criticisms that have been made, the UK Government has been working on that issue on more than one level, not least with the substantial increase in tax thresholds, which means that the low paid in work are paying a great deal less tax than they paid in the past. That is a significant factor in the Scottish economy and one that is not given adequate credit when we discuss the issues here in the chamber.

I move on to some of the things that other people said. We heard an emotional and, I have to say, honest and effective speech from Linda Fabiani. I would expect nothing less—Linda is one of those honest people who says what she feels. She said that she feels that we could do so much better, but again we had no explanation of how we could do so much better. What would Linda Fabiani do differently?

Linda Fabiani: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Johnstone: Sadly, there is some evidence that the Scottish Government has no intention of doing anything differently.

In the early days of the Welfare Reform Committee, we became one of the few committees to meet in the chamber. Committee members lined themselves up along the second row of chairs, and at the far end we had members of the Scottish Government's commission on welfare, whom we were able to question at some length about their plans for changing welfare in an independent Scotland.

I remember asking the commission members specifically how they would deal with tax credits. I got a straight answer on that subject: they said that they did not have to worry about tax credits because they had no intention of changing anything until after the implementation of universal credit and the abolition of tax credits. That indicated to me that the Scottish Government, at that time at least, had no plans to change the welfare system before it achieved the holy grail of independence.

The truth is that the rhetoric is not likely to be matched by actions and that much of what we have heard today is policy being made on the hoof and is largely uncoded. Kevin Stewart said that the sooner we have the powers to deal with welfare, the better, but there is simply no evidence that the Government has any plans to use those powers.

We have to address one or two key issues that have been raised, one of which is, of course, the issue of discretionary housing payments. I would like to say a little more about DHPs and how they are being used.

The initial £13.4 million that the Department for Work and Pensions put into discretionary housing payments was first topped up by an additional £20 million from the Scottish Government, with an additional £15 million subsequently being made available. The problem is that we do not seem to be able to get the money into the hands of the right people. The Government needs to look seriously at how the money that it is making available is ultimately used. It would be a tremendous disappointment if money were to be made available and the funds, like the Scottish welfare fund, ended up not being used for the purpose for which they were intended. A little more work by the Government in that area could result in less disappointment at the end of the day.

Finally, we have heard on more than one occasion in the debate my colleague Kevin Stewart from the north-east telling us that the real difference in a future Scotland would be that we

could collect more business taxes and, as a result, we would not have to worry about how we spent them.

Linda Fabiani: Will the member take an intervention?

Kevin Stewart: Will the member take an intervention?

Alex Johnstone: The only evidence that I have from the Government on how it intends to tax businesses is that it intends to cut corporation tax by 3p in the pound. If that is an indication of how the Government sets its priorities, it is clear that those priorities differ substantially when they are expressed at the back of the chamber in a welfare debate from how they are expressed at the front of the chamber during First Minister's question time.

16:37

Jackie Baillie: Welfare reform needs to be seen in the context of probably the worst cost-of-living crisis for decades. The minimum income standard tells us that the cost of a basket of essential goods and services has gone up by around 25 per cent in the past five years. We know that wages have stagnated or, at worst, have gone down in real terms.

We face two significant problems. One is that in-work poverty is increasing. We absolutely need to do more to make work pay rather than have the welfare system subsidising employers. I genuinely say to the Scottish Government that there are real opportunities to put a requirement in the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Bill to pay the living wage. We should not miss those opportunities, because we spend billions of pounds on public contracts. It matters to us that the standard of delivery of those contracts matches the highest standard possible. Paying the living wage to staff and valuing them if they work under those contracts matters.

The second significant problem is the scale of the benefit cuts. I say as politely as I can to Willie Rennie that benefit cuts to individuals and families are being made, so I genuinely do not know where he gets his figures from. Perhaps the number of claimants is increasing but, at the launch of its document today, the Child Poverty Action Group did not make up the projections that demonstrate that the number of children who are likely to be plunged into poverty as a result of welfare reform may be as high as 100,000. Willie Rennie's comments and figures simply do not add up.

Willie Rennie: I was simply making the point that it is a gross exaggeration to say that the welfare system is being dismantled. I recognise some of the points that Jackie Baillie is making

and what that organisation has said, but that was my point.

Jackie Baillie: Okay. My criticism was that Willie Rennie also said that we should not describe the cuts as benefit cuts, when it is clear that there are benefit cuts.

Before I turn to contributions from members across the chamber, I want to return to the minister's intervention during my speech. The minister helpfully made it clear that, when she was at the Scottish Affairs Committee, she did not rule out removing the debt from those who are in bedroom tax arrears this year. Does that mean that she will do that and that arrears will be wiped out for those who have struggled to pay in 2013-14? I am happy to take an intervention from her on that point.

Margaret Burgess: I was going to deal with that in my summing-up speech. At the Scottish Affairs Committee, when I was asked whether we would make available additional funding to write off arrears for the current year, I said that we have committed £20 million to discretionary housing payments and that a discretionary housing payment can be made to write off rent arrears. I said that we would look at the available balance, if any, at the end of the financial year.

Jackie Baillie: Thank you, minister—that is helpful.

Michael McMahon set out clearly the impact of welfare reform on the people who came to the committee to give the personal testimony that shaped our knowledge and thinking. Alex Johnstone said that he would not be adversarial, but he then had SNP members jumping up and down in unison when he asked them to describe what the welfare system would look like in an independent Scotland. Although I genuinely think that he was using that as a bit of a distraction and was being just a little mischievous, I agree that there is not much detail in the white paper. It is legitimate to ask questions and to want to know the shape of any future welfare system, because it is one thing to make promises and another to make the sums add up.

Hugh Henry was right to talk about Renfrewshire Council, which has been proactive. Along with others such as West Dunbartonshire Council, it has sought out people who would benefit from a discretionary housing payment. Those councils will spend their budgets fully, but not every other council will do so. I ask the minister to evaluate their work and consider what we can learn from it.

Ken Macintosh spoke in detail about sanctions, the number of which has more than doubled. In September 2013, the total number of sanctions against benefit recipients reached its highest level,

with about 900,000 benefit claimants sanctioned. DWP figures show that 45 per cent of ESA sanctions are given to people with mental health issues, a learning disability or behavioural conditions such as autism, but that those people make up only 30 per cent of ESA recipients, so something is clearly wrong. The situation must be urgently reviewed, not least because sanctions now last longer—the minimum is four weeks and the maximum is three years, for goodness' sake. If we are getting sanctions wrong, we absolutely cannot subject people to them for that length of time.

Alex Johnstone described Linda Fabiani as honest. I simply observe that Linda said that she does not particularly like Alex, so I do not know what is going on there. However, she rightly reminded us about the history of our policy making on houses, which is that we built homes for life. That is why the bedroom tax absolutely cuts across that policy area.

Linda Fabiani also appeared to suggest that no welfare measures are devolved, whereas community care grants, crisis grants and council tax benefit are devolved and the independent living fund is going to be devolved. She and other SNP members simply say that, if people vote yes on 18 September, everything will be all right. However, the issue is not about where the power lies; it is about what we do with it, and the SNP has to provide us with lots of detail about what its answers would be.

16:43

Margaret Burgess: We have heard a number of stories from members across the chamber about the real impact that the welfare reform cuts are having on families and individuals across Scotland. Going back to those stories makes the situation real and shows the reason why we must do something about it. We have heard a lot about the bedroom tax, and I am sure that all members have constituents who have felt the impact of it and who are struggling to meet their housing costs. That confirms that the Scottish Government was absolutely right to take action to help those who are affected.

I will say a bit about why we think that discretionary housing payments are the best way to mitigate the bedroom tax. Discretionary housing payments can be paid at the outset when someone makes a claim for housing benefit, or at the start of the year, and they can be paid for a 12-month period, which can take away stress from people for that time. The payments can prevent people from building up arrears, which I think is critical. People should not build up arrears, and we should not tell them that they have to do so before they can get assistance.

That cap must be lifted. Indeed, it brings us back to the issue that Jackie Baillie highlighted of an underspend in some councils. The reality is that the DWP's allocation of the money does not match the need in Scotland and if we can get the cap lifted we can make the Scottish Government's share of the money go further and ensure that it gets to those who need it.

Jackie Baillie: April is a matter of weeks away. Are we seriously still waiting for a letter from Lord Freud? Are we not putting in place contingency plans to ensure that payment reaches the people who need it most before the beginning of April?

Margaret Burgess: We have made it very clear that the £20 million that we have agreed for discretionary housing payments will be made available to local authorities from 1 April, and we will be looking at how to get the additional £15 million out to those who need it most.

However, we must be very careful and ensure that what we are treading into does not have unintended consequences for those on means-tested benefits. These payments cannot be seen simply as a source of regular income that goes into people's rent accounts. That would affect their benefits, because we are talking about a means-tested benefit. Arrears have to be built up before the money can be paid out.

We are working very carefully on the matter, and we have had three different pieces of correspondence with Westminster to get it resolved. Lifting the cap is an easy solution that will cost Westminster nothing. It will be able to make its savings in the way it wants to make them and the Scottish Parliament will be able to help those affected in the way it wants to help them, which is to add to the discretionary housing payments.

Kevin Stewart: Going back to earlier comments about the use of powers, I think that this is a kind of abuse of power. Although the move will cost Westminster nothing, it will simply not let us do anything about mitigation. Does the minister agree that that is why we should have these powers here?

Margaret Burgess: Absolutely. Given that there is no valid reason not to lift the cap, we have to wonder why this position is being taken. Alex Johnstone said that we just want to take on the UK Government head-on but it seems to me that it is the other way round. We have given that Government a solution that will work for us, that the Scottish Parliament and the people of Scotland want to put in place and which will not cost it anything, but it is still not willing to do it and we have to ask why. Perhaps Alex Johnstone and Willie Rennie can get us the answer to that question.

If the cap is lifted and the funding is available, everyone who applies for a discretionary housing payment from 1 April should be entitled to it. It is as simple as that. It should not require any strong means-testing measures or onerous work by local authorities; the process is very simple and flexible and the guidance very clear.

Willie Rennie suggested that the Scottish Government has said nothing about what a welfare state in an independent Scotland would look like. However, we have produced funding projections that the expert working group on welfare has agreed are correct. Given that Scotland's spend on social protection, including pensions and welfare, is lower than that for the UK as a whole, it is clear that we can afford a decent welfare system and support our public services. We have set out in "Scotland's Future" the kind of system that we want and, having heard the stories that have been told in this chamber this afternoon, I know that that system will be fairer, more just and closer to what our people want than what we are getting from Westminster. That is something that we can do. No matter what—

Willie Rennie: Will the minister give way?

Margaret Burgess: I have only a few seconds left—

Willie Rennie: Just on that point, minister—

Margaret Burgess: I am sorry—I have only a few seconds left. I have taken quite a bit of criticism in the debate from Willie Rennie and others. Alex Johnstone said that we heard the same old stories but I have to say that what we heard from him was the same old story that we hear every time he speaks on welfare in this chamber.

Not once in my opening speech did I mention the referendum, independence or the constitution. However, I note that both sides of the better together campaign raised the issue in theirs. It was not me who focused on the referendum today.

Hugh Henry: Will the minister give way?

Margaret Burgess: I am sorry, but I am not taking any more interventions.

Hugh Henry: It started on your benches.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Margaret Burgess: The first speech did not come from these benches.

We have heard from a number of members that working is better for people, and it is better. Jackie Baillie mentioned in-work poverty, which concerns us all. The Scottish Government has been criticised for not taking action, but we have taken direct action on youth unemployment to ensure that 10,000 young people in Scotland can get a

job and training from day 1 of their unemployment. That is the preventative approach and it is better for them than having to wait a year and being forced into a mandatory scheme. We have also taken action on the council tax reduction scheme and the Scottish welfare fund.

I might not have time to go into all the details of that, but money is now going out and if guidance has to be changed again, we will change it. The money must get out there, but we must recognise that the Scottish welfare fund cannot make up for all the ills caused by UK benefit cuts. It cannot do it. The welfare fund is £33 million. We heard from John Mason about the cuts that we are still to see coming down the road. We heard from Kevin Stewart—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Come to a conclusion please minister.

Margaret Burgess: —about the local housing allowance. We know that a lot more cuts are to come.

I agree with my SNP colleagues that we need to have control of welfare and employment in the Parliament. That means having control of all Scotland's finances.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that you really need to close.

Margaret Burgess: Only with those powers in this Parliament can we have a welfare system that meets Scotland's needs.

16:51

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I begin by thanking all members for taking part in today's debate, which has been useful and constructive. It has been the second debate on the subject in two weeks, but I do not think that there is anything wrong with that. The issue demands and merits this Parliament's frequent attention.

I thank my committee colleagues and the clerks for their work during the past months. We do not always agree with one another, but I think that we work well together overall. I include in that Mr Johnstone, who is often a lone voice on the committee.

Above all, I would like to thank those who have given their time to speak to the committee, whether they are from sectoral organisations that are interacting with the welfare reform process or individuals who have been directly affected. I particularly thank the latter group. Linda Fabiani made the point that it was difficult to have to listen to evidence from those individuals, but it was essential to hear it.

During the first Welfare Reform Committee debate last year, I said:

"Behind all the figures that are detailed in the report that we debate today are individual stories and individuals who are being impacted. I reassure those individuals that the committee will focus on them as it takes its work further forward."—[*Official Report*, 23 April 2013; c 18866.]

I very much hope that those individuals feel that that has been the case. As has been mentioned already, the committee has the your say process, which is an open process that lets individuals engage with the committee on their own terms. I will try to talk a little more about that later.

The convener rightly presented the report card of the DWP and the UK Government. I want to give an alternative report card, which is that of the committee itself, although it is more a self-assessment than a report card. Before that, I will comment on one aspect of the UK Government's performance that the convener and Annabelle Ewing picked up.

Yesterday, the convener wrote to the UK Government Minister of State for Employment, and in the letter he set out:

"The Committee feels strongly that evidence from a UK Minister is important in its current work of scrutinising the impact in Scotland of the revised benefit sanction regime."

That letter came on the back of Esther McVey refusing to attend a public session of the committee. Despite repeated invitations, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the Minister for Welfare Reform Lord Freud have similarly refused to attend a committee in public session. That is despite the fact that the Secretary of State for Scotland has given evidence on child poverty to the Health and Sport Committee, and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has given evidence to our Finance Committee and Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee. All those sessions were in public.

I will not labour the point, but if any of the three UK ministers who have thus far refused to attend our committee are watching today, I urge them to reconsider and ask them not to hide behind the shield of responsibility to the Westminster Parliament as an excuse for not coming to meet this Parliament's Welfare Reform Committee and hearing our evidence.

I turn to some of the work that the committee has done and the work that we have planned. As a number of members, including Linda Fabiani, said, the committee commissioned work from Sheffield Hallam University. Its report found that financial losses arising from the reforms will hit the most deprived parts of Scotland hardest; when fully implemented, welfare reform will take more than £1.6 billion a year out of the Scottish economy; and the biggest financial losses—of £500 million a year—will arise from reform to incapacity benefit.

That evidence was well received, not just in this Parliament but by wider civic society. On that basis, the committee has commissioned further research from the university to look at the impact of welfare reform at a ward level. That research, which will show the local area impact, is due to be published in May. I am sure that all members will look forward to seeing it.

I turn to the bedroom tax, which is an issue that has demanded a lot of this Parliament's attention. The committee has dealt with two petitions on the issue—one presented by the Govan Law Centre and the other presented by the no2bedroomtax campaign. The committee commissioned research by Professor Gibb, of the University of Glasgow, which looked at the scale and depth of the impact of the bedroom tax. Findings, which were published last October, included the fact that, despite the financial pressure of the bedroom tax, social housing tenants are resistant to downsizing in Scotland and that the pull factors that keep people in their homes and existing communities are outweighing the push factor of the bedroom tax. People view their house as their home—it is more than just bricks and mortar.

The committee published its interim report on the bedroom tax in January 2014. The headline was that the committee called for the abolition of the bedroom tax by the UK Government and that, failing that, this Parliament should have the power and resources to do so.

The research from Sheffield Hallam University found that, proportionately, the bedroom tax was one of the smaller changes, but it does of course have a big impact on those who are directly affected, so it is right that this Parliament and the Welfare Reform Committee in particular focus their attention on it. I emphasise that the report that we published in January was an interim report; the committee will continue to look at the issue.

Another area of the committee's work has been to engage with the local authority pilots that the DWP and the Scottish Government commissioned on various strands of universal credit. Along with the convener, I visited West Dunbartonshire Council and New Horizons Borders—a third sector organisation based in Galashiels. Other members of the committee went to other areas. Some of the discussion was about whether the pilots would have a meaningful impact on the roll-out of universal credit.

Digital literacy presented a particular challenge. In West Dunbartonshire, approximately one third of households have broadband at home. I know that that is an issue elsewhere, too. Concerns have been raised by the likes of Citizens Advice Scotland about the UK Government's digital by default agenda. It is an important issue on which the committee will continue to focus.

I said earlier that I would speak about the your say process.

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): One moment, Mr Hepburn. There is just far too much chatting. Can we take the next one minute and 30 seconds to listen to Mr Hepburn?

Jamie Hepburn: I certainly appreciate that, Presiding Officer. Thank you very much.

The your say process is an open process to enable any person who wants to contact us to do so. Where colleagues in the chamber have constituents engaging with them who are experiencing problems with the welfare reform process, I suggest that they encourage them to contact our committee.

The convener mentioned Scott Wilson, Henry Sherlock and Audrey Barnett, who gave very telling evidence to the committee. They all came to the committee through the your say process. John Mason, Annabelle Ewing, Linda Fabiani and Willie Rennie also mentioned experiences of their own constituents. Hugh Henry was absolutely right to characterise that type of evidence as “sobering”—that is the least that we could describe it as. The your say activity has been very important in informing the committee in its work.

I see that I am now desperately running out of time. There is a further huge range of activity in which the committee is engaged. It is examining direct payments, personal independence payments, sanctions—which have been raised as a particular concern—and food banks. Those are all issues that we will consider.

I hope that it gives some reassurance to the Parliament to know that the Welfare Reform Committee is actively engaged in this process. More importantly, I hope that it also gives members of the public that confidence.

High Speed Rail (London – West Midlands) Bill 2013-14

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of motion S4M-09281, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, on the High Speed Rail (London - West Midlands) Bill 2013-14, which is United Kingdom legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the High Speed Rail (London - West Midlands) Bill 2013-14, relating to works required in Scotland for HS2 Phase One and to the exercise of the related right of entry to property, in so far as these matters should fall within the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[*Keith Brown.*]

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 four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S4M-09274.1, in the name of Sarah Boyack, which seeks to amend motion S4M-09274, in the name of John Swinney, on the draft Local Government Finance (Scotland) Amendment Order 2014, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Baxter, Jayne (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)
 Hilton, Cara (Dunfermline) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMahon, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Rowley, Alex (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Buchanan, Cameron (Lothian) (Con)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-

shire) (SNP)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 35, Against 77, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-09274, in the name of John Swinney, on the draft Local Government Finance (Scotland) Amendment Order 2014, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Amendment Order 2014 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-09190, in the name of Michael McMahon, on the impact of welfare reform, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes that many provisions of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 came into force almost one year ago, on 1 April 2013, and that the Welfare Reform Committee has, over the past year, examined the impact of these, including the under-occupancy charge (commonly referred to as the bedroom tax), passported benefits and the Scottish Welfare Fund, and is committed to examining the role of foodbanks and increased sanctions, as well as the introduction of personal independence payments and universal credit.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-09281, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, on the High Speed Rail (London - West Midlands) Bill 2013-14, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the High Speed Rail (London - West Midlands) Bill 2013-14, relating to works required in Scotland for HS2 Phase One and to the exercise of the related right of entry to property, in so far as these matters should fall within the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

Meeting closed at 17:02.

Correction

Keith Brown has identified an error in his contribution and provided the following correction.

The Minister for Transport and Veterans (Keith Brown):

At col 28893, paragraph 3—

Original text—

EGIP is a £3 billion investment in infrastructure—an investment that should have been made many years ago—that will create many jobs and will dramatically improve the service.

Corrected text—

EGIP is a three quarters of a billion pounds investment in infrastructure—an investment that should have been made many years ago—that will create many jobs and will dramatically improve the service.

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