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Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 5 December 2013

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 5 December 2013

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

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Question 1 is from Joan McAlpine, who is not in the chamber.

Tax System (White Paper Proposals)

2. Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what actions underpin the proposals in the white paper on independence to simplify the tax system. (S4O-02678)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities (Nicola Sturgeon): “Scotland’s Future” sets out this Government’s aspiration to create a simpler tax system for Scotland that will stimulate the economy, build social cohesion and sustain Scotland’s public services.

As set out on page 121 of “Scotland’s Future”, the Government will work with revenue Scotland to simplify the tax system to reduce compliance costs, streamline reliefs and help to reduce tax avoidance, with the aim of generating additional tax revenues of up to £250 million per year by the end of the first session of an independent Parliament.

We have already shown a commitment to streamlining reliefs in developing devolved taxes. Land and buildings transaction tax will contain fewer reliefs than the United Kingdom tax that it will replace. We will seek to replicate that approach in developing a Scottish tax system that will reduce the scope for individuals and corporations to avoid paying their fair share of taxes.

Alison McInnes: Let me draw the cabinet secretary back to the point. The finance secretary’s expert group said that making the tax system simpler would “imply tough choices.” Sir James Mirrlees, Nobel laureate and member of that expert group, wants VAT on food, even though that would cost a family £500 a year. If the cabinet secretary is not going to do that, what tough choice does she recommend? Different industries have acquired special tax breaks, sometimes after many years of campaigning. Will the cabinet secretary come clean and tell us which industries will lose out?

Nicola Sturgeon: It is a bit rich to get lectures on VAT increases from members of parties who are in government in Westminster. There are no Scottish Government proposals for what Alison McInnes suggests. I recommend that she takes the time to read “Scotland’s Future”, in particular part 2, entitled “Scotland’s Finances”, which very clearly sets out the opening fiscal position of an independent Scotland and the changes that this Government would make, in terms of both raising revenue and additional spending commitments over the first session of an independent Scottish Parliament.

We have very clearly set out our plans and our vision for Scotland if we vote yes. What is missing absolutely from the other side of the debate is any vision for what happens to Scotland if we vote no.

Aileen McLeod (South Scotland) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary highlight the benefits of an integrated benefits and tax system in assisting families with childcare, as outlined in “Scotland’s Future”?

Nicola Sturgeon: I am very mindful—I know that this view will be shared across the chamber—that if we continue on the current path of welfare cuts under the Westminster system, potentially we will consign up to 100,000 more of our children to a life in poverty. That is unacceptable and nobody in rich Scotland should be prepared to settle for it.

The white paper sets out how we can start to do things differently, and Aileen McLeod is absolutely right to draw attention to our transformational childcare policies. We would not spend money on weapons of mass destruction; we would invest instead in the childcare that is required to give our kids the best start in life and help women into the workplace. The integration of tax and benefits is something that is badly needed to avoid letting people fall further into poverty traps, and it is only with the powers of independence that we will get the chance to do that.

It is absolutely right that the white paper sets out that vision of how we can do things differently and better in an independent Scotland. Right now, it is the only vision in existence for the future of Scotland.

Independence (Currency Options)

3. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with Opposition parties about currency options in an independent Scotland. (S4O-02679)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities (Nicola Sturgeon): The Scottish Government agrees with the fiscal commission working group that retaining sterling in a formal

currency union with the rest of the United Kingdom is in the best interests of both Scotland and the rest of the UK. Scotland is a key trading partner for the rest of the UK, which exports more to Scotland than to Brazil, South Africa, Russia, India, China and Japan put together.

Kenneth Gibson: Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is simply not good enough for Opposition parties to denounce the Scottish Government's plans to retain the pound? If Opposition parties think that retaining sterling would not be in Scotland's interests, is it not time for them to say what currency Scotland should have if Scots vote—as I believe that they will—for independence in September?

Nicola Sturgeon: Kenny Gibson is absolutely correct. I confidently predict that all those politicians in the Labour/Tory/Liberal alliance, who are, as is their absolute right, arguing against independence, will, if Scotland votes for independence, be on the same side as us, arguing for sterling in a currency union. That is the reality of the situation. I am sure that members across the chamber will have seen today's intervention by a number of Scotland's leading businesspeople, who have said that, if we vote for independence, retaining sterling in a currency union is exactly the right thing to do, not just for Scotland but for the rest of the UK.

On a more general point—and following my response to Alison McInnes—I think that the no campaign is in significant difficulty. It is devoid of any positive vision for the future of Scotland if we do not become independent. It will not be good enough to continue to say, “You can't do that”, and to continue to spread fears and smears that fall apart before our very eyes. “Scotland's Future” is the only vision for the future of Scotland, which is why I think we will be seeing more and more people support it.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab): Once again, the cabinet secretary is entirely missing the point—or, rather, the points. Will she accept two things that she rejected last week? First, does she accept that, if there is a vote for independence, it is totally irrelevant what I think or what any of the Opposition parties or anyone in this chamber thinks about a single currency, because the decision will be for the rest of the UK, over which we will have no influence whatever? Secondly, does she accept that even if there were a common currency we would not have the fiscal independence that she kept talking about last week? Will she accept those two facts, which she completely failed to understand last week?

Nicola Sturgeon: I have said many times in the chamber that I have enormous respect for Malcolm Chisholm, but he is putting that position under serious pressure at the moment.

I want to make three points. First, it is completely wrong to say that what people on the Opposition benches think about life in an independent Scotland is irrelevant. If the people of Scotland democratically vote to be independent, they are going to have to come forward with some policies about what life in an independent Scotland should be like—unless, of course, they want to remain consigned to opposition for ever, which, I have to say, they are doing a good job of suggesting at the moment.

Secondly, on the question of the rest of the UK, what no one on the no side can answer is how it would possibly make any sense for the rest of the UK to force its own businesses into a separate currency from Scotland's when Scotland itself did not want to be in a separate currency. That would cost businesses in the rest of the UK at least £500 million in transaction costs alone. The key strength of our position, which the no side really struggles with day and daily, is that it is not just in the interests of Scotland but overwhelmingly in the interests of the rest of the UK.

Thirdly, Scotland would of course have fiscal independence. More than that, we would have control over our welfare state, which is something that I would have thought that Malcolm Chisholm, looking at the destruction and devastation being done to it by the Tories, whom he seems to support in the better together alliance, would want. The sooner we get control of our welfare state in Scotland, the better.

Fuel Poverty

4. Margaret McDougall (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to tackle fuel poverty. (S4O-02680)

The Minister for Housing and Welfare (Margaret Burgess): The Scottish Government is committed to eradicating fuel poverty. Since 2009, it has invested £220 million in fuel poverty and energy efficiency programmes, with an estimated total net saving of more than £1 billion to household incomes over the lifetime of the measures, and has created a £200 million per year initiative, using Government funding to lever in additional investment from energy companies to tackle fuel poverty.

However, we need the full powers of independence to tackle all the causes of fuel poverty. If elected in an independent Scotland, this Government will move the costs associated with the energy companies obligation programme and the warm home discount scheme from levies on consumers' bills to central resources, cutting energy bills by roughly 5 per cent, or £70 a year, and allowing a new means of funding and delivering energy efficiency improvements to

Scottish homes that is fairer and better suited to our needs.

Margaret McDougall: Sharp rises in gas and electricity prices have plunged more families into fuel poverty across Scotland, and we are now fast approaching 1 million households in fuel poverty. As the minister has said, the white paper proposes to reduce energy bills by around 5 per cent by moving the cost of some environmental schemes from energy bills and funding them instead from central Government resources. Is it not the case that that 5 per cent, which is an average saving of approximately 20p a day, would be added to taxation? With the sharp rises in energy prices, how does this Government aim to meet the statutory 2016 target to eradicate fuel poverty?

Margaret Burgess: I outlined in my answer how we are tackling fuel poverty and will continue to do so. In an independent Scotland, we will continue to keep the same spending to deal with fuel poverty, reducing fuel bills, and we will have full powers over our economy, tax and welfare systems, reducing poverty overall in Scotland, including fuel poverty.

Independence (Compatibility of Tuition Fee Charges with European Union Law)

5. Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government for what reason it considers that, in the event of Scotland becoming independent, charging United Kingdom students tuition fees but not students from other European Union countries will be compatible with EU law. (S4O-02681)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): We believe that the unique and unprecedented position in higher education of a post-independent Scotland will enable us to continue our current policy in a way that is consistent with the principles of free movement across the EU as a whole and which is compatible with EU requirements.

As detailed on page 200 of "Scotland's Future: Your Guide to an Independent Scotland", our policy is based on the unique and exceptional position of Scotland relative to other parts of the UK; the relative size of the rest of the UK; the fee differential; our shared land border and common language; qualification structure; the quality of our university sector; and the high demand for places.

Neil Bibby: I have read that section of the white paper, and I have also read article 18 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, which clearly states that discrimination on the ground of nationality is illegal. Even the Universities Scotland legal advice, which the minister likes to refer to, states clearly:

"RUK students will require to be treated no differently from other EU students."

Is the minister actually denying that, under EU law, it is illegal to discriminate on the grounds of nationality? If he is not, where does that leave his policy in the white paper?

Michael Russell: It leaves the policy completely untouched, because the argument of objective justification—as the member will know, given his expertise in European law—is a clear and understood argument in these circumstances. The member should consider that argument. Perhaps he would also like to reflect on his party's policy, which appears to be to impose tuition fees. The no campaign's offering is to have tuition fees in Scotland. The Scottish Government believes that education should be based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay. If the member shared that view, he would be working hard to make sure that that continued to be the case in Scotland. However, of course, that pass has been sold by the member and the Labour Party.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Can the cabinet secretary confirm whether the law officers have given an opinion on the policy that is contained in the white paper?

Michael Russell: The member is aware that such confirmation is not given by any Government. It is not given by his Government in Westminster and it is not given by this Government. However, I am happy to say to the member that the details that I gave in my initial answer—concerning the unique and exceptional position of Scotland relative to other parts of the UK; the relative size of the rest of the UK; the fee differential; our shared land border and common language; qualification structure; the quality of our university sector; and the high demand for places—are clear elements of an argument for objective justification, which is a term that I am sure he will understand.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): In an answer to our late colleague David McLetchie on 9 February 2012, the cabinet secretary said that he wanted to introduce a management fee for students from other EU countries to defray at least some of the cost of providing them with free higher education. There is no mention of that policy on pages 449 to 451 of the white paper. Has it been abandoned?

Michael Russell: Considerable discussion took place with other EU countries and EU officials about the concept of management fees, and the policy is extremely difficult to implement. It would still be considered, but it is extraordinarily hard to implement. In the white paper, we offer a positive approach to the issue of EU students.

If the member has ideas about how we could improve our higher education system, I will always

be happy to consider them. However, as the member's ideas have also included charging students in Scotland fees, I suspect that we will not be able to come to an agreement on them.

Independence (Share of United Kingdom National Debt)

6. Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it has estimated an independent Scotland's share of the United Kingdom national debt. (S4O-02682)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities (Nicola Sturgeon): The first thing that I would say is that the UK national debt is an argument for independence, not against it.

An independent Scotland's share of the UK national debt, and our share of UK national assets, would be part of a negotiated settlement between Scotland and the rest of the UK.

"Scotland's Future" sets out the possible scenarios for Scotland's share of UK national debt. Those show that, if Scotland were assigned either an historic or a per capita share of UK debt in 2016-17, we would have a lower debt to gross domestic product ratio than the UK as a whole.

Willie Coffey: The cabinet secretary will be aware that, when Labour left office in 2010, the debt in the UK was £750 billion. It is now predicted to be £1.6 trillion by 2016. Can she assure me that, in the negotiations that will follow a yes vote next year, she will drive a hard bargain with the UK in recognition of the fact that Scotland's contribution to the UK's finances is greater than our population level suggests?

Nicola Sturgeon: Yes, I agree with that. Willie Coffey makes a good point. It should be remembered that, in the past three years, the UK Government has borrowed almost £400 billion. As a result of economic mismanagement at Westminster, not only will cuts to public services continue for years to come, but the independent Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts that the UK is set to remain in deficit for the next 50 years. Scotland's public finances are stronger than those of the UK, and it is only with independence that Scotland can chart a better course for the future.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): Whatever level of inherited debt is agreed or negotiated, the white paper proposes that the Government of an independent Scotland would not take on that debt but would, rather, pay the Treasury to service it. Is that not an admission that the Scottish Government knows that a separate Scotland will face far higher interest rates for Government borrowing than the UK currently does?

Nicola Sturgeon: No, it is not. I assume that Iain Gray has read the fiscal commission's work on the issue and knows that it has looked at it in detail. It has concluded that an arrangement whereby Scotland gradually assumes an agreed share of UK debt while contributing an agreed share to UK debt interest payments would be an efficient and sensible solution.

There will come a point in the debate—I think that it is now—when, as well as chucking criticisms at the vision that we are setting out for Scotland's future, the no campaign will manage to come up with some ideas and vision of its own.

Prestwick Airport

7. Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to revitalise Prestwick airport. (S4O-02683)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities (Nicola Sturgeon): As members will be aware, we completed the acquisition of Prestwick airport on 22 November, securing its future and safeguarding the significant number of jobs that are supported by the business. We are now developing our detailed proposals to ensure that Prestwick delivers a commercial rate of return and can thus maintain and enhance its contribution to the local, regional and national economies. Our business plan will consider all potential commercial opportunities and will maximise the use of the assets at the airport. It will consider new and existing revenue streams and how they can deliver optimum returns.

Colin Beattie: Does the cabinet secretary agree that bringing the airport into state ownership could improve the Scottish economy through increased business and tourism?

Nicola Sturgeon: I agree with Colin Beattie that acquiring the airport was hugely preferable to standing by and watching it close, with all the impacts that that would have had on jobs and the local, regional and national economies. Our decision recognises the role that Prestwick airport can play in enhancing not just the Ayrshire economy, but the wider Scottish economy. We firmly believe that Prestwick has a positive role to play alongside Glasgow airport, Edinburgh airport and Scotland's other airports. We look forward to developing the plans to ensure that that is the case.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): I welcome the cabinet secretary's positive comments. She will be aware of the new generation of aircraft—the Airbus A380 and the Boeing 787 Dreamliner—and the different ranges that those aircraft have relative to the current transatlantic workhorse, the Boeing 747.

Have she and Transport Scotland considered developing Prestwick airport as a long-haul hub for flights from the far and middle east to America that specifically use those aircraft, given that Prestwick airport has the only runway in Scotland that is long enough to accommodate those aircraft? Would she be prepared to meet me to discuss that concept further?

Nicola Sturgeon: I am certainly prepared to meet John Scott, who is one of the local members, to discuss any positive suggestions for the future of the airport. However, he will understand that I am not going to give a categorical answer to his suggestion. I refer him to my original answer, which made it clear that we will consider all possible commercial opportunities. I will be happy to meet anyone to discuss those. I am about to meet Brian Donohoe, one of the local MPs, to discuss his ideas for the future of the airport, and I am happy to meet anybody else to discuss their ideas and suggestions.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Engagements

1. Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what engagements he has planned for the rest of the day. (S4F-01735)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): With your permission, Presiding Officer, it might be useful for members if I give a brief update on the severe weather disruption facing Scotland.

As members will know, we have had gusts of wind of more than 100 mph in many areas. The Scottish Government resilience operation has been in operation all day. The Minister for Transport and Veterans is in the Transport Scotland control room, where he will be until the emergency passes.

I confirm that one weather-related fatality has been reported in Scotland. There have been a number of injuries but thankfully none yet has been reported as serious. There has been significant disruption to road, rail and ferry infrastructure. Our utility companies have reported that 100,000 customers have been offline, but 15,000 reconnections have already been made, and those will continue through the day.

In light of the tragedy at the Clutha bar, we all have very good reason to pay tribute to the outstanding work of our emergency services. I reassure members that that work is on again today, as we respond to the on-going emergency of the weather conditions.

Johann Lamont: I thank the First Minister very much for that update. Our thoughts are with those families who have been sorely affected by the bad weather, but also with all the brave people of the emergency services and other agencies who are working to get Scotland safe again, so that people can move about the country.

The First Minister put childcare at the heart of his white paper on independence. Can he tell me what the final stage of his plans would cost, how many jobs would be created and what the average salary of the jobs would be if a separate Scotland was going to recoup the cost of the policy—*[Interruption.]* Forgive me, but I thought that the policy was a serious one. I asked what the average salary—*[Interruption.]* SNP back benchers are laughing, but perhaps we can get the answer to my question. How many jobs would be created and what would the average salary of those jobs be if a separate Scotland was going to recoup the cost of the policy, as the white paper says it would, in income tax?

The First Minister: In the first term of office with an independent Scottish Parliament, the policy would cost £700 million a year. It would require a doubling of the childcare workforce, which is an increase of 30,000 jobs. One of the great economic benefits would be in releasing more women to be available to move back into the workforce. That estimate is just short of 100,000 women, assuming that we could raise women's participation rates in the workforce in Scotland to the same level as in Sweden.

The Swedish example was taken for a number of reasons, but it has a lot of credibility on the basis that male participation in the Scottish and in the Swedish workforce is virtually identical at present. There seems no other good reason why there should be a 6 per cent differential in female participation rates in the workforce except for Sweden's extraordinary supported childcare arrangements, which provide the opportunity for more equality in the workforce by allowing women not only to care properly for their children, but to fully participate in the workforce and society.

Johann Lamont: Whatever that was, it was not an answer to the question that I asked. Perhaps the First Minister will want to reflect on the fact that modern women are not too impressed by men who promise the earth without providing any evidence that they are serious about doing so. On that evidence, he is not serious about the matter, so let me try and help him.

The Scottish Parliament information centre estimates the cost of the policy to be at least £1.2 billion a year, and that is without the cost of new buildings and facilities to meet increased demand. Since the First Minister has promised for months that the white paper would answer all the questions about independence, he must have worked out how many jobs would need to be created, and at what average salary, for the policy to pay for itself. Unfortunately, in 670 pages, there was enough room to explain what time zone we would be in, but not those details. Will the First Minister give Scottish families, men and women the details that they deserve to know?

The First Minister: Johann Lamont asked me a question about the number of jobs to be created. I pointed out that we would require 30,000 extra jobs in the childcare workforce, and the policy would release an estimated almost 100,000 people, mainly women, back into the workforce, to be available to work. By the end of the first session of Parliament, if we remember—and that is the question that I answered—around 50 per cent of two-year-olds and all three and four-year-olds would be entitled to 1,140 hours of childcare a year. That would be one of the great benefits of having the freedom of independence. That would require an investment of £600 million a year in

addition to the £100 million in the first year to make the improvements that were specified.

That is an argued transformational change in childcare provision in Scotland. We have consistently pointed out the benefits in terms of increased taxation revenue from releasing that additional workforce into the community of Scotland and the range of benefits in terms of employers' national insurance, employees' national insurance, income tax, VAT and the range of economic expansion and that those revenues will flow into the Scottish exchequer in an independent Scotland. Under the devolution position that we have now and the one proposed by Johann Lamont, they would go into the back pocket of George Osborne. As we are finding out from the autumn statement today, when it comes to increasing Scottish expenditure, we do not want to look to the Tory chancellor in London, who looks forward to further years of austerity.

That is why the difference is opening up: by showing that that transformational policy in childcare can be afforded and can be pursued in an independent Scotland, just as it is pursued at the present moment in an independent Sweden.

Johann Lamont: First of all, the First Minister reread the answer to the question that I did not ask him. He has not yet explained how he would cost the bit beyond the first term. He simply ignored that. He then says that the policy is transformational but does not give us the figures. We need to know the figures for it to be more than simple assertion.

I have done some estimates of my own. *[Interruption.]* In order to be of assistance to the First Minister, of course. Let us give the First Minister the maximum benefit of the doubt. There are currently 90,000 women unemployed. Let us imagine that they all get jobs because of the policy, even the ones without children. To give the First Minister the biggest possible tax base to draw from, let us say that the 35,000 jobs that he says will be created in childcare do not go to any of those women but all go to unemployed men. That is 125,000 people off the dole, saving at the most £370 million in jobseekers allowance. Those people need collectively to pay £830 million in income tax for the policy to pay for itself as the much-vaunted—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Order.

Johann Lamont: I am only quoting what the white paper says. It is supposed to be the bible. It is the white paper that says it, and presumably the First Minister will rest on the figures in the white paper.

Does that not mean that, on average, every single one of them would have to earn more than

£42,000 a year, almost twice the average wage, for an independent Scotland to recoup the money?

The First Minister: No, because the calculation of additional income to Government is about a calculation of the increase in output that is generated by that increase in the labour force. That increase in output goes across the economy; it benefits lots and lots of people. If we have more people in employment, spending more—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: —it does not just mean that they pay more tax. The people who benefit from the economic expansion also contribute more tax.

Incidentally, I would have thought that that would be recognised by the Labour Party since it has deployed this argument time after time in debates in the Westminster Parliament. Unfortunately, that instruction has not drifted its way up to Scotland. It is about the benefits of an economic expansion, as opposed to the austerity policies that we have been suffering from over recent years from both Labour and Tory Governments at Westminster.

I am surprised that Johann Lamont does not embrace that expansion and transformational change in childcare. She came to see me some months ago, but she still cannot explain how she would pay for any increase in childcare provision in Scotland. She did not have a single positive idea or suggested amendment to the budget to tell us what Labour's plans to make any change in the provision of childcare would be.

Johann Lamont seems to suggest that it would be extremely difficult to get the proposed expansion in the number of women in the workforce but, thanks to John Swinney's initiatives on the matter, employment among women in Scotland has increased by 3 per cent over the past year or two. Therefore, I do not think that it is overambitious to suggest that, through a transformational offer on childcare, a 6 per cent increase could be achieved, and the talent and ability that are locked away at the moment could be used for the benefit of the families concerned and of the wider Scottish economy.

I am absolutely delighted to get the debate on to the benefits of independence. Let us talk about jobs, let us talk about families and let us talk about the transformation of childcare and society.

Johann Lamont: Now we have the truth of it—this is not about men and women struggling with childcare; it is about getting on to the benefits of independence. How disgraceful it is that the First Minister is using the issue as an opportunity to argue about independence, rather than to address the needs of families across Scotland.

The First Minister says that the policy will benefit lots and lots of people. I hate to tell him that that is not good enough. His white paper is predicated not on output, but on the money that would be recouped through income tax. He has not been able to show us the figures. If he is telling us that his white paper does not tell us the truth, that will come as no surprise to us, but it might come as some surprise to the members behind him.

If the First Minister does not like my figures—and as his own figures do not appear to exist—I will give him some figures that he has not provided today. According to Scottish Government figures, if 105,000 women joined the workforce—that is more than the number of women who are currently unemployed—the tax revenues would be less than half of the most optimistic estimates of the cost of the proposed policy.

Last week, the First Minister googled his answers, but even Google cannot make those figures work. In order that we do not have to wait for a freedom of information request to get the fag packet that the policy was worked out on—crudely, to win votes for independence, not to meet the needs of families—will he now publish full costings of his flagship policy, or admit that it is a shameless attempt to con the people of Scotland, which we have all seen through?

The First Minister: From that line of questioning, we still do not know whether the Labour Party is for or against a transformation in childcare provision in Scotland. We do not know, because Labour has not laid out its policies and has not said how it will pay for them. We know that the cuts commission is looking in detail at cutting free transport and free personal care and at reintroducing tuition fees, but I do not think that those options will be palatable to the people of Scotland.

I will be delighted to lay down the calculations that show how an expansion in economic activity will result in a £700 million increase in Scottish revenues. Of course, that increase in Scottish revenues would occur at present, but what happens is that the vast majority of those revenues go to the Westminster Exchequer. Let us imagine for a second that Labour decided to cut everything else and to go for a transformation in childcare, and that those additional revenues were generated. Do we think that George Osborne would say, "That is fantastic. I'll immediately return these additional revenues to Scotland. I shall help Scotland, because I think its policy on childcare should be supported"? That is not the fate that any of the no parties has in store for Scotland in the event of a no vote. We know what that fate is: it is a £4,000 million cut from the existing position in the Scottish public finances. We also know that that is supported by an all-party group—it is

supported not just by the Tories, but by the Labour Party as well.

Not only do we have the prospect of a transformation in childcare and all that that means for families, women and equality in Scotland, and a policy that can result in a huge increase in jobs and economic output; we know what the alternative is—no improvements in childcare and a slashing of the Scottish budget. That is what would follow a no vote.

Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)

2. Ruth Davidson (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Secretary of State for Scotland. (S4F-01734)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I have no plans to do so in the near future, but if it is helpful, I make it clear that I will, at any future meeting, protect the Secretary of State for Scotland from the Deputy First Minister's debating skills.

Ruth Davidson: We ask nurses to work long hours in physically and emotionally demanding jobs, and they do so with a huge amount of professionalism and care, but we also need to care for them. In 2006, the Royal College of Nursing Scotland reported that one in five nurses had suffered bullying at work in the previous year. At the time, the RCN said that such treatment was unacceptable and added:

"We can't expect nurses to put up with this at work".

The RCN report that is out today shows that the number of nurses who have been bullied in the past 12 months has risen from one in five to one in three. What steps is the Scottish Government taking to help to tackle the problem?

The First Minister: I make it clear that the Scottish Government has a zero-tolerance approach to bullying in the workforce. A number of aspects of the RCN survey cause concern. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing has already written to health boards around Scotland to draw attention to the survey—in particular to the suggestion that some people have not been properly remunerated for the work that they were committed to doing. The cabinet secretary has made it clear to health boards that people must be properly remunerated.

Ruth Davidson will find that the Scottish Government and our partners throughout the health service and public services are hugely responsive to any indications that bullying or other unacceptable practices might be taking place in our public services.

Ruth Davidson: I welcome the First Minister's words and the sentiments behind them, but the facts remain that nurses say that the problems are getting worse and not better, and that one in three

is bullied. That is the equivalent of nearly 28,000 nurses having faced abuse in the past 12 months in Scotland.

We appear to have a system and a culture in which bullying of nursing staff is a widespread and systemic practice in our hospitals and health centres. It is clear that we are not rooting out the bullies, that we have not changed the management culture through which bullying has been allowed to happen, and that we are not properly supporting staff who have an already difficult job that is being made much harder by the abuse that they experience from their managers or colleagues.

Our nurses have consistently been failed and we must act now to make that better. Bullying in any form is unacceptable. I want to do something about it and I know that the First Minister does, too. Will he meet me, the other party leaders and nursing representatives to draw up an action plan to help to right this wrong?

The First Minister: As I said, we are sensitive and responsive to any indications that management practices are not what they should be in the health service. I can arrange a meeting with Ruth Davidson and the other party leaders to develop that argument.

I will say two things to Ruth Davidson. She should look at how the nursing workforce planning tools, which concern the workforce's direction, have been welcomed by the RCN. The tools will be an important aspect of planning for national health service staff. She will know that we have more qualified nurses and more staff in the health service than we had in 2007, but she should appreciate the RCN's welcome for that initiative.

Ruth Davidson makes important points, but she should also remember that guarantees have been given to our public services in Scotland that have provided a great deal of reassurance, such as the guarantee of no compulsory redundancies. I mention that because she might be aware that the national health service in England has made a total of 8,702 compulsory redundancies since July 2011.

I accept Ruth Davidson's point that we must be vigilant, and we will operate on a cross-party basis to eradicate any unacceptable management practices in the national health service, but I hope that she will be generous enough to concede that, given the workforce planning tools, which the RCN hugely welcomed, and the no compulsory redundancies policy, aspects of the public service workforce situation in Scotland are incomparably better than what is happening elsewhere in these islands.

The Presiding Officer: John Lamont has a constituency question.

John Lamont (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): The First Minister is aware of the dreadful weather conditions that are affecting many parts of Scotland, including the Scottish Borders. Many schools in the Borders had to close this morning because of a loss of power. Will he assure me that the Government will do everything possible to ensure that the local council is given all the support that it needs to get schools reconnected to power supplies as quickly as possible?

The First Minister: I tried to give a brief update earlier. The number of school closures is 195, of which seven are in the Scottish Borders. That was at 10.45, but—as John Lamont will appreciate—the situation is evolving.

The Minister for Transport and Veterans and the resilience room are in full operation. John Lamont will find that our public services are working very hard indeed to inform the public of the likely consequences of the disruption, including school closures as well as disruption to travel and the electricity supply, and to restore supplies as quickly as possible.

I will arrange for information to be lodged in the Parliament so that any member can see what the situation is in their area of Scotland.

Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab): Is the First Minister aware that funding for NHS Grampian falls short by £35 million a year of what it should be under the Government's own funding formula? Does he agree with the chief executive of NHS Grampian, who told the health board this week that trying to run health services without proper funding is like running a race against Usain Bolt and having to give him a four-yard start? Will the First Minister help Grampian to catch up by setting a firm timetable for full implementation of the Government's own funding formula in the very near future?

The First Minister: Lewis Macdonald will know that we have taken a policy decision to bring the boards that are under parity towards parity, and to try to do so in a way that does not cut services elsewhere. He should also be aware that this week I visited the new health village in Grampian, which is the first of the hub initiatives. It will have 500-600 staff working in combined service delivery, and from 10 December it will be seeing many patients. Lewis Macdonald should welcome that initiative, which is the first of its kind in Scotland and one of many that are being rolled out.

Lewis Macdonald should also be aware that I monitor very closely—he will understand this, as another local member—the statistics on waiting times in the emergency centre in Grampian, and I can tell him that spectacular new investment has

been one of the reasons, along with the commitment of our national health service staff, for the very good performance in meeting targets on throughput of patients. That indicates, along with the new facilities that are being put in place and the commitment of our staff, that we can still make substantial improvements in our health service, which I am sure all members will welcome.

Barnett Formula

3. Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what recent conversations the Scottish Government has had with the UK Government regarding the Barnett formula. (S4F-01746)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): I have written to the Prime Minister to seek clarity on the proposed Westminster plan for a £4 billion budget cut in Scotland in the event of a no vote. Although the Prime Minister has not yet provided any answers on the future of the Barnett formula, we know that those Westminster calls for spending to be cut in Scotland by as much as £4 billion would be equivalent to an extra £1,600 for every income tax payer in Scotland.

We also know that, in every one of the last 32 years, Scotland has contributed more in tax per head than the United Kingdom and that, in the five years to 2011-12, the relative surplus was £12.6 billion. It seems extraordinary, in the face of those figures on income, that Westminster parties together in an all-party committee are proposing to follow the Holtham commission's suggestion of a £4 billion cut in Scottish expenditure.

It is very important that the Prime Minister answer that letter and reveal the intentions of his Government, if there is a no vote in Scotland next year.

Bruce Crawford: As well as a £4 billion cut, we know from the Chancellor of the Exchequer's autumn statement—[*Interruption.*] I hear Duncan McNeil. We know that Westminster has its sights set on Scotland's pensioners, Duncan, with plans to raise the retirement age.

Does the First Minister agree that under those Westminster plans, people in Scotland will enjoy fewer years of retirement than pensioners in almost every other part of Europe? Does he agree that that is yet another reason for Scotland to vote yes in next year's referendum?

The First Minister: When Bruce Crawford was making those excellent points, I heard some indication of disquiet from the Labour Party back benches. There should be disquiet—an all-party committee has proposed that the Holtham proposals on Scottish spending be followed in the event of a no vote.

We know what the Holtham proposals are. In an article in the *Financial Times* headed “Scotland is taking more than its share of funds”, members of the Holtham commission estimated that the proposals would cut Scotland’s spending by £4 billion a year. I have indicated what that would mean in terms of an income tax rise for every tax payer in Scotland, but perhaps members would like to reflect on the fact that the dramatic cuts to the Scottish budget that we have seen over the period of austerity amount to just over £3 billion a year in real terms. What Labour MSPs’ colleagues in Westminster have in mind for Scotland following a no vote is a cut that would be even greater than the austerity that we have seen from Labour and Tory Governments over the past few years. There is disquiet on the Labour benches; there will be more disquiet around Scotland as those facts percolate through into the debate.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab): Can the First Minister tell us why the report of an obscure Westminster committee has become the lead debating point in favour of independence from him and his party colleagues this week? Is it because his substantive economic and financial arguments in favour of independence have fallen apart within days, so that his “project wish” of last week has become “project scare” today?

The First Minister: The lead debating point in the case for independence is to explain how, with the transformation of childcare provision in this country, independence means jobs and new prosperity for Scotland.

I will tell Malcolm Chisholm why I take the issue seriously: it is because I met George Osborne when he was shadow chancellor to ask him what his intentions were with regard to the Barnett formula, and he told me that it was his intention to scrap it. Alistair Carmichael says that the Barnett formula will be in place until the period of austerity is over, but George Osborne has just told us that the economy has stabilised. That is why it is legitimate to point out the consequences of a no vote in Scotland.

Our argument is that we want access to Scottish revenue because although at the last count we received 9.3 per cent of spending, we had generated 9.9 per cent of the revenue of the UK. The no campaign and Malcolm Chisholm’s colleagues at Westminster want to cut Scottish spending but keep Westminster access to Scottish revenue. I will make available to the Scottish Parliament information centre a range of quotations from his colleagues and others who are heading in that direction. That argument’s coming through, along with the argument about the transformation in society that will be possible

through having access to Scottish resources, will be followed by a yes vote next year.

Land Ownership (Devolution of Powers)

4. Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): To ask the First Minister which powers over land ownership could be devolved to the Scottish Parliament to strengthen Scottish land reform. (S4F-01736)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): The land reform agenda is part of building a more equal society. We are committed to taking forward proposals on land reform that contribute to the success of Scotland for future generations. Earlier this year, I announced a target to have 1 million acres of land in community ownership by 2020. I will not pre-empt the findings of the land reform review group, which is charged with producing proposals on land reform, but it is fair to say that decisions about the ownership, leasing and development of land are very much tied to policies on taxation.

Rob Gibson: I thank the First Minister for that answer with regard to taxation. Does he agree that Westminster’s Scottish Affairs Committee, which is inquiring into land reform and which met in Inverness this week, must focus on ways to end the United Kingdom tax system’s lenient treatment of landowners who use allowances for inheritance and capital gains tax; the vesting of companies whose beneficial owners are concealed; the registration of such entities in offshore tax havens such as Grand Cayman; and the offsetting of estate management losses against landowners’ non-landed business interests? Does he agree that the fact that powers over those issues are reserved hinders an effective approach by the Parliament to land reform in Scotland?

The First Minister: That is why we set out in the white paper that we would want a simple and transparent tax system after independence that is designed to minimise the opportunities for tax avoidance. The member will be aware of other important reserved powers. He will remember the attempted land grab by the Ministry of Defence at Cape Wrath, in his constituency, which was contrary to the wishes of the local community. I can assure him that, with the powers of independence, including powers over all public land that is owned by the Crown Estate and the Ministry of Defence, such a situation would not be allowed to happen.

I hope and believe that people in the chamber will celebrate the fact that, as part of the target to have 1 million acres of land in community ownership—although this does not make a huge contribution in number to the target it is nonetheless hugely important for communities and symbolically—we will shortly have a situation

where the Mull of Galloway lighthouse on the south-west tip of Scotland and Cape Wrath in the far north of mainland Scotland are in community ownership. I think that most people in Scotland will think that that is hugely symbolically important and hugely important to those communities and that it points to the way forward and the benefits of having 1 million acres of land in community ownership by 2020.

“Coping with the cuts? Local government and poorer communities”

5. Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report “Coping with the cuts? Local government and poorer communities”. (S4F-01739)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): At a time when the Scottish Government's budget has been cut by over 10 per cent in real terms for the 2010 to 2016 period as a result of the austerity agendas of the Westminster parties, the Scottish Government works very closely with our local government partners to protect communities from the worst of the cuts. As the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report makes clear, Scottish local authorities have fared substantially better than their English counterparts. Over the four-year period from 2012 to 2016, local government's revenue funding and capital share will be maintained on a like-for-like basis, with extra moneys available for new duties. Although the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report recognises the protection that we have provided to council budgets in Scotland, it is disappointing that the analysis fails to recognise that the level of funding for individual local authorities in Scotland is determined by the needs-based funding formula agreed by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which is largely driven by population and, importantly, by pupil numbers.

Sarah Boyack: We can agree that local government is one of the foremost casualties of austerity in the United Kingdom. However, given that local government has borne the brunt of the Scottish Government's cut when the costs of providing those services have risen by 10 per cent since 2007—with big social care and welfare challenges yet to come—and given the loss of £1 billion from Scottish Government spending on anti-poverty programmes, does the First Minister accept that it is vital that next week's local government finance statement is underpinned by principles of fairness and social justice if the most vulnerable in our communities are not to be subjected to not just austerity but austerity plus?

The First Minister: Yes, which would seem a good reason for Scotland never again being

subjected to a Government like the present one at Westminster.

I take issue with how Sarah Boyack described the situation. I have here the figures for local government spending and departmental expenditure limit as a share of the overall Scottish block. That has increased from 34.7 per cent in 2006-07 to 36.4 per cent on a like-for-like basis, so what Sarah Boyack said is simply not true. On the contrary, as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report indicates, Scottish local authorities have not just fared better than their English counterparts but have a rising part of Scottish spending, on a like-for-like basis. It is simply incorrect for Sarah Boyack to try to assert that local government has borne the burden of cuts. On the contrary, the percentage of local government spending in our total budget has risen since 2006-07.

I do not accept the argument that this Government is not acting to mitigate the impact of austerity and poverty. For example, from 2013-14 to 2015-16, there will be spending of £244 million to mitigate the impact of Westminster's welfare reform.

Perhaps Sarah Boyack and I will at some stage come to an agreement that, instead of having to take action to mitigate the worst of Westminster spending cuts, we should have charge of the resources of this nation and be in a position where we can plan out a new future for the country.

Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP): The First Minister explained earlier to the Opposition benches the reality of the £4 billion cut that is coming down the line from Westminster. Will he take this opportunity to explain to the Opposition the potential impact of that on this Parliament's efforts to tackle poverty?

The First Minister: We have seen the extraordinary results of the austerity programme already. A continuation of that austerity will cause a great deal of misery across Scottish society. Through our action on the Scottish welfare fund, supporting charities to provide advice services to those suffering from benefits cuts, introducing the council tax reduction scheme, in partnership with our local authorities, to protect the people on council tax benefit from the impact of austerity, and indeed the commitment to mitigate the bedroom tax this year and next year, the Scottish Government has done everything within its powers to try and take the edge off these harsh policies from Westminster.

Of course, the result of these Westminster policies will be to make Scotland a more unequal society, and that is exactly why we have to take charge of the resources and spending of this country to move policy in an opposite and much better direction.

World AIDS Day 2013

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion number S4M-08260, in the name of Sarah Boyack, on world AIDS day 2013. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes World AIDS Day on 1 December 2013; considers that this is an opportunity to raise awareness and tackle the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS; understands that, worldwide, an estimated 34 million people are living with HIV; notes that of the estimated 100,000 people in the UK that live with the condition as many as a quarter are unaware of their infection; expresses concern at the outcome of a recent Waverley Care-commissioned YouGov survey of people in Scotland, which suggested that more than half the population is unaware of all of the ways that the virus can be transmitted, with 11% wrongly believing that it can be passed on by kissing; commends the work of the individuals and organisations across the country, such as Waverley Care in Edinburgh, that work to raise awareness of the condition, and supports the efforts across Scotland to mark World AIDS Day in order to help improve understanding about the virus, prevent its transmission, stop prejudice and tackle the global challenge of HIV/AIDS.

12:36

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): World AIDS day is our chance to celebrate achievements and mourn those who are no longer with us. It is important because it is our opportunity to come together in our different communities to express our solidarity with people who live with HIV and AIDS and their friends and families. It is our chance to raise awareness and to highlight the fact that HIV and AIDS are still with us.

It should concern us all that a recent poll by Waverley Care showed that more than half of the population is unaware of all the ways in which the virus can be transmitted, with 11 per cent wrongly believing that it can be passed on by kissing. We really need to increase our efforts on prevention and make sure that information is presented in a relevant way to a new generation.

We also need to get the message across that effective treatment is available. Alongside that, we need to tackle the root causes of prejudice that prevents people from coming forward and leaves them living in isolation. We therefore need to support the campaign to encourage people to get tested. A quarter of those who are infected in the United Kingdom do not know that they have been infected. That is bad for prevention, and it also means that they are also denied the social and health support that they need.

In particular, today is my chance to thank the staff and volunteers of all the charities that support

action on HIV and AIDS. I welcome those who are with us today in the public gallery and those who are watching online.

I thank HIV Scotland for its efforts in promoting accurate information and knowledge about HIV in Scotland. One of its statistics leapt out at me: in Scotland, almost one person is being infected every day, and that is one too many.

Over the years that I have worked with Waverley Care, I have been impressed by the range of services that it has developed, such as buddying, support networks for families, and support for key groups such as gay men and those from the African diaspora. I particularly thank the staff and all the volunteers and supporters who have made that fantastic work possible. Raising funds is a vital part of the work to ensure that those people can continue to support people in our communities.

On Sunday, when I joined Waverley Care's celebration, I welcomed the fact that Milestone house will reopen in early January. It is testament to effective lobbying by Waverley Care and input from the City of Edinburgh Council and NHS Lothian that that has happened.

During our visit to Malawi earlier this year, Alex Fergusson and I saw very practical projects using theatre and radio to promote the prevention agenda for vulnerable groups. We in Scotland can be proud of that.

The genesis of my motion goes back to the debate that was held after the showing of the film "Fire in the Blood" at the take one action festival this October in Edinburgh. Take one action asks that, after the festival, filmgoers should do something specific to change the world: just one thing. It is a fantastic model of targeted activism in a world in which it can seem to be really difficult to know where to start. "Fire in the Blood" records the progress that has been made in developing access to affordable HIV treatment for people across the globe.

Last month, at our own cross-party group on international development, the campaigning charity Impact AIDS led our discussion. I particularly want to thank Cathy Crawford, an inspirational campaigner who has done tremendous work to raise awareness on access to affordable treatment.

As Impact AIDS put it, global progress has been both brilliant and terrible. It has been brilliant as a result of global pressure. We in the UK can take some pride in the action that followed on from the Gleneagles summit and our support for action on the millennium development goals. Successful lobbying for access to generic drugs meant that there was a breakthrough when we made the goal of affordable medication costing a dollar a day

achievable. Investment in health and education in poorer African countries has also had social and economic benefits, particularly for women, so there has been progress.

However, it is terrible that in other African countries not enough progress is being made—of the 35 million people who are infected with HIV globally, 25 million live in sub-Saharan Africa. It is therefore too early to say that we are at the beginning of the end of HIV, but the fact that that is even being discussed represents the potential that is now possible.

“Fire in the Blood” argues that there is now the threat of new restrictions to cheaper generic drugs through trade regulations, which are being discussed and agreed behind closed doors. We need to demand transparency in those talks so that the affordability of drugs and the needs of those with HIV across the world drive the conclusions of those trade talks.

Our members of the European Parliament need our political support and our UK Government needs to take a stand and push for solidarity and equality of access to HIV drugs. Access to cheaper, generic drugs has saved the lives of millions and, crucially, it has also enabled social and economic progress and investment in health and education facilities in some of the world’s poorest countries. We cannot let the clock be turned back on that progress, so on this year’s world AIDS day we need to redouble our efforts in Scotland and abroad.

There has been dramatic progress and we can celebrate that, but there is a very long way to go. I hope that the debate will give heart to campaigners that their work is visible, that we regard it as politically important and that we acknowledge its impact.

Let us all work together to ensure that we start that discussion on the beginning of the end of AIDS. It is within our grasp but it needs political action, it needs political progress and it needs investment to make it happen.

12:42

Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP): The first time that I marked world AIDS day was in 2002 at a student fundraiser in aid of HIV/AIDS charities. Oddly enough I was—believe it or not—one of the DJs for the evening. I remember that the front row was made up of a group of people who were all painted from head to toe in red. It was quite a memorable image because it was an example of joy being used in the face of overwhelming sorrow, like the families of the deceased who insist on people wearing bright clothes.

If there was not perhaps the greatest amount of sombreness at that 2002 event, the next year I visited the United States national AIDS memorial grove, where there was enough seriousness and reflection to go around. San Francisco had been at the heart of what was originally entitled the “gay-related immune deficiency epidemic”. That naming and the developments that happened led to very visible effects on groups of people who had already been marginalised by society. Today, the US still has 1 million diagnosed HIV/AIDS carriers, which is the highest level in the developed world.

I have never known anyone who has been diagnosed that I am aware of. I came in a later generation, when the so-called gay plague had instead become more like the plague, with 60 million people dead or infected from it. That shocking figure is reminiscent of the numbers of people in the middle ages who were infected by the black death.

Sub-Saharan Africa, as we heard, suffered particularly badly, having spent decades improving healthcare systems and bringing the average life expectancy up by a year or so at a time. After 1990, HIV/AIDS meant that that progress went into reverse. Life expectancy across sub-Saharan Africa started to fall again.

The countries that, until that point, had had the best healthcare systems often found that those healthcare systems had only helped to spread the disease. Some countries have rates of prevalence as high as 30 per cent of all adults, and they had to struggle with companies that put patents before people.

In March 2002, the Thai Government took unilateral action to use generics. The price for treating one person for one month fell from \$750 to \$30. The US Government blacklisted generics and it was only the following year that the World Trade Organization agreed a regime whereby developing countries could use generics.

Work by campaigners and philanthropists has seen tremendous progress around the world. Deaths globally now are down—2.2 million in 2005 and 1.8 million in 2010. However, there are still far, far too many deaths.

Here in Scotland, 5,900 people have been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, while an estimated 1,400 have HIV/AIDS but are undiagnosed. That is despite the change in average life expectancy among those who have the disease, since it has become a chronic condition rather than a terminal one.

The stigma has always been, and remains, the great barrier. When I was seven, at primary school there was a girl who was bullied. As happens in playgrounds, there was a weapon of choice, which, at the time, was to say that she had AIDS.

Other children would not sit in a seat that she had sat in. While the adverts of the time were certainly necessary, that is the effect that they had.

We must tackle the basis of that stigma, which is the ignorance at the heart of the issue. I welcome the Waverley Care report. I asked the First Minister and I was grateful that he reiterated the Scottish Government's support. I welcome the Government's action plan and the cross-party resolve that I think the debate will show.

World AIDS day is a chance to remember the dead, to acknowledge those who continue to live with HIV/AIDS and to work together across all our boundaries to end the scourge once and for all.

12:46

Jackson Carlaw (West Scotland) (Con): Being just a little bit older than Marco Biagi, I am part of a generation that remembers very much when AIDS became an illness that affected a great many people. At the time, I was a young man just out of my teens. The attitude among the much older generation was so corrosive that it fundamentally altered the approach to issues such as sexual equality among my generation and the generations that came after.

I had a personal experience, albeit at one stage removed. It relates to someone who had been at school with me but was not one of my closer friends. He was someone I got together with in the morning to discuss the previous evening's episode of "Monty Python's Flying Circus" and to relive every one of the sketches. I had no idea of what his sexuality was. When he left school, it turned out that he was homosexual. He was not someone who was open about that. He eventually had sex and, on the one occasion that he did, he caught AIDS, which he then died from. He died from it in misery because his family were ashamed of him and more or less kept him isolated from the wider family, the community and his friends.

Such experiences, which were not unique, fundamentally changed the attitude of the generation that subsequently emerged. It made us realise that this was an illness that had to be faced and, like all other illnesses that have affected populations, it has to have every resource and effort put into defeating it.

I do not wish to distinguish HIV and AIDS from all sorts of other sexual diseases. We have appalling rates of chlamydia in society. At a school that I was speaking at last week, it was clear that many young people do not know that the Government has a first-class website that is designed to educate young people, in terms that they can best understand, about sexual health and all the protections and so on of which they need to be aware. That is true whether young people are

gay or straight, which is another big issue that everybody is now perfectly open to discussing.

More must be done. As each new generation of children comes through school, we tend to forget that we launched something to people who have now left school, are off to university and have gone beyond. We need to ensure that the next emerging generation knows that the information is there and that we constantly update it and make it relevant.

I commend President Obama for his support of the work that President Bush did in relation to the international aspect of tackling AIDS. Both President Obama and former President Bush were in Tanzania earlier this year, and President Obama again commended President Bush's president's emergency plan for AIDS relief, as part of which the biggest single donation by any state in history to tackle a disease was committed by President Bush. The donation was \$15 billion in 2003 to 2008 to prevent 7 million infections across Africa—Sarah Boyack talked about that—and it has prevented some 1.1 million deaths.

Much more needs to be done, including from what some people would, I suppose, regard as an unlikely source. That commitment was from President Bush, and I noticed a comment from a leading businessman in Dar es Salaam said:

"We love Obama because his father was an African, he is the first African American in the White House, and that has inspired us ... But the fact is that so far he has not done as much to help Africans as President Bush did. We understand he has problems at home, but truly we are still hoping that he will help us more before he retires."

The United States is the international leader in all of this, although we play our part as a community and as a country here. I hope that the message from this debate is not only about the education and support and everything that we do—I endorse everything that Sarah Boyack said; I hope that it sends a message to the United States to underline, underpin and further resource the programme that is doing so much on the continent of Africa.

12:51

Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): I congratulate Sarah Boyack on securing this debate and recognise her long-standing passion for the issue, the work that she has done with Waverley Care, and the work that she is doing overseas.

I draw members' attention to my register of interests. I am a member of the Terence Higgins Trust, and I have been a member of it for a long time. That is in part due to when I came of age. I grew up in the 1980s and 1990s, when Mark Fowler was diagnosed as being HIV positive on "EastEnders". That led to a national debate about

what that meant. Freddie Mercury died when I was obsessed with Queen and all the rock music that was around. My childhood was framed around Band Aid. I watched AIDS ravage Africa, as it still does in many ways. That heightened my political interest in the HIV/AIDS debate, which is why I joined THT.

My membership of THT took a different personal meaning when a good friend of mine was diagnosed with HIV two years ago. That was a bit of a shock. He sat down and told me, and we talked through all the consequences that it would have for his life, job and relationship. We then had a drink, and it was all good and fine. I then got up, went home and cried all night because I knew that my friend was going to die. I knew that that would not necessarily happen tomorrow or in a few weeks' time, but that it would happen and was likely to happen before I died. I found that really hard to deal with.

A few months later, that friend was walking to meet me—we were going for a coffee. He was on his mobile phone, accidentally walked into a lamp post and bashed his nose, which started to bleed. When he arrived and met me, he was in covered in blood. That was a despairing moment for him—not for me—because he was so conscious that he was covered in a thing that was everything that symbolised his illness. He felt a great sense that his body was a danger to me at that moment. I could see his despair and fear for our friendship, about how I might cope with the fact that he was bleeding, and about what to do about that.

I share those personal stories because each says something significant about the challenge that we still face around HIV/AIDS. Part of that is the stigma. All members who have spoken are right to have pointed to the great deal of ignorance that still surrounds HIV/AIDS. I was ignorant, too. My friend does not have to die. The Terence Higgins Trust report that looks at the greying element of the HIV/AIDS epidemic shows that people can live very well for a very long time with it. I was ignorant on that issue, even though I was very engaged in the debate.

Crucially—Sarah Boyack made this point—we must consider the support services that exist. I will forever be grateful to Waverley Care and the Terence Higgins Trust for the breadth and variety of the services that they run and operate, which have helped my friend. It is not only about his mental health; it is about the impact on his work, and how he can continue to go about his way of life and live his life to the full.

In conclusion, I once again thank Sarah Boyack for bringing the debate to the chamber, and I thank members for letting me share my very personal experiences.

12:54

Jim Eadie (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP): I, too, congratulate Sarah Boyack on bringing this important debate to the chamber. I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute and to highlight the work of the recently established HIV human rights and development network, which I am privileged to co-convene with my friend and colleague Kezia Dugdale.

The network's aim is to run seminars, co-hosted by the University of Edinburgh, based on cutting-edge research and good practice examples, which it is hoped will raise awareness and influence policy outcomes that relate to HIV, human rights and development. It acts as a platform for the exchange of knowledge across different fields, from practitioners and policy makers to interested parties and activists. The network has the support of a range of partners, which are Scotland's foremost HIV charities: Waverley Care, HIV Scotland and the Terence Higgins Trust. In addition, it has the support of the Church of Scotland HIV programme and Queen Margaret University.

I pay tribute to my constituents Dr George Palattiyil and Dr Dina Sidhva, whose research and commitment to highlighting these important issues has been instrumental in establishing the network. Their report, "They Call Me 'You Are AIDS'" gives us a chilling insight into the lives of many HIV-positive asylum seekers in the United Kingdom who

"left behind persecution, violence, gang rape and discrimination as they fled their country, seeking to find a place of safety."

Unfortunately, many of those vulnerable women and men are met with stigma, financial difficulties and discrimination when they arrive in the UK, which makes it difficult for them to find a safe place to live. Then there are challenges around access to health treatment, which leaves them susceptible to further vulnerabilities. At the seminar that the network held in the Parliament last week, it was highlighted that someone classified by the Home Office as a person of no status has no address and therefore cannot register with a general practitioner and cannot access health treatment.

That is why as well as marking world AIDS day, the theme of which is striving towards an AIDS-free generation, I also highlight human rights day on 10 December and international migrants day on 18 December, which recognises the rights of migrants throughout the world.

HIV has been a feature of the developing world for many years, as colleagues have said. In countries such as Botswana and Lesotho, nearly a quarter of people aged between 15 and 49 have

been diagnosed with the disease. I will put that into perspective. There are 200,000 orphans living in Lesotho, of which 140,000 have been orphaned because of AIDS, according to UNICEF. The reason for that tragic figure is that only 50 per cent of diagnosed people in the world are able to access antiretroviral therapy, due to a variety of factors that include fear of stigma, the lack of a fully developed and accessible health care system and poor rural infrastructure.

I agree with the observations made by Professor Lesley Doyle of the University of Bristol's centre for health and social care. She said that from the perspective of rich countries it is easy to think that the HIV and AIDS pandemic is a thing of the past, but that is not the case, as countries in the developing world continue to face a series of epidemics.

In the current climate of austerity, funding gaps between the needs of people in the developing world and the resources available are becoming wider, which is hitting the poorest countries hardest. Although the uptake of antiretroviral therapy has improved dramatically in the past decade, significant challenges remain. The medicine has to be taken for the rest of the individual's life, so more funding will be required to sustain and increase the uptake of medication and care for the ill in their later years.

We must strive to educate people in Scotland and the developing world to dispel the myths of HIV and AIDS. We need to build on the success of recent decades to ensure that all people in the developed and developing world who are infected with HIV and AIDS are able to access appropriate and lifelong treatment and care and to live longer and healthier lives, and that their human rights are upheld.

12:59

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I, too, thank Sarah Boyack very much for securing this important debate. She asked whether we can even begin to talk about the end of AIDS. For a very long time, it has been clear that this virus would not give way to a single magic bullet, some quick technofix or solution that would work overnight and consign the epidemic to history and that, instead, we would have a thousand defeats and a thousand victories along the way. There have been more victories than defeats as humanity continues to battle this epidemic, but both are still with us.

As a youth worker for an HIV agency in what is long enough ago to feel almost like a past life, I saw those victories and defeats on a small scale. It felt fantastic to see a young person who just a few months previously had been nervous, unsure

of themselves and without the knowledge and skills to begin to think about how HIV would affect their lives progress to becoming a young, confident person finding their own voice and the opportunity to challenge ignorance and prejudice and to empower others to take the same attitude to HIV. On the other hand, when we hear a 17-year-old quietly and privately confiding that he has just had an HIV diagnosis, it is hard not to feel it as a bitter defeat; to be honest, it is hard not to beat ourselves up and feel responsible for it. Such victories and defeats are continuing around the world as well as in Scotland.

Although HIV is in many ways changing, although the science is continuing to develop and although the life chances of the people who live with the virus continue to change, some things stay the same. Sarah Boyack and others have talked about the continuing misconceptions and ignorance in our society and people who are HIV-positive would say the same. The Terrence Higgins Trust recently published the results of its survey of HIV-positive people, who talked about the misconceptions, the myths and the ignorance that they encounter every day. The most common was that HIV and AIDS are the same thing; that an HIV diagnosis is a death sentence; that someone with HIV cannot access financial products such as mortgages or life insurance; or that they cannot or should not have a relationship with someone who is not HIV-positive.

There is also the increasing myth that there is a cure or vaccine for HIV. As our victories continue to mount up globally and as we get closer to universal access to antiretroviral therapy around the world, preventing the idea that HIV has been solved from lodging in the minds of each new generation in particular will be an increasing challenge. If access to antiretroviral therapy becomes universal—which is, I am sure, something on which all of us want progress to be made as quickly as possible—we must avoid the danger of creating a perception among young people that HIV is not a problem any more. If we want to provide that access to antiretroviral therapy, we need to redouble our efforts with regard to prevention.

I look forward to the minister's comments about what we can do domestically in Scotland and the contribution that we can make around the world to tackling these on-going challenges.

13:03

The Minister for Public Health (Michael Matheson): Like others, I congratulate Sarah Boyack on securing time for this debate, which raises the profile of the 25th world AIDS day last Sunday. As several members have pointed out, this is a topic of global importance and it is worth

bearing in mind that, worldwide, the tide is starting to turn, with the lowest number of new infections recorded since the late 1990s and a 40-fold increase in access to treatment over the past 10 years.

However, despite that progress, the stark reality is that there are still more than 35 million people living with HIV and that there were 1.6 million deaths from AIDS last year. In Scotland, more than 4,500 people have been diagnosed and are living with HIV, and the vast majority of them are receiving specialist care. Very high numbers are on treatment and many will have undetectable viral loads. However, in Scotland, there is still nearly one new HIV diagnosis every day. It is worth keeping in mind the fact that an estimated 22 per cent of our HIV positive population remain undiagnosed.

It is for those reasons that HIV continues to be a public health priority in Scotland. Our policy in this area is articulated through the sexual health and blood-borne viruses framework, which is supported by almost £30 million every year. The emphasis is on the importance of prevention, testing and diagnosis and on the provision of treatment and care to those who are infected. The national advisory committee on sexual health and blood-borne viruses is responsible for taking the framework forward. I chair the group, and it includes a range of stakeholders from across the sector who support us in this policy area.

Members will recognise that significant progress has been made over the past 25 years. Thanks to needle exchange programmes, HIV transmission through injecting drug use is now rare—there are fewer than 20 cases a year on average. Pregnant women are now routinely offered antenatal screening for HIV and, with the right care, the risk of mother-to-child transmission is less than 1 per cent. Due to treatment advances, many people with HIV are now living into old age, with 31 per cent of those who are HIV positive in Scotland now aged over 50.

However, still too many people are being infected and prevention is a priority. That is why, over the past two years, we have invested almost £200,000 in research by NHS Lothian and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde to examine the risk behaviours among men who have sex with men. The results of that work, which will emerge over the coming months, will inform service development and policy in the coming years in Scotland and will also add to the international evidence base for measures that can be implemented globally.

Of course, the other area in which we still need to do more is that of stigma and discrimination. In that regard, it was great to see the efforts that were made across Scotland to recognise world

AIDS day on Sunday. We should congratulate HIV Scotland for its light up Scotland campaign, which saw more than 50 buildings across Scotland being lit up red to mark the day. I was pleased to arrange for St Andrew's House and Victoria Quay to participate in the event. I am aware that a range of community events also took place, involving health boards and other sectors and recognising local activity around world AIDS day.

Reducing stigma is one of the five high-level outcomes that are set out in the framework. That is why, over the past year, we have conducted research into the most effective way in which to take forward a national campaign on the issue. Interestingly, the research found that a campaign by the Government was more likely to increase fear and stigma and that a campaign that was run by the voluntary sector was seen as more acceptable by the public. That is why we have decided to fund Waverley Care with more than £270,000 to deliver the always hear campaign. Campaign resources have already been distributed and are being used widely across Scotland. By any measure, the campaign has been a success and has helped to give a voice to people living with the disease. I look forward to continuing to work with Waverley Care to develop and expand the always hear campaign over the next 12 months.

In looking to the future, we continue to hope that there will be a cure or a vaccine, but those remain some way off. However, members will be aware that changes in the law mean that, from next year, for the first time, it will be possible to buy HIV home testing kits in Scotland. That development should help to remove barriers to testing and diagnosis for those who may fear stigma, as, in the future, people will be able to conduct tests themselves in the privacy of their own homes. We are working with our partners in NHS Scotland to ensure that NHS Scotland is able to deal with any issues that arise from self-testing, and HIV Scotland held a seminar for health boards on that topic last week.

I hope that I have emphasised to members that HIV remains a priority for the Government. Our efforts to test, diagnose and treat those who are affected will continue. We will continue to invest in prevention and we will do all that we can to ensure that people who are living with HIV are able to live longer, healthier lives free from stigma and discrimination.

13:11

Meeting suspended.

14:15

On resuming—

Food Train

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is a members' business debate on motion S4M-08202, in the name of Elaine Murray, on all aboard the Food Train. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament welcomes the award of a £59,474 Investing in Communities: Supporting 21st Century Life grant to Food Train Limited in Dumfries and Galloway; congratulates Food Train on its progress from its beginnings in Dumfries in 1995 as a service to assist older people with their weekly grocery shopping to a multi-award-winning charity supporting older people in six local authority areas in Scotland, with the intention of expanding further; notes that Food Train now also offers home support and befriending services, and understands that this award will support the continuation of Food Train Friends in Annandale and Eskdale and its expansion into other parts of Dumfries and Galloway, supporting at least 160 vulnerable people aged 65 and older to reduce social isolation and support their independence.

Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab): First, let me correct the typo that seems to have made its way into the motion. The sum of money that was awarded to Food Train by the Big Lottery Fund's investing in communities supporting 21st century life grant was actually £590,474 over five years, not £59,474 as shown in the *Business Bulletin*, so we have 10 times as much to celebrate this afternoon.

I had hoped to be able to welcome Scott McGill, who is the befriending project manager, Dr Rob Wells, who is the chair, and Sue Greig, who is a volunteer, to the gallery but I suspect that they have been prevented from coming by this morning's severe weather. Nevertheless, I am delighted to bring this debate to Parliament and to celebrate the continued success of a social enterprise that began its existence in Dumfries and Galloway in 1995. It now provides services to older people in six local authority areas in Scotland, and it has ambitions to expand further.

Food Train started out 18 years ago after the Dumfries elderly forum conducted a survey of older people in the town to ask what services would make a real difference to their lives. Many respondents stated that they struggled with their weekly grocery shopping, so Food Train was born. It was chaired by the redoubtable Miss Jean Mundell, who left no stone unturned or elected representative at any level unlobbied in her determination to get her beloved project firmly established.

Jean Mundell's efforts first focused on Dumfries and Galloway Council, but with the advent of the Scottish Parliament, she soon had Susan Deacon and then Malcolm Chisholm in her sights as they were holders of the office of Minister for Health and Community Care. That effort paid off in 2002, with a four-year grant from the Scottish Executive better neighbourhood fund, which enabled staff to be recruited to develop the service. Ever since, Food Train has been well supported by successive Scottish Administrations. Indeed, support from the current Scottish Government has enabled the service to be rolled out to other parts of Scotland.

Jean Mundell was awarded the MBE for her services to the community in 2006. She received the award from the Lord Lieutenant in her hospice bed the day before she died at the age of 80. She is in company with Kirkpatrick Macmillan, the inventor of the bicycle, and JM Barrie, the inventor of Peter Pan, as one of three people to be selected by community vote to be commemorated by a portrait bench in Dumfries. If anyone wants to see that, it is on the Heathhall to Cargenbridge section of the cycle way. It is not far from my house, so I am often able to go and see her when I walk my dogs.

When I told Food Train's chief executive, Michelle McCrindle, that we were holding this debate today, her response was that, if she had still been alive, Jean would have been chuffed to bits to hear Food Train being debated in Parliament. I think that she would have been even more chuffed at the success of Food Train today. It has been in receipt of a plethora of awards, including the Queen's jubilee award for voluntary service, and it now operates in West Lothian, Stirling, Dundee, Renfrewshire and Glasgow, as well as in Dumfries and Galloway. Every month, more than 500 volunteers give more than 75,000 hours of their time to support 1,250 older people with 3,000 grocery deliveries, supported by 20 grocery store partners.

Food Train does not only deliver groceries. Food Train extra household support also assists people in Dumfries and Galloway, and now in West Lothian, with household tasks that they find difficult, such as changing lightbulbs, defrosting the fridge or freezer, or other small tasks that can be made difficult by decreased mobility or joint problems.

In Dumfries and Galloway, Food Train friends offers a befriending service to combat loneliness with phone calls, home visits, trips out, events and clubs. Currently, 100 people receive the service, with volunteers giving 250 hours of their time each month. Esther Rantzen might have launched the Silver Line the other week to great fanfare, but Food Train was well ahead of her. The recent Big

Lottery Fund award will support and expand that service throughout our region to start with.

It would be easy for me to talk for seven minutes about how wonderful Food Train is and how wonderful all the volunteers are. However, it is important to reflect on why its services are so necessary, and Food Train has asked me to speak about some of its concerns. The International Longevity Centre—UK report earlier this year estimated that more than 10 per cent of older people are malnourished. That equates to about 90,000 malnourished older people in Scotland. We aspire to our population leading healthier lives for longer, but unless older people are eating properly that cannot be possible for them.

The third sector is particularly well placed to provide services such as those that are provided by Food Train. Co-production of services is a fashionable concept nowadays but Food Train was doing that way back in 1995.

Sadly, loneliness is also a major factor in reducing the quality of life for many older people as partners and friends die and families live too far away for regular visits. Reduced mobility creates difficulties in getting out of the house and having to give up driving isolates people, particularly those who live in rural communities where there may be little or no accessible public transport. Projects such as Food Train friends can make a real contribution, bringing friendship and fun back into people's lives. The improvement in quality of life is of course the most important factor, but when we think about preventative spend, investment in such services can save the statutory public sector a lot of money by sustaining independent living and physical and mental health.

Food Train is proud of the services that it provides, but it remains concerned that the grocery service is still available in only six local authority areas, its household service in two areas and its befriending service still only in Dumfries and Galloway. As Michelle McCrindle said in her email to me, the frailties of ageing do not discriminate, whether someone lives in Portpatrick or Portree. Food Train continues to advocate for a single standard of social care for older people and it also provides a wonderful example of how the third sector can provide the services that make all the difference.

It is only about a year ago that my colleague Claudia Beamish, who is here beside me, hosted a reception in Parliament for Food Train, which was attended by many MSPs—more than are here in the chamber today, I think. We were all very impressed to learn not only about what Food Train had achieved in Dumfries and Galloway—those of us who represent the area were aware of that—but about its ambitions to do the same for the whole of Scotland. I look forward to Food Train's

continuing success and say well done to Food Train on getting the award. I look forward to it receiving further awards and being able to expand its services throughout Scotland to provide that support to our older communities.

14:22

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): I thank Elaine Murray for lodging the motion. It is very apposite at this time of year in particular to have the chance to discuss something such as Food Train.

As Elaine described, Food Train was launched in Dumfries in 1995 but it has been a vital service to many people across the country since that launch. I congratulate Dumfries and Galloway Food Train on receiving that fantastic investment of more than £0.5 million. It was well deserved because Food Train has proven itself on the ground from its own customer satisfaction surveys, given the feedback from the people whom it is helping.

Elaine mentioned that there is a branch of Food Train within my constituency area, Stirling, and the residents of Stirling are very lucky to have it. Food Train in Stirling was launched two years ago under the leadership of—I will use one of Elaine's words—the redoubtable Fran Thow. Fran works with volunteers from across the Stirling area to provide a shopping service for people over 65 years of age who cannot manage, as we might imagine, to do their own shopping.

I know that Food Train wants to expand into other areas, but it already makes 27,000 grocery deliveries across the six areas that Elaine mentioned, which says something about the existing scale of the grocery service and deliveries operation that the volunteers have taken on. That is why Food Train managed to get hold of that £500,000 award, which is so important.

Within the Stirling area there are about 150 customers who use this fabulous service, with 55 local volunteers providing assistance. Over the past two years, the volunteers across the constituency have donated more than 12,000 hours of their time to help those in need of support.

Not only do the volunteers offer an extremely valuable service, providing groceries and home deliveries, but they have come to the aid of several people who have been found in distress, and of whom my constituency office is aware, helping them to gain access to the support services that they need in a wider sense.

I am also aware of the relationships that Food Train has built locally with many other third sector organisations in Stirling. It has been working

together very effectively in partnership with the Royal Voluntary Service, Start-Up Stirling—which is also involved with one of the food banks in the Stirling area—and Stirling carers centre. It also supports work experience projects for Jobcentre Plus, Scope, youth services and organisations such as the Richmond Fellowship, creating opportunities for people to become involved in meaningful activities and help others in their community.

In Food Train's annual customer survey, 98 per cent of the service's users voted Food Train excellent or good. I wonder how many public services would get that level of recognition of the effort that they are putting into helping people. I am not in any way decrying public services and what they do, but obviously something exemplary is going on here. Sixty per cent of people said that they felt more able to stay in their own home because of the service on offer. That relates to Elaine Murray's point about the importance of early intervention in ensuring that people can stay in their home with their family support network around them.

Over the past two years, Food Train has had a huge impact on the life of some of my constituents. It has allowed them to live independently in their own homes, safe in the knowledge that they will have their shopping delivered to them every week. Members should not just take my word for it. Service users have made the following glowing comments about Food Train in my area:

"All my shoppers are cheery and helpful";

"They make my day, can chat and laugh";

"Being a Type 1 diabetic, I find your service quite invaluable. I now feel confident that I can access foods for my diet";

"It makes our lives less stressful";

"An excellent service, fulfilling a great need, especially in rural areas";

"Food Train makes it possible for me to live independent of the help of friends for shopping";

and

"I would find life very difficult without Food Train".

The one I like best is, "They are magic."

That says it all about the sort of organisation that we are talking about. To the staff and volunteers at Food Train in Stirling and throughout Scotland, I say "You have been doing a wonderful job—keep it up. We value the service you provide. Certainly the people who get your service very much value what you do."

I was quite moved last week when I watched the launch of the Silver Line by Esther Rantzen. I was thinking about this debate and it made me realise

just how important such services are when it comes to issues of isolation and loneliness among older people. I guess that I am getting closer to that myself now, so I am getting a bit selfish and ensuring that everything is in place before I reach that stage.

Well done to everyone involved in Food Train—it is a fantastic organisation—and to Elaine Murray for bringing the debate to the chamber.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that it is important to use full names, not only with respect to chamber protocol but because it is necessary for the *Official Report*. It also helps the public who are watching our proceedings. I would be grateful if members could bear that in mind.

14:28

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I thank Elaine Murray for securing the debate. I first met Food Train volunteers and staff in the Scottish Parliament at a lunch time event. When I spoke to volunteers from Stirling, which is in my region, as well as older people who use the service, they were all so positive about their experience and said how much they valued it.

It is remarkable that such a simple service—one that arose from the need for older people with reduced mobility to get their food shopping done regularly and freshly—can deliver so many benefits. The health benefits of staying at home for as long as possible and retaining a degree of independence are clear. I was interested to read that all service users are company members with a vested interest and democratic say in shaping the charity and its objectives. The level of involvement in the charity gives the people who use the service more of an investment in it and in its future.

The regular interaction and friendship given by the volunteers is invaluable. We know about the 15-minute care visit—statutory services are under such pressure. Third sector organisations such as Food Train can help to relieve some of that pressure, as well as provide a preventative service offering care and support.

There was a recent report about older people and loneliness. Age UK says that half of all people aged 75 and over live alone, and one in 10 people aged 65 or over say that they always or often feel lonely. That is more than a million people. We are familiar with some of the reasons for that. Families live further away from each other. People experience bereavement. Neighbours are around less. However, that is often a way to criticise modern society. That is not good enough. Not all communities or families are the same, and loneliness touches many people. I do not think that

societal change is enough of an explanation, and anyway, what is important is how we respond to those circumstances. Society has changed and will always change, but with new models of care and an understanding of the huge variations in older people's needs, we can improve expectations and opportunities.

We must be alert to malnutrition among older people. For people who have previously fed a family, perhaps cooking for one or two people can often feel like more bother than it is worth. As Elaine Murray said, recent research from the International Longevity Centre—UK found that around 10 per cent of people over the age of 65 suffer from malnutrition and dehydration. That equates to around 89,000 older people in Scotland. The research found that malnourished people saw their general practitioner twice as often, had three times the number of hospital admissions, and stayed in hospital for three days longer than those who are well nourished.

Older people who have a relationship with organisations such as Food Train, which values food and its importance, can help to address that issue. With six Food Trains across Scotland, its growth is a testament to the effectiveness and quality of the service.

Securing funding is always vital for voluntary sector provision, of course. The motion highlights the support of over £500,000 from the Big Lottery Fund for Food Train in Dumfries and Galloway. Securing such support is a valuable part of its work and is important in enabling it to keep the service affordable.

Stirling Food Train, which started in November 2011, has an on-going programme of fundraising from bag packing to car boot sales, textile recycling and its sponsor-a-box scheme, which encourages individuals or businesses to sponsor a Food Train box for £10 a year. I congratulate all those who contribute to that scheme.

Key to the success of Food Train are the volunteers—Bruce Crawford talked about the volunteers in Stirling—who do the shopping and deliveries in a friendly and caring way. That was why I was particularly pleased to see Stirling Food Train presented with the volunteer friendly award. It was the first voluntary organisation in Stirling to be presented with that award.

Food Train is a great organisation, and I am very happy to recognise its contribution. I hope that it will continue to grow into the future.

14:32

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Like other members, I warmly congratulate Elaine Murray on lodging the motion.

I also thank her for pointing out the typo in it. I hope that I will be forgiven for taking the opportunity to ask those who award the grants: what was wrong with £590,475 or £590,500? I have never understood why a figure such as £590,474 would be appropriate. Perhaps that will feed through somewhere.

The amount of money is significant, and it has been given to a very worthy organisation. I commend Elaine Murray for her speech, and particularly for explaining just why, in this day and age, Food Train is still needed and is so necessary. There is a bit of an irony in the fact that, despite the huge improvements in communication via the information technology that we have all now learned to love, people are still very lonely and isolated in the world that we live in.

As has already been explained, Food Train began in Dumfries in 1995. It has gradually spread across the region—where it has six branches; three are in Elaine Murray's constituency and three are in mine—and across the country. As we have heard, it now operates in six local authority areas.

Ever since I became an MSP, I have tried to use volunteers week as an opportunity to join the Food Train operation and experience it for myself, but I was never accepted for some reason. Therefore, I took matters into my own hands in the summer. I rang it up and said, "Can I come and join you?" and it was very willing to offer me a day out.

I found the day absolutely fascinating. I went with the Newton Stewart Food Train. We started by collecting the deliveries from the shop, visited a couple of houses in Newton Stewart, and then headed into the country. I thought that I knew my constituency quite well, and still believe that I do, but we headed up a road that I did not know even existed—by the state of it, the local authority does not know that, either. When we got to the end of the road, we headed up a track into the middle of a forest, opening two gates on the way. In the end, we came to what one might refer to as a but and ben—a little cottage—in the middle of nowhere. It was in a little glade in the middle of the forest, where lived one of life's great characters.

The lady did not drive, and she had no real way of communicating with the outside world. She was in her own little bit of paradise in the middle of the forest. I do not know how she would have survived without the weekly visit from the Food Train.

Something that really came through to me was the very warm relationship that had grown up between the woman, who was very shy and retiring, and the Food Train volunteers. It was a very warm, friendly relationship, and I suspect that that kind of thing goes some way to explain the very high satisfaction rating that Bruce Crawford

referred to in his speech. There is a clear and very friendly relationship between the service user and the service provider.

Just as the service has expanded across the region, so has the suite of services that Food Train offers, as others have said. As Elaine Murray said, Esther Rantzen got the glory for the Silver Line, but Food Train has been providing its services for ages. Something that specifically interests and impresses me is the development of Food Train friends. Here in the Scottish Parliament earlier this year, Food Train friends received a service to older people award from Age Scotland, principally for the development of the befriending options that it now offers service users. I was quite moved to read the news item on the Dumfries and Galloway Food Train website relating to that award, which states:

“our aim is to reduce loneliness and social isolation for older people across Dumfries and Galloway.”

How can one possibly aim higher than that?

14:36

Aileen McLeod (South Scotland) (SNP): I thank Elaine Murray for securing this debate on a valuable and vital voluntary service, and I welcome the opportunity to speak about a good idea from Dumfries and Galloway that is spreading across Scotland.

On one of my early visits as a newly elected MSP I spent a day volunteering with the Food Train's Stewartry branch in Dumfries and Galloway at the invitation of two good friends who are volunteers with Food Train. My day was organised by Jif Hyde, who co-ordinates Food Train's activities in the west of Dumfries and Galloway. I have to say that, like Alex Fergusson, I had an enlightening experience.

At 20 per cent, the proportion of retired people in the Stewartry is one of the highest for any locality in Scotland. The Stewartry also has the largest population of older people in the region, with 10 per cent over the age of 75, in comparison with a regional average of 8.5 per cent and a Scottish average of 7.1 per cent. The number of lone pensioners in the Stewartry, which is the most sparsely populated area of Dumfries and Galloway, is 25 per cent higher than the national average.

Given that people are living longer, which is a good thing, but not necessarily living well, there is a substantial demand for Food Train services in the Stewartry. In fact, the Stewartry service has slightly more customers than neighbouring Wigtownshire, with its significantly larger population.

Food Train's 63 volunteers in the Stewartry are kept hard at work. From those who deal with orders being sent or phoned in on a Monday to the teams of shoppers who descend on the local Co-op to buy the items and the drivers who make the deliveries every week, as well as the organisers who ensure that everything runs smoothly, a huge amount of time, effort and care is put into the service.

Food Train has attracted loyalty—my friends have been volunteering with Food Train for seven years—as well as good will from other local businesses. For example, a local garage in Kirkcudbright has in the past made available the use of a four-by-four so that deliveries can continue during bad winter weather. It would be fair to say that Food Train has become part of the social landscape.

I want to reflect on why Food Train is important in a wider context. Its services are vital because they will help deliver the national health service's 2020 vision of more people living for longer in their own homes. Making sure that people have enough good-quality food to eat is absolutely fundamental to achieving that aim.

The service also has less-measurable benefits, such as the provision of social interaction: the fact that someone is checking—unobtrusively, of course—that folk are all right and taking action if something is wrong. Many of Food Train's more rural members in the Stewartry live in communities that used to have a shop, a post office and even a bank, most of which no longer exist. Those opportunities for social interaction are gone and with them the opportunities for folk to look out for one another, so the news that the Big Lottery is to fund the roll-out of the Food Train friends befriending project across Dumfries and Galloway is particularly welcome and, I am sure, will be of great benefit.

Food Train is an extremely valuable service, which I have been delighted to experience at first hand. It is hugely beneficial to the members who receive its services and the volunteers who provide them. It is an excellent initiative and a fantastic organisation. I join Elaine Murray and my colleagues across the chamber in wishing Food Train the very best for the future and thanking all the volunteers who deliver such a vital and valuable service.

14:40

The Minister for Housing and Welfare (Margaret Burgess): Like others, I congratulate Elaine Murray on bringing the debate to the chamber and on highlighting Food Train's excellent work in providing shopping, handyperson and befriending services to older people in six

local authority areas across the country. I also thank her for clarifying the amount of lottery grant that it received. The figure that I had was the almost £600,000 one and my last words as I left the office were, "I am not going to argue with the member moving the motion!" I am glad that we have sorted out the matter, and think that the award is well deserved.

The motion highlights the benefits of support services to older people, particularly those who find it difficult to manage some household tasks themselves but who, with a small bit of help, can continue to live independently at home. The fact that Scotland's older population is growing is something to celebrate, because it is proof that we are using advances in medicine and technology to live longer and healthier lives. The Government recognises that organisations such as Food Train are vital in delivering good outcomes for older people and acknowledges their contribution to our wider work on housing and support for older people.

"Age, Home and Community", the Scottish Government's 10-year strategy for housing and support services for Scotland's older people, was published in partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities in December 2011. We were delighted to include the work of Food Train as a case study in that strategy and I was happy to hear of the recent award from the National Lottery's investing in communities fund, as that will allow the organisation to expand its services.

Between 2010 and 2015, the Big Lottery Fund will invest £300 million through its Scottish grant programmes, which equates to an investment of £1 million a week in Scotland's communities. Food Train's award of almost £600,000 will help to support many vulnerable older people in Dumfries and Galloway over the next five years. I was interested in the accounts of Alex Fergusson and Aileen McLeod of their days out with Food Train, which I am sure have given them great insight into its work. Hearing about their experiences has certainly given me an insight.

As we know, current population projections forecast that the number of people aged over 75 will increase by 82 per cent by 2035. Although that presents us with a significant challenge, Scotland has a track record of delivering real benefits to older people, including free personal and nursing care. We have retained those benefits in the face of current spending pressures and plan to continue them.

It is vital to have the right housing and support for older people, as that will help to enhance people's quality of life, help them to feel safe and secure, help to reduce the number of falls and other accidents in the home and subsequent emergency hospital admissions, and allow us to

make better use of our resources. Those will all produce good outcomes for elderly people.

Our national strategy for housing for older people is built around four themes, all of which are clearly shown in Food Train's work: seeing older people as an asset, which is obviously vital to the organisation; choice; planning ahead; and prevention. Given that older people tell us that they want to remain at home for as long as possible, it is right that they, like anyone else, should have such a choice, and preventative services such as those provided by Food Train help older people to maintain their independence, retain control over their lives, stay active and contribute to their community.

A number of speakers have mentioned isolation. Although older people want to stay at home—and although we want the same for them—the one thing none of us wants is for them to feel isolated. Initiatives such as Food Train prevent that because they allow people to get involved; indeed, as others have made clear, the work done by volunteers in that respect must also be praised.

The point is that, in order to meet those needs and expectations, we need a range of different housing and support services. In 2011, we launched the reshaping care for older people programme and the accompanying £300 million change fund, which supported many services that were aimed at improving older people's independence and wellbeing.

A central theme of our work in this area is prevention. Its importance is widely recognised, particularly in the context of public service reform. We cannot pretend that we can always prevent falls or deterioration in health. However, like the services delivered by Food Train, there are many services that can support wellbeing and reduce the likelihood of traumatic and costly hospital and care home admissions.

Good progress has been made in recent years but, as I said, we need to tackle the social isolation of people who live independently at home.

Projects such as Food Train and the new living it up project, an initiative that supports active lifestyles for Scotland's older people, have the ability to really change the lives of our elderly population, by which I mean our parents, grandparents, neighbours and friends, and, as Bruce Crawford said, all of us, one day—some of us sooner than others, and I include myself in that.

Issues affecting older people have rightly gained national prominence in the housing and health and social care agendas. However, we need to increase that momentum. As we implement our strategies and deliver Scotland's vision for older people, joint working across the public,

independent and third sectors will be vital to the achievement of success.

Food Train is making a significant contribution to the delivery of preventative services in a number of areas across the country, and I am delighted to hear about the success of the project and the significant funding award from the Big Lottery Fund. I wish Food Train well as it continues its work.

Taking Children into Care

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-08480, in the name of Stewart Maxwell, on decision making on whether to take children into care.

I call Stewart Maxwell to speak to and move the motion on behalf of the Education and Culture Committee.

14:47

Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP):

Today's debate comes soon after the stage 1 debate on the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill. That discussion demonstrated strong cross-party support for the bill's broad aims of effective early intervention and better support for our children and young people. Several members also stressed their commitment to making the bill even stronger and to ensuring that the legislation delivers real improvements in people's lives.

I want today's debate to build on those sentiments and aspirations, and for us all to consider how we can improve outcomes for looked-after children and young people in particular. To be blunt, that might not be too difficult. Our inquiry confirmed again that many young people who have been in care have worse education outcomes than other children. Many also have poorer health and are more likely to become homeless or to become involved in the criminal justice system.

Although the committee is united in its view that further improvement is necessary, it is encouraging that so much activity is under way to improve outcomes for young people. The Minister for Children and Young People will no doubt wish to highlight the various measures that the Scottish Government is taking, as set out in its response to our report. We welcome such measures, but I will use this debate to push the Government for more detail on some of our recommendations. I also hope that the debate will inspire other members and committees to consider their role in improving outcomes.

However, before I get into the detail of our recommendations, I will provide Parliament with some background on what was a complex and relatively long-running inquiry. Our remit was to consider the decision-making processes that are involved in determining whether a child should be removed from the family home and taken into care. More important is that we also asked whether those processes are delivering the best outcomes for children and their families.

We took an enormous amount of evidence across a wide range of decision-making processes, including social work, the children's hearings system and the child protection system, and I wish to thank everybody who submitted evidence to us. We took evidence about and from children who have been in care, who were looked after at home or who may be at risk of becoming looked after.

Our remit developed throughout as we continually sought to focus on areas where we considered that the need for improvement was strongest. Although we are debating the committee's final report, we also published an interim report to ensure that none of the many concerns that were raised with us were lost.

In order to frame our debate, I make it clear that nobody who contributed told us that the current system of child protection and welfare should be abolished and that a completely new system should be established instead. That said, there were suggestions for improvement across virtually every area that we looked at. To put it starkly, we consider that current decision-making processes are not always delivering the best outcomes for children and their families. That view was heavily shaped by the children and young people to whom we spoke, many of whom had harrowing stories to tell.

In Scotland, we talk a lot about putting children and young people at the centre of decision making. However, according to the young people whom we met, we do not always deliver on that promise, which is why we were determined to place the views and real-life experiences of young people right at the heart of our report. When teenagers who have been in care tell elected politicians that they were left too long at home when they should have been taken into care, there is a considerable responsibility on us all to listen and to respond. The problem that those teenagers described is easy to repeat to Parliament, but it is by no means easy to solve. Their concerns are at the heart of highly contentious issues such as the right of the state to intervene in family life, and how professionals make decisions about them.

Another aim of our inquiry was to encourage a public and media discussion of issues around care. We hear very little about child welfare and protection until something goes wrong, so we wanted to encourage a debate on questions including why some children are taken into care but others are looked after at home, whether general assumptions can ever be made about someone's fitness to be a parent, and whether there is consistent decision-making across the country. Those questions can be hugely controversial, sensitive and difficult, but rational public discussion can make them less so.

I will provide a brief example of how our current approach to children who are at risk of coming into care is of considerable public interest. Without commenting on the merits of that development, I note that earlier decision making is resulting in more children coming into care at a younger age—something that the Scottish Government considers to be a “positive development”. We need to be aware of and to debate such changes, and we need to be alive to how they may impact on society.

Having provided the background, I will highlight some of our main conclusions and recommendations. I will focus on vision, resources, early interventions and the respective roles of the Scottish Government and local government. Above all, I will focus on outcomes.

No one could question the amount of activity that is under way to improve the position of looked-after children. Apart from the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill, the Scottish Government's response mentions a forthcoming care and permanence strategy, efforts to map the processes and bodies that are involved in decision making, a review of statistics on looked-after children, and several other pieces of work. We appreciate the efforts that are being made across the public and third sectors to reform the child protection and welfare systems, and we acknowledge that some improvements will take time to manifest themselves. However, our report highlighted the danger that the sheer volume of on-going work could give the impression that deep-rooted problems are being addressed incrementally. The committee also wanted a reassurance that all the reforms are being co-ordinated, that key findings will be acted upon and that they will result in better outcomes.

In seeking to improve looked-after children's outcomes, we must know their current outcomes and the outcomes that are expected. The minister quite correctly considered that it is too crude to judge success for looked-after children in terms of the number of children who are being taken into care. She called for a

“better, more rounded picture of a looked-after child's well-being”

to gauge whether an intervention has been successful. The Scottish Government's response to our report stated that

“There are some encouraging signs that outcomes are improving gradually across almost all indicators.”

I would welcome further detail from the minister about which outcomes are improving and the ways in which life chances will continue to get better as a result of the current reforms.

Given the complexity of current decision-making processes, the number of bodies involved and the

on-going reforms, our report called on the Scottish Government to establish

“a shared vision of what success would look like for looked after children”,

and to

“ensure that resources and processes are built around that vision”.

The Scottish Government has been commendably clear in stating that the policy aim is early permanence, which it considers will help to reduce the number of children on long-term supervision requirements and increase the number of children who find secure legal permanence. I am sure that the minister will expand on that aim in her speech. When she does so, it would be helpful if she could discuss the bigger-picture outcomes that it will deliver. Will we see improved educational attainment and better health and employment prospects, for example?

I would also welcome an assurance from the minister that the on-going reforms will involve children and young people themselves, because no one can speak with more authority about what improvements are still required.

Not surprisingly, the issue of resources featured in both our interim and final report. For example, we questioned the Scottish Government on evidence that suggested that decisions about removing children from the family home are affected by availability of appropriate placements. Given changing demographic patterns and the strong policy emphasis on the early years and preventative spending, we also asked for projections of the balance of care; that is, the likely number of children who will require to be taken into care.

At a time of budgetary pressures, it is critical that we know the level of spending, what it is delivering, and whether that spending is achieving optimal results. We therefore asked the Scottish Government to calculate the total sum of money that all the relevant bodies spend on protecting children, and whether that spend is providing value for money. The minister made clear the difficulties of disentangling spending in that way, but said that the total possible spend on children's services is about £2.5 billion.

In response to our requests on planning and resources, the Scottish Government emphasised its view that an understanding of spending and need is best determined at local level. That said, the Government set out how it supports local authorities to promote strategic commissioning. The minister may wish to expand on that approach in her speech.

Our report concluded, however, that we still do not know whether public spending on supporting

and protecting children is delivering value for money. However, we consider that existing resources—people, finance and time—could be used more effectively. For example, several witnesses told us that too many people are involved in the decision-making processes. We also recommended that all the on-going reforms should take value for money fully into account, so we would welcome the minister's reassurance on that point.

I will now highlight a specific aspect of the resources discussion. The Scottish Government's focus on early intervention and preventative spending has been widely discussed inside and outside Parliament, and there is broad support for the principles. The Scottish Government considers that although early intervention may lead to an initial rise in children becoming looked after, it can also help to ensure that fewer children are looked after in the longer term. In the light of that trend and the strong emphasis on the financial benefits that are to be derived from early intervention, we asked for an analysis of the likely delivery and financial implications for service providers. I would welcome any further detail that the minister could provide on that.

In recognition of its leadership role, our recommendations were aimed primarily at the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government's response makes clear its role in

“holding partners to account towards ensuring that we deliver excellence”

and in

“helping service providers to set the policy and resource framework”.

We are fully aware that improvements to decision making and outcomes will rely heavily on the input of the people who work at the local level. However, it would be helpful to have clarity around lines of responsibility and accountability, given that the Scottish Government has a leadership role and local authorities have a delivery role. To illustrate that matter, our report raised concerns about social workers; namely, threats to their post-graduate training and councils' ability to retain experienced staff on the front line. We were concerned by the Scottish Association of Social Work's claim that social work training departments have

“disappeared as a result of the cuts that have happened to local government”

and that

“Post-qualification training ... is now disappearing.”—
[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 28 May 2013; c 2524-5.]

Given social workers' fundamental role in bringing about improvements, we asked for

detailed information on the impact of the local government settlement on their post-qualification training and career development. We also asked the Government to confirm the action it would take should the evidence substantiate the claims that have been made. We note the Scottish Government's view that matters of social work delivery, training and support are for local authorities; however, it would be helpful if the minister could respond to those claims and that recommendation in her speech.

Children who have been in care do not simply need to do better at school. They need to enjoy better health, they need more stable and better quality accommodation, and they need to be far less likely to become involved in the criminal justice system. Those are hugely challenging problems, and it is to the credit of Parliament and our wider society that so many people are investing time and effort in trying to do better by some of our most disadvantaged fellow citizens.

Our inquiry was immensely challenging and, at times, very emotional; it also left the committee with somewhat mixed feelings. We welcome the widespread efforts across government, the public and third sectors to improve decision-making processes and outcomes for children and young people, but the rate of improvement is still too slow, considering the amount of effort and resources that have been committed over a long period.

As we concluded in our report, too many children have been left for too long in unsuitable home environments, and too few children move quickly enough into stable loving homes and go on to enjoy the same life chances as other children. The Education and Culture Committee will maintain its commitment to those children and young people. We will get updates from the Scottish Government on the outcomes that all the activity that is described in our report is helping to deliver. When we do so, we will speak again to those who are most directly affected by the reforms: the children and young people themselves.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Education and Culture Committee's 10th Report, 2013 (Session 4): *Report on decision making on whether to take children into care* (SP Paper 386).

15:00

The Minister for Children and Young People (Aileen Campbell): I welcome this afternoon's debate, which the Education and Culture Committee has brought to the chamber following its recent inquiry. I congratulate the committee on its work; I know that we all share a passion for

doing the very best that we can for the young people whom we are tasked with looking after.

I will touch on the themes in the committee's report and comment on the action that we are taking. The Scottish Government believes that every child has the right to expect the very best start in life, the right to be safe, happy and nurtured in their own family, and the right to be in a loving and stable home with parents who have ambition and aspirations for their child—to have all the things that any parent would seek to provide for their child. Unfortunately, however, there will always be children whose wellbeing depends on alternative care, and for those children we need to make early and effective decisions to promote stability. We need to plan for and make decisions about their long-term futures as soon as they come into the looked-after system.

The Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill, among other things, aims to make public services more responsive to needs and more sensitive to working with families in order that they better support our most vulnerable children and young people. The committee's work is useful and timely because it sets the scene on looked-after children ahead of stage 2 of the bill.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): One of the ways to help young children in particular is childcare. Today, we have learned that the Scottish Government will receive £300 million in consequential from the United Kingdom Government. Can the minister commit to putting some of that money into childcare for some of the youngest and most vulnerable children?

Aileen Campbell: We have made clear within our bill our commitment to supporting children in their earliest years and we have set out our aspiration with the 600 hours of childcare for looked-after two-year-olds. We have also clearly set out our wider aspirations for childcare, which Neil Findlay can read in the white paper, if he would like to read it.

The importance of improving—

Neil Findlay: Will the minister take an intervention?

Aileen Campbell: Neil Findlay needs to consider his tone during this debate, which is about trying to work constructively together on this important issue.

Improvement of corporate parenting is a crucial element of the bill because it encompasses all areas of our work, demanding that we get things right for those who are in our care. Our putting getting it right for every child on a statutory footing will provide a mechanism for early and effective intervention. GIRFEC's principles underpin everything that we do and they place children at

the heart of the design and delivery of services, aid improvement in permanence planning and delivery and, importantly, value the voice of the child.

There are encouraging signs that outcomes are improving gradually across almost all indicators. The main findings in the most recent publication on Scotland's looked-after children show that looked-after young people who leave school are increasingly entering positive destinations. Some 75 per cent of looked-after young people who left school during 2011-12 were in a positive destination three months after they left school. The children's social work statistics show that the rate of increase in the total number of looked-after children continues to slow, but that earlier and more frequent interventions can result in more children coming into care and, in particular, to their becoming looked after at home. The challenges around improving outcomes for that group are well known. Therefore, the partner policy aim here is early permanence.

Both early intervention and early permanence are needed if we are to meet our aims of reducing the number of children on long-term supervision requirements and increasing the numbers who find secure legal permanence. A focus on those two areas in the years ahead will enable us to achieve an effective, affordable and swift system of intervention and substitute care that wraps around the child. The benefits of investing in early intervention are fully realised when quality services are provided. We know all about the positive societal, emotional, educational and health impacts of early intervention, and there is economic evidence that every £1 that is invested in cause can save £9 in cure.

We are seeing a trend of children becoming looked after younger, which shows that social workers are acting more quickly to assess and intervene. We believe that social workers are right to take early decisions about children becoming looked after. We know from our work with the sector, including through the practice exchange workshops that the centre for excellence for looked-after children in Scotland has held, that social workers are feeling increasingly confident about using relevant evidence from previous interventions with families to hasten timescales for subsequent children. We support that approach; we want families to thrive, not just survive.

We are also making progress on permanence, with the number of children who are adopted from care increasing and the number of permanence orders rising year on year since their introduction.

However, too many children still remain on supervision for far too long, with all the uncertainty and distress that go with that. To reflect our commitment to permanence, we will in the coming

months publish a care and permanence strategy that will set out the strategic framework for our work. It will recognise that far-reaching improvements in delivering early permanence for children can be made only by taking a whole-system approach that involves all those who contribute to the permanence process, including social work, wider community planning partnerships, children's hearings and the courts. It will also include the voice of the child.

In addition, we will launch a permanence and care excellence—PACE—programme, which will work in two geographical areas and will use improvement science to develop improvement projects that look at all aspects of a child's journey to permanence. It will focus on the child's experience and will bring together local authorities, children's hearings and the courts to identify barriers and delays, and to develop and test solutions. Those programmes will provide a powerful opportunity to deliver real improvement on the ground. By bringing the relevant partners together, the projects will address the interactions between systems in delivering permanence and will enable us to share learning across Scotland.

I turn my focus to the workforce. The Scottish Government's approach to improving the quality of children's social services centres on the needs of the child and the support that is given to professionals to make good judgments, and on continuously learning from what works. The Scottish Government fully realises the importance of developing a competent, confident and valued workforce, as is evidenced through the work of the Scottish Social Services Council and the investment that we make in other organisations, such as the Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services and CELCIS.

The SSSC provides various means of support to the sector and is, in partnership with a range of stakeholders, taking forward two further strands of activity to progress and support workforce development. That work will see the development of a national learning strategy for all practitioners, which will provide a framework for learning at qualifying and post-qualifying levels, and a career development pathway to support learning and skills throughout a career. In addition, a review will be carried out of the social work degree to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of students and employers now and in the future.

Furthermore, along with the chief social work adviser, I have established a social work strategic forum, which brings together partners from academia, the unions, the regulators and the Association of Directors of Social Work. It will allow us to move the sector forward strategically, and its work will include workforce support and

continued engagement with front-line practitioners, among other things.

The inquiry also highlighted the need for more detailed information to be collected in order to provide a fuller picture of looked-after children's outcomes, and to allow judgments to be made on whether interventions have been successful. The Scottish Government is currently working to review CLAS—children looked after statistics—data so that we can ensure that the data that we collect can be analysed to inform practitioners and policy making. The review is to be completed by the end of the year and should contribute to our understanding of service delivery and help us to articulate and anticipate financial implications for service providers.

The committee's attention and report have been incredibly useful in ensuring that we do not take the foot off the gas when it comes to ensuring the very best for our looked-after children and young people. The committee has indicated—as the convener has done—that the systems and policies that we have should not be abolished. However, I believe that we must allow our approaches time to gain ground and to achieve the desired culture change and associated improvements. The challenge is about mobilising our combined efforts and resources more effectively, and directing more of them at families earlier to make it easier for practitioners to deliver involved family support.

GIRFEC is the policy and strategic framework that overlays our approach to all children who are in need or at risk. A range of interactions take place between concerned agencies, but what should unite them is the fundamental belief that every child has the right to expect the best start in life.

This is a difficult and complex subject area, but I do not doubt the passion and commitment of everyone in the chamber and across the relevant sectors to do our utmost to inculcate change and demand improvement. The issue is too important to get wrong, and we cannot be content with mediocrity. I look forward to the debate and to continuing to work with the committee on the journey to do our very best for our looked-after children.

15:09

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

As I am the newest member of the Education and Culture Committee, some might say that I had the luxury of considering the final report without having to undertake the hours of work that were required to pull together such a comprehensive review of the current systems and decision-making processes for determining whether to take a child into care. However, after reading the report and

the accompanying documents, I think that I missed out on some useful evidence sessions at previous committee meetings. I was particularly pleased that the committee took the time to meet children and young people who are in the care system, to ensure that their voices were heard and that their experiences contributed to the report's development.

The committee's evidence gathering by listening to those young people is the most crucial point and it underpins the theme of hearing all voices in the decision-making processes. Sadly, it is too easy for many young people who are in care to become statistics and to be written off ahead of their time.

When we talk about how we support the most vulnerable young people in our society, we should think about our family, our friends and our loved ones. Looked-after children deserve no less than everything that we would do for our own families without a second thought. Looked-after children deserve no less commitment, no less patience and no less presence of a caring adult in their lives. Perhaps we as a society need to examine our attitude to looked-after children and the system that supports them and their families. Why is care perceived as a last resort or a response to family failure? I prefer to think of it as a declaration by society that every child matters and deserves the best. The system must deliver that.

A child being taken into care does not have to be a last resort. There should of course be concentrated support for families to improve the underlying issues but, as the committee's convener highlighted, the move towards early interventions to take children into care sooner can—perhaps counterintuitively—be positive if it ensures that the decision leads to more permanence and stability in the child's life and better outcomes in the form of improved life chances. Sadly, that is still not the case in many circumstances, but it is good that those areas for improvement have been highlighted by the committee's work during the inquiry. I hope that we will see action on them.

Because of that room for improvement, I am pleased by the increasing emphasis on the need for permanence in a child's life. Much of the evidence that the committee considered highlighted that, for too many children in care, the difficulties and complexities of decision making when considering outcomes can upset the stability in a child's life not just at the start of their childhood but as they move into adulthood.

There is no arbitrary cut-off point in a loved one's life when we stop caring about them or when they stop needing support. As the mother of two grown-up sons in their 30s, I know that only too well. To describe a parent's relationship with their

children in the drily technical language of the sector, it is about establishing a long-term framework of care and love. We support the development of that long-term framework when we want improvements to be made to the decision-making processes for taking children into care.

The Scottish Government has been keen to highlight how the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill goes some way towards meeting the challenges that are identified in the committee's report. One of the measures in the bill that the Labour Party will support is the increase in the eligible age for aftercare for young people who have left care from 21 to 26. The permanence that we seek for children in care does not just involve ensuring that they have a roof over their heads. Stability does not mean just a house; it means having a home and friends and feeling valued, not just being accommodated.

One of the challenges of delivering public services is that the system that is in place in Scotland is a network of processes and multi-agency approaches that aims to develop a safety net that will catch and seek to protect the most vulnerable children in Scotland. It is vital that that succeeds, and we cannot afford for any child to slip through the gaps in our decision-making processes. We have guidelines for those vital processes, but a range of organisations expressed concern that the guidelines are still applied inconsistently across the country. Barnardo's Scotland highlighted that each local authority has its own assessment process for handling risk assessment on taking children into care, which impacts on the potential outcomes for children according to where they live.

The report recognises the impact of GIRFEC and other child protection measures, but it acknowledges that current decision-making processes are not always delivering the best outcomes for children. We do not want to scrap the system and start again, but we need to make improvements.

Many of the points that are raised in the report, particularly about looked-after children, concern themes that the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill covers. We will work with Aberlour Child Care Trust, Barnardo's and Who Cares? Scotland to lodge a number of stage 2 amendments to improve the outcomes for looked-after children. However, we know that legislation alone is not enough and that we need a cultural shift in attitudes towards looked-after children. I look forward to working with colleagues to achieve that.

15:15

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I put on record apologies from my colleague Mary Scanlon, who was due to participate in the debate. As a result of the travel situation she has had to head back to the Highlands for a constituency event rather earlier than she was anticipating, so I pass on her apologies to the Presiding Officer and to members in the chamber.

The extent of the challenge that faces the Parliament—and most especially the Education and Culture Committee—has never really been in doubt. In the past few years, during the most recent inquiry and the previous one, it has been patently clear that the Scottish care system is letting down far too many young people. In preparing the report we heard time and again from charities and third sector organisations and, most important, from young people in the care system, that most—though by no means all—of the concern centres on the decision-making process.

Before I turn to the report and to the Government's response, I acknowledge the very real frustration, which stretches well beyond Holyrood, at the length of time that it is taking to meaningfully address the issue of looked-after children. All parties in the chamber have shared a common commitment to making the Scottish care system as effective as possible, and yet for all the goodwill and endeavour we seem to find ourselves back at first principles time and again. We have been very good at the diagnostic process, but much less good at finding a cure.

For instance, when the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration published its 2011 report there was real hope that progress would follow very soon after. However, two-and-a-half years on, we are still very much stuck with the same problems. Indeed, the minister indicated in her response to the committee's report that the Scottish Government is aware of that situation and intends to review the care and permanence plan, with a revised strategy due early in the new year, which is good to hear. We all recognise the huge sensitivities that are involved in the issue, but we need to ensure that changes are well-balanced and properly implemented. Likewise, I think that we all feel a little guilty that the pace of reform has been too slow.

During our deliberations we have all been considering why we have made so little progress, given the extent of the good will that I mentioned. There has been considerable cross-party support, and the issue has been placed further up the political agenda, for which I give the Scottish Government credit.

Have we been missing some key points, or failing to listen to the right people? Perhaps the

most uncomfortable question of all is whether we are relatively powerless when it comes to dealing with some situations. There might be a little bit of that—certainly that is what we were bluntly told by two of the witness panels—but the lack of progress is also due to the weaknesses inherent in some of the data that has been essential in uncovering the problems in the decision-making process. It has also resulted from poor transparency, although that was not intentional.

That said, there is no weakness or lack of transparency when it comes to the blunt statistics that define the problem. Some of them are truly shocking. Although 56 per cent of school leavers overall gain five or more qualifications, only 4.7 per cent of children who are looked after away from home and 0.5 per cent of children who are looked after at home can expect the same degree of attainment. That is not a small disparity but a gaping chasm that reflects very poorly on us all.

Moreover, while 87.5 per cent of school leavers are engaged in work, education or training, only half of those who are looked after at home are doing the same. We are really not doing them any justice whatsoever by not enabling them to acquire the relevant skills to participate in a modern workforce, and that has lifelong implications.

During our most recent inquiry we heard troubling evidence from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children that, in Glasgow, two thirds of children who have left care to return home end up back in the system within a year. Oscillating between pillar and post, those youngsters are at serious risk of being left behind completely.

We have been good at the diagnosis, but what is the cure? There is no doubt that much of it will have to focus on the decision-making process, because it is clear that, as many of the witnesses told us, too many barriers remain in the way of good decision making. Those barriers mean that too many children are being left in unsuitable home environments. Decision making is inconsistent and variable across the country; the system does not use resources sufficiently well; and some groups find it far too difficult to have the courage of their convictions and remove a child—I can well understand why.

In response, perhaps the key recommendation is on early permanence: the idea that, by intervening earlier, children are removed from an unstable home environment and given the foundation that they need to grow and prosper. A consensus is emerging that, together, early intervention and early permanence can deliver much better outcomes for children, families and communities. The whole package, if I can call it that, is important.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): The member will recall the debate that we had in the committee about the fact that early intervention does not relate simply to the early years. Does she share the concern that was expressed that, with older children and younger young people, there is sometimes a temptation to put in place temporary measures, as that is a less costly way of dealing with the issues that they face?

Liz Smith: I absolutely share that concern—I do not think that we could doubt the evidence that was given to the committee on that point. However, we have had other careful evidence that, at the earliest stages, where the first signs of difficulties often arise, we have to do much more. We need a combination of early intervention and early permanence, as the minister has flagged up.

The Scottish Conservatives are largely supportive of the measures that the Scottish Government is taking. Later, in my closing remarks, I will mention a few issues on which we will request more detail from the Scottish Government. Above all, we must all ask ourselves why we are debating again many issues that we debated not that long ago and that we have not managed to resolve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now turn to the open debate. At this stage, I can offer speeches of around six minutes, with time for interventions.

15:22

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): The debate comes on the back of the Education and Culture Committee's extensive inquiry into decision making on whether to take young children into care. As the convener, Stewart Maxwell, rightly said, it is powerful when a young person in his 20s tells the committee as a witness that he and his brother should have been taken into care a lot sooner. As I have said before and I will say again, that brings a reality to the debate and the issues that we are discussing.

Many children's charities engaged in the process and they mentioned some of the difficulties. One of those, which has been mentioned by Jayne Baxter and other members, is to do with consistency and the fact that local authorities have different guidelines on how to proceed. For example, Barnardo's Scotland said that it is

"concerned that there is not always consistency in the focus given to the rights of the child."

It continued:

"We have witnessed some local authorities becoming too optimistic about the outcomes of maintaining the child in the family setting, at the expense of the needs of the child."

That point also came across strongly when we spoke to young people. Like that young man I mentioned, when they explained their experience, they agreed that, at the time they probably wanted to stay with their family but, in retrospect, they saw that being taken into care made a difference to their life. I am not saying that that applies to every child, but the Scottish Government's ideal of early intervention and a preventative approach is the way forward.

We have to consider some of the things that young people told the committee. A perfect example was another person in his mid-20s who also had a younger brother, who was a teenager. When we saw the two of them, the older brother felt guilty about the fact that he had not been there to support and look after his family and deal with the issues.

The younger brother had been taken into care earlier and he was, to use a local parochialism, quite gallus about the whole situation. That was a perfect example of how to make things work, given the difference between the two brothers. The younger sibling dealt with the situation a lot better because he was taken into care a lot quicker; the older sibling felt guilty and took it upon himself to deal with the situation.

I welcome the minister's commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people. The GIRFEC principles in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill can make a difference. If we use those principles and they are legislated for at local authority level, that might ensure that in future young men like the older brother we met do not feel the way that he did. I am glad that he was able to open up to us, because it made it obvious to us how he felt and what a difference his situation had made to his life.

Another issue that came up was the fact that social work professionals are often promoted and taken away from the front line or leave to go into other roles with children's charities or other projects. They are still doing good work, but their expertise is taken away from the front-line jobs that we really need people of their experience to do. The Scottish Government and local authorities have to work together to ensure that we retain such staff, because we cannot afford to lose that expertise.

In my days in the motor industry we used to say, "You never promote your best salesman, or salesperson; you always ensure that they are out there doing the job." It should be almost the same in social work. We must have a way to ensure that good social workers stay at the front line in the profession and continue to do good work. We must give them the support that they need as well.

I mentioned early intervention and prevention. For me, the important aspect of the bill is that there is scope for early intervention and prevention. I said last week that I had been at the Polmont young offenders institution to find out about the Barnardo's Scotland outside in project, which has made a big difference to the young people there. Many of them were there because they had come from broken homes, were in care and a violent situation had inevitably arisen at some point. When we started talking about things and discussing their issues, they thought that what is in the bill could have made a difference, not to every child, but to some of them. That is the way to go, because if we are to get it right for every child in Scotland and ensure that Scotland is the best place in the world to grow up, we have to make sure that everyone gets an opportunity, regardless of their background.

I agree with Jayne Baxter that there has to be a change of national attitude when it comes to looked-after children. We have to get away from the idea that they are other people's problems. It is almost like the corporate parenting thing again; we are the ones who have to take on the responsibility.

We must also think differently. The Government needs to work in partnership with local authorities and find solutions to the problems and challenges that we face.

I welcome a lot of the work that we have done. One of the things that I really liked about the inquiry was meeting the young people who have gone through the system; listening to their evidence made it real. I hope that, having listened to it, we will move forward and make things better for children in Scotland.

15:29

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I thank the committee for taking on this challenging and contentious subject and for producing such a thoughtful and, I hope, helpful report.

Given the broad consensus across the Parliament and across all sectors about the importance of early intervention generally in improving prospects for our children, I was struck by the lack of agreement on the question of when to take a child into care.

There was one particularly insightful comment in the report from Professor Eileen Munro that sums up the dilemma that faces us:

"Society varies in the message that it sends. There are times when it says that a child should never be left in any danger, but it gets into a paddy when a lot of children are taken away. It is always a pendulum that we are trying not to let swing too far in either direction."

I certainly do not want the pendulum to swing wildly, but we should tip it in the right direction. We still need to be more timeous in interventions, not so much because it will prevent cases of abuse—although we always have to be watchful for that kind of deliberate and wicked cruelty—but to prevent the grinding and depressing prolonged neglect and the damage that it causes that are so much more common.

I will not pretend to bring any sort of expertise to this issue when the committee has clearly benefited from the evidence of so many caring and experienced professionals. However, almost all of the cases that have come to my attention—directly or indirectly, from constituents or other sources—and left me worried have pointed to the need for speedier decision making.

In its interim report, the committee asked:

“Are too many children left too long with parents who neglect or emotionally abuse them?”

The simple answer to that is yes. As the committee has made clear, however, it is not so simple to decide what we can do about it.

For example, it is encouraging to read about the strong public policy focus on achieving permanence for children more quickly. It is not so encouraging to read that the level of early intervention is more likely to reflect the resources that are available to front-line social workers than variation in need or the demand for families.

Liam McArthur: One of the other things that we heard about early intervention is that it is not just about intervening with a view to taking a child away; it is about arriving at a decision that is in the best interests of the child. That can be about maintaining the child in the family home. We also heard that, at that point, support needs to be put in place to ensure that the home environment is as stable and supportive as it can be. Too often, resources are withdrawn at that stage rather than added to.

Ken Macintosh: I entirely agree with Mr McArthur. Although I was highlighting acute need, I will return to that point and the need for quick support, early intervention and speedier decision making in making that support available to families.

I return to the issue of resources and the way in which they shape our actions. It troubles me to see how often the decisions about children who might be in need of care reflect the facilities or options that are open to the public authorities rather than the needs of the children themselves. I would welcome the minister's comments on the extent to which that is still happening. For example, public authorities that have access to residential care homes seem to be more likely to

place children in residential care than those who do not have that option on their doorstep.

Many of us will have seen the adverts, which seem to have been more frequent in recent weeks and months, asking for foster and adoptive families to come forward. Although on the one hand that might highlight a shortage of such families, I take the emphasis on recruitment as a positive sign. Again, however, it is rather worrying to hear about the experiences of families, particularly those who are looking to adopt.

Those of us who have dealt with fostering or adoption cases will know that, in the majority of cases, the children who are up for adoption have a range of needs and challenges. Even when children as young as two or three are taken into care, the damage that has been caused by poor attachment in infancy can often play out in behaviours in the child's teens or later years. There is now so much evidence that reveals the importance of the first few months, let alone the first few years, of a child's life, but our systems for helping families who are in need seem to be incredibly slow and cumbersome.

I have previously cited examples in my own constituency, in which the authorities have indicated their intention to move a child from his or her parent and have lined up an adoptive family, and the whole process has taken not months but years. In that time, what damage has been done? Removing a child from his or her family is not something to be done in haste, but neither does it help anyone to drag out these decisions.

What can we do? I think that we all recognise how difficult it is to know exactly when and how far to intervene. We do not want to design policy around the worst examples, but surely we can agree that quicker decision making is more likely to produce more effective results. Families need to be more actively supported. People need to be offered help to become good parents, and not just inspected every now and then to see whether things are all right. It is all too easy for the fly and the sly to deceive the health visitor or the social worker. Those families are rarely evil; they are just incapable. When it is possible, we need to help them to look after their own children properly.

Putting the child at the centre of our thinking is what GIRFEC is all about and it is a good approach. I emphasise that there are aspects of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill that are to be warmly welcomed, and I echo the point highlighted by Jayne Baxter earlier about the extension to young adults leaving care of the right to ask for support. However, I have already expressed my doubts about the named person approach taken in the bill, which could divert resources away from where they are most needed. I am not convinced that legislation by

itself will do much good if we strip local authorities of the resources needed to provide the support.

Is there not an irony about, or at least a contrast between, our shared agreement across the Parliament on the committee's report and the simultaneous knowledge that social workers are so hard pressed and so stressed with their case load that they scarcely have time to make the visits or have the room to make the balanced judgments that we all seek?

We should acknowledge that those working in child protection get mixed messages. The reaction to shocking cases of child abuse is often to point the finger of blame at social workers, and then to respond with many well-intentioned recommendations, but the net effect is sometimes to encourage those working in the sector to become ever more risk averse. They become more aware of the need to protect themselves from prosecution, rather than concentrating solely on protecting children from harm.

There was a good and thought-provoking article in *The Scotsman* recently by Stuart Waiton, who argued that the bureaucratisation of adult-child relationships has undermined our ability to exercise personal judgment. I believe that the answer lies not in ever more formal procedures or processes, whether clumsy or streamlined, but in creating an atmosphere where good judgment is at the centre of decision making, where social workers and other carers are encouraged to step in to support, not to condemn, and where good examples are heralded and lauded rather than bad examples simply being pilloried.

We know that we can never get it absolutely right and that there will always be examples that shame us all for their human cruelty, but if the report can tip the balance towards helping children with earlier and quicker intervention to help parents and, where necessary, to remove children, it will have been worth while.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): As members will be aware, there is quite a bit of time in hand, which will allow for interventions and even the development of themes and ideas. I now call Clare Adamson. You may have a generous six minutes.

15:37

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Presiding Officer, thank you for that challenge at the start of my speech.

I begin by associating myself with Stewart Maxwell's comments about the witnesses and contributors who have worked with the committee during the past few months in coming to the conclusions in the report. I listened to Liz Smith

talking about her frustration in dealing with this area, but I am also aware that we have done a considerable amount of work across the Parliament on the issues. In December last year, we had a debate in the chamber on permanence and adoption, and at that time Gil Paterson said that it was one of the debates that shows the Parliament in its best light. The report that we are discussing today also has the potential to meet that standard.

Liz Smith: Clare Adamson has pointed to the frustration that I feel, and I do not deny that we have come some way towards addressing the problem. However, one of the most stark pieces of evidence provided to us was when somebody told us in fairly blunt terms that we were right back where we had been several years ago. For those who were around the previous time, the frustration arises from the fact that the progress that we have made is rather piecemeal and is not going fast enough to address the real problems that Ken Macintosh has just been speaking about, and that we do not have the courage of our convictions in some circumstances. Does she acknowledge that that is part of the frustration?

Clare Adamson: I absolutely agree, and I have had the same experience when listening to such comments. However, we must recognise that the committee's initial inquiry identified that we were letting down our looked-after children. The second inquiry that we have undertaken in that area is a new piece of work, and perhaps enough prominence has not been given in Parliament to some of the issues and problems that existed before.

I would like to thank Jayne Baxter, a new member of the committee, and to recognise the hard work of colleagues on her own benches and across the Parliament in bringing together the report that we are discussing and that I am so pleased to be able to speak about this afternoon.

When we discussed permanence last year, my colleague Willie Coffey spoke about the scale of the problem. It is worth repeating some of the facts that he mentioned. He said that

"there are 16,000 children who are being looked after by Scotland's local authorities, and that there are possibly up to another 15,000 being cared for by relatives under informal arrangements."—[*Official Report*, 6 November 2012; c 13073.]

It is vital for families that the Scottish Government works with local authorities and other partner organisations in this area.

In December last year, I highlighted a report from Who Cares? Scotland, which has contributed a great deal to the committee report that is before Parliament today, both in its support of young

people who wanted to give evidence to the committee and in its briefings.

In April last year, *Who Cares?* Scotland conducted a survey in which it spoke to 116 young people about their experience as care leavers in the system. One young woman said:

"It was all too quick and I never got the time to pack my things. I would have liked more time to prepare and also to be told that going into care was an option as it was all a shock to me when it happened. I never got to say goodbye to my friends either which I didn't like."

That quote sums up a lot of the concerns that were raised by many young people who we spoke to in the course of our deliberations.

I want to talk briefly to the four themes in the report. On the early intervention theme, we have made quite a bit of progress with the roll-out of GIRFEC across Scotland, which will be put into statute in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill. That goes some way to improving what we mean by early intervention.

Ken Macintosh talked about the challenges for social work. Under theme 2, on assessments, we must not underestimate the huge amount of pressure to get it right for social workers to ensure that assessments are at a standard that is acceptable to decision makers about young people. Again, GIRFEC has gone some way to improve interagency and interdepartmental co-operation and to improve confidence that assessments meet requirements.

The report also asks the Government to consider the concerns that have been raised and the commitment to GIRFEC that a clear timescale should be given that will demonstrate that integration is working and that we have improved confidence in the decision-making process and assessments. We must not underestimate the importance of the establishment of CELCIS in contributing to the improved confidence in assessments. CELCIS was set up with the aim to

"promote effective professional engagement with families, promote the planning for and the management of high quality assessments, reduce unnecessary delays and drift in permanence planning and promote a new 'whole systems' approach to permanence planning."

Again in 2012, the early years collaborative, which is looking at evidence-based decision making, was created. Together, the two have the potential to do transformational work in this area. The challenge for the Government and local authorities is to ensure that the sharing of the findings, the adoption of best practice and the research from CELCIS and the early years collaborative can be used to maximum effect across Scotland.

Mr Macintosh has already mentioned the importance of training and assessment in these

areas. We must not underestimate the concerns that social workers have raised about the demographic challenges in their profession and the claim that post-qualification training and career development have disappeared. In paragraph 63, the report asks the Government to take seriously the concerns raised in that area.

The quote from a young person that I used earlier says all that we need to know about hearing all the voices in the decision-making process. That is theme 4 in the report. A lot of good work is going on out there and a lot of progress is being made. I am really glad that this report will play a small part in improving the lives of our looked-after children.

15:44

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): The issue of looked-after children and young people and how we improve the life experiences and outcomes for that group has dominated the work of the Education and Culture Committee in this parliamentary session. None of the committee members, either past or present, would make any apology for that focus or for the time that we have committed to getting into the detail of the issues involved. The issues are complex, and that is reflected in the latest report. The area does not lend itself to neat, far less to easy, solutions.

I add my thanks to all those who gave evidence and helped in the development of the committee report, and the report that preceded it on improving the outcomes for looked-after children. One inquiry flowed naturally from the other, although even now I have the sense that we have scarcely done justice to many of the issues. As the convener of the committee indicated, it is inevitable that we—and certainly successor committees—will return to the subject in the future.

As the convener explained, the approach that was taken to the report was rather different from before, with interim findings and a parliamentary debate as well as a special hearing that involved the wide range of stakeholders whose work in the field on a daily basis deserves our respect and gratitude.

Above all, we were committed to hearing the voices of children and young people with direct experience of the care system. Their testimony was particularly powerful and at times highly creative. We owe a special debt to *Who Cares?* Scotland for its help throughout the inquiry, not least in the session with those with direct experience.

As well as being moved by the piece of theatre that the young people performed, I was struck by what they had to say. They wanted to feel involved in decisions that profoundly affect their lives; they

wanted a sense of belonging and not to be shunted from pillar to post; and, most of all, they wanted a strong, stable, supportive and loving environment in which to be brought up.

As Jayne Baxter rightly said, those are all things that we would expect for our own children and things that we should aspire to deliver for those for whom we have responsibility as corporate parents. The committee's report is helpful in that regard, and the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill, which the committee is currently considering, has the potential to deliver real improvements for those who are in care and those who are leaving care.

I will turn to those people shortly, but I first want to reflect briefly on the Government's response to the committee's report. I confess that, in places, the response left me a little frustrated. It is, of course, generally very positive, and I absolutely agree with the minister's view that the focus must be on early intervention, particularly in the early years, and also on early permanence. Nevertheless, I felt too often that the message was either "We're doing this already" or "This is nothing to do with us." That may be unfair and it may reflect the iterative nature of two committee inquiries in which we have been in almost constant dialogue with the Scottish Government, but in some places the response still felt a bit unsatisfactory.

For example, the minister's letter to the convener starts by declaring that there are

"encouraging signs that outcomes are improving gradually across almost all indicators".

I agree that the picture is not universally bleak, but that statement seems unduly upbeat. For example, the committee found little evidence that outcomes for those who are looked after at home are anything other than shockingly poor, as the convener suggested, in respect of education, health, homelessness or involvement in the criminal justice system.

Later in the response, the minister talks of her

"programme of work to encourage strategic commissioning".

That is very welcome, but again on the evidence that we received from those who are involved in the third sector, that is a way off happening in almost all parts of the country.

Likewise, the committee's concerns about workforce training and retention in social work appear to have been rather brushed aside. I am not suggesting that no action has been taken by the minister in conjunction with local authorities—far from it—or that there are any easy answers, but we heard firm evidence that retaining staff in what can often be highly stressful roles in children

and families social work is a problem in many areas.

I think that George Adam indicated that we heard that retaining experienced social workers on the front line was a particular challenge. Obviously, that is a concern, as providing high-quality assessment of difficult cases perhaps depends more on experience than training.

That said, I recognise the steps that the Government has taken and is taking. Indeed, I welcome the establishment of the permanence leaders group. I also acknowledge the opportunity that the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill presents to make further progress, for which there is solid cross-party commitment.

Where can that progress be made? According to Barnardo's, improving outcomes requires improvement in the consistency, speed and timeliness of decision making, and an absolute focus on securing permanency once a decision is made to take a child into care. That was entirely borne out by our inquiry.

On consistency, Barnardo's has highlighted the different risk assessment processes that are used by authorities in Scotland and that uncertainty about what evidence needs to be gathered leads to needless delays. As such, a common framework across the country is necessary.

Speed of decision making is also crucial, notwithstanding that such decisions are probably the most difficult that an authority has to make. As the minister acknowledges, the issue is about not just speed but achieving permanency quickly. Barnardo's proposes a six-month timeframe for conducting a parental assessment and highlights—as Ken Macintosh did—the need for much stronger support for parents when a decision is taken to leave a child in or return it to the family home. Often the reverse happens, which is a complaint that we hear particularly from parents of children with disabilities or additional support needs, although I hope that proposals in the bill for a named person and a single child's plan will help in that respect.

Early decision making is also vital. As Stewart Maxwell said, the complaint from many of the young people that we spoke to was that they were left in a poor home environment for too long. The earlier that decisions are made—at whatever age—the better the outcomes for the child or young person.

Stewart Maxwell: I have listened to Liam McArthur's speech very carefully and I agree with what he says. Does he share my concern about the decision-making process that leads to one child being removed while a younger sibling is left in a home, where, in effect, both suffer the same abuse? We heard a lot of evidence about such

situations and it is something that has left a permanent memory in my brain. We are leaving children in the home when evidence of abuse has been proved.

Liam McArthur: The committee convener is absolutely right on that point. It was one of the most striking aspects of the evidence that we received. Such situations almost seem to be an exercise in going back to first principles, rather than basing assessments on existing risks that seemed to be well known and understood.

As I said earlier, the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill can help address a number of the issues that the committee's report flagged up. In addition, I welcome moves to improve aftercare for those who leave the care system, though the eligibility criteria must be extended and a greater consistency in what is provided is also required. I will lodge amendments at stage 2 to that effect.

Moreover, following the UK Government's announcement yesterday that children in care in England will have a legal right to stay with their foster families until their 21st birthday, I would welcome comments from the minister on what steps might be taken here in Scotland.

I am grateful to all those who helped in the production of the report and I hope—not least through the bill that is now before the committee—that we can make further inroads into improving the life chances of those who go through the care system in this country.

In that respect, I hope that, when ministers quite legitimately defend their record, they will guard against any temptation to downplay the serious gaps that still exist, the slow pace of improvement or the distance that we still need to travel to achieve our shared ambition to make sure that, for our looked-after children and young people, Scotland really is the best place in the world to grow up.

15:52

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): The inquiry has in some respects been difficult for the Education and Culture Committee. I for one hoped that, somewhere among the wealth of information and evidence provided, a magic bullet would be found that would point to a clear and simple solution, but alas that was not the case. What is clear is that successive Governments have rightly placed a high priority on children in care. Considerable resources have been channelled into this area and a multitude of groups and organisations have come into being over the years, with the laudable aim of providing much needed support, yet the fact is that improvement has been glacial.

I believe that the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill will make real progress and create a more consistent approach. It should help to create the environment in which solutions can flourish. It helps point the way in a more cohesive and focused manner. It is not a magic bullet, but it moves us in the right direction. At the end of the day, solutions still lie with people and how they respond to the opportunities that the bill will create.

The committee's report highlights many of the key issues that surround the decision-making process. From an organisational perspective, the evidence points to the fact that, at present, no joined-up approach is in place across Scotland and there are therefore major inconsistencies across the board. Decisions are made through a mixture of processes that involve a wide range of stakeholders, from social workers to courts to children's hearings. Beyond that, each local authority has its own assessment process to handle risk assessment when deciding whether to take a child into care.

When all those factors come into play, it may well be the case that what should be the true focus of the decision—the welfare of the child in question—is, in effect, put to one side. It must be clear that, in any such decisions that are made, the rights of the children and parents are carefully balanced.

At no point should we underestimate the fact that this decision-making process is potentially the most difficult that local authorities must undertake. I believe that the committee has been sensitive to that. Many competing viewpoints have to be taken into consideration, as a potentially wrong decision might result in further neglect or abuse, or worse.

In order to improve the process, one could make the case that earlier intervention provides the potential for stability or permanence to be put into effect as early as possible to minimise the potential for harm. Indeed, many of the young people with experience of the care system who spoke to the committee indicated that they felt they should have been taken into care earlier.

However, it has not always been proved that early intervention will produce the desired outcome for each family, especially given that circumstances will almost certainly differ from case to case. One size does not fit all. Fundamentally, early intervention should be seen in the context of whether it will lead to fewer children being placed in care over the longer term and whether those children will enjoy better outcomes as a result. In pre-birth cases, it must be considered whether providing parenting support would provide a positive outcome. If, as the Scottish Government proposes, early intervention is introduced in

tandem with early permanence, we should see fewer young people remaining in long-term care.

The role of social workers and the support that they receive need to be carefully examined. The evidence that was supplied to the committee indicates that, at present, social workers lack confidence in their own knowledge and assessment skills. It has also been suggested that they take an overly optimistic approach, which can result in an unwillingness to remove children from potentially harmful or neglectful situations. Beyond that, we have been told that their evidence in court is not treated with the same legitimacy as evidence from other professionals such as doctors and psychologists. If social workers' opinions are not given credibility, it is no surprise that the profession suffers from a lack of confidence. That could be remedied in the training that is given to social workers by, for example, expanding the social work degree to allow for more specialisation and making post-qualification training and career development more focused and targeted. I understand that the Scottish Social Services Council is reviewing the degree and I look forward to seeing its conclusions.

That leads me on to the provision in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill of a named person for those in care, the response to which has been overwhelmingly positive. However, one or two questions still remain. For example, if the named person is to be a teacher, it is assumed that the add-on costs will be minimal. What will happen during school holidays? Such decisions are in the hands of councils, but the bill indicates that the Scottish Government is taking the lead on implementing solutions.

It is also important that we do not forget parents with learning disabilities. International research suggests that two out of every five children who are born to parents with learning disabilities are permanently removed from their care. Although the statistic might not specifically refer to Scotland, the figure is unlikely to be significantly different here and, as a result, those cases need to be considered very carefully. There is evidence that prejudicial attitudes—for example, that people with learning disabilities are incompetent—have been the reason for removing children, but I would like to think that a modern, independent Scotland is capable of much more compassion and understanding than that. To that end, the Scottish Government has set up the child protection and disabilities ministerial working group, which will consider the needs of children and young people in families where disability affects a parent and will, I presume, also study the level of support that such parents or carers require.

One key issue is that the voices of children and parents must be heard throughout the decision-

making process. The committee met young people who had recently come out of the care system and found their feedback to be exceptionally enlightening and thought provoking. Indeed, it provided us with a uniquely different perspective on the situation. The reactions to the children's hearings system, for example, indicated several shortcomings with the current set-up. The committee heard that the hearings can be intimidating with too many people present, including professionals such as psychologists who could provide an opinion but had not necessarily seen the children regularly. There was also concern that some children who were reluctant to speak out in front of their family were unaware that they could speak to the panel on their own. It is not surprising that young people had better experiences at these hearings when there were fewer people present and when they genuinely felt that those responsible were listening to them.

That truly is the crux of the of the issue for children being taken into care. Throughout the process, they need to be listened to and their feedback needs to be properly considered in order to ensure that, when decisions are made on taking children into care, the voices of those who are affected most are those that are given the highest priority. The newly established children's hearings improvement partnership will, I hope, take this feedback on board, to improve the process.

The Scottish Government is working to strike a balance on permanence decisions and, while results might not be immediate, and we rely on the responses of other individuals and organisations, I believe that we will have a bill that results in a much more considerate and empathetic care system for children who are taken into care.

16:00

Fiona McLeod (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I rise to speak in the debate with little expertise in this subject, but with a great interest in it. That interest stems partly from my years as the chair of East Dunbartonshire children's panel advisory committee. I note that Kenneth Macintosh and I are again speaking in a children's debate, and I wonder whether there is an umbilical cord taking us both back to that very first Education, Culture and Sport Committee in 1999 that means that we just cannot leave the subject alone.

I would like to consider three areas: early intervention; prevention; and, particularly, the idea in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill of a named person. I would also like to consider how the voice of the child is heard in this process. Given my background, which I have just explained to the chamber, I would also like to speak about the role of children's hearings in the process.

Planning for permanence and the elimination of what I understand is now being called drift runs through everything that we are discussing in relation to looked-after young people. I note that those issues were a theme in the minister's opening remarks.

A lot of my speech today is based on recent reading and research. The information that went into the committee's report was useful and important. Running through the report and the minister's opening remarks is the idea that GIRFEC is the foundation of everything that we should do in this area.

There is a great deal of evidence that early intervention and the preventative agenda are best not only for young people but for their families. When I was a member of the Health and Sport Committee, the chief medical officer told us that, in his view, it is the nine months before birth and the nine months after birth that set the foundation for a person's life. That is extremely clear in what we are talking about today.

When I was looking for evidence on which to base my speech, I found that there was a lot of specific evidence about how the early intervention agenda is important when taking children into care. As someone who likes to find evidence, I found it comforting, at an intellectual level, to learn about all the work that the Scottish Government is doing to support teams that are conducting research so that there will be a strong evidence base for all decisions that are made. The work of the permanence and care team and CELCIS, which was founded in 2011 at the University of Strathclyde and which Clare Adamson talked about, is important. We need to ensure that, when decisions are made, either legislatively or by a social worker on the ground, they are based on evidence.

For me, that is why the named person is so important. My understanding is that the named person will allow for integration across the child's life. It will ensure that there is consistency and co-ordination of help and support for every child in Scotland. In his speech, Colin Beattie listed the multi-agency involvement in the lives of vulnerable children. That stresses the importance of the named person. As someone who is not at the heart of the debate, I say absolutely genuinely that I cannot understand why Kenneth Macintosh and others in the Labour Party say that they have reservations about the named person. To me, it looks like a crucial measure. Having a named person will be supportive for every child in Scotland, but it will be vital for vulnerable young people and their families.

Ken Macintosh: Will the member give way?

Fiona McLeod: I will, but I probably will not understand Mr Macintosh's point.

Ken Macintosh: My question is simply this: why would it be helpful for my six children to have a named person?

Fiona McLeod: I am a parent, like Ken Macintosh, and we never know when we might find ourselves vulnerable as a family. I do my absolute best as a parent, but that is not to say that it would not have been helpful for me and my son, who is now an adult, to have had someone to whom we could have turned.

Ken Macintosh: Will Fiona McLeod give way on that point?

Fiona McLeod: I know that we have plenty of time, but Mr Macintosh and I could end up having a debate across the chamber.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is fine.

Ken Macintosh: I point out that, should there be difficulties in my family, we have an enormous support network, although I recognise that I am fortunate. I have a mother and I have a brother and two sisters who all have kids. My wife has two siblings with families and her own parents are alive. We have family, friends and neighbours who would help to look after us. There are all sorts of people who would intervene, support us and know if we got into difficulty. Absolutely the last person on the list of people to whom we would turn would be a social worker. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry, but that is the last person to whom we should turn. To go to a social worker in such a situation is a total diversion of resources when so many people need urgent help right now.

Fiona McLeod: You have been generous, Presiding Officer. That was a one-and-a-half-minute intervention.

My comments were genuine—I do not understand Ken Macintosh's point. I do my best as a parent and I have my support networks. However, I registered my child with a general practitioner not when he was ill, but so that there was a general practitioner to take him to if he became ill. For me, a named person would have provided similar support—a resource that I could have turned to if my own family network had not been available. The named person will be a fantastic advantage for every child and family in Scotland but is an absolute necessity for vulnerable children and families, given the multi-agency involvement that Colin Beattie described.

When I was researching my speech, I found not just that there is evidence of the need for a named person but that there is almost universal support for the proposal. Seventy-two per cent of the respondents to the consultation on the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill supported

having a named person. When Children 1st surveyed kinship carers, 90 per cent of those who responded said that every child in Scotland should have a named person and 78 per cent reflected on their own situation and said that, if they had had a named person, it would have been helpful to them and their family. The support for having a named person exists as well as the evidence for it.

I am a great fan of article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child—I used to have the T-shirt—which is all about the child's voice needing to be heard in the process. I found the evidence that Who Cares? Scotland gave to the committee interesting. Who Cares? Scotland is good and supportive at an organisational level, but the young people whom we met through it just blew us away with the stories that they told us. I quote from the evidence that Who Cares? Scotland gave to the committee:

“Young people should be better informed and included in the decision making process before, during and after leaving care”.

I would have liked to concentrate on the children's hearings system at this stage. With your indulgence, Presiding Officer, I will do so.

When I was in children's hearings, I often used to hear that the child's presence would be dispensed with. For me, however, as article 12 says, that is where the child's voice must be heard. Therefore, it has been lovely for me to find out about all the work that has been done recently, such as the Scottish Children's Reporters Administration setting up a participation in hearings group in 2009, the children's hearings improvement partnership being set up in 2010, and the involvement of the Children's Parliament. It has been lovely to come across a fantastic document entitled “Hearing Scotland's Children” and to read about the changes made to the hearings system, including to the waiting rooms and the format of the information that goes out to young people. It has been useful for me to learn about all those things.

What I have learned in researching for the debate is that the policy is a work in progress. It looks to me that the intent is there by all parties, so I hope that we will all keep on the path and ensure that we get it right for every child.

16:10

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): Do we still have plenty time in hand in the debate, Presiding Officer? I know that you were encouraging us to develop ideas and, in doing so, I hope that I do not misrepresent Clare Adamson—I would never dream of doing so—but I think that she mentioned that this Parliament was at its best when discussing permanence orders during a previous

debate. I think she implied that, because Parliament came to a consensus, that was Parliament at its best. I argue that this Parliament is sometimes at its best when there is no consensus and we are debating big ideas and topics. Of course, that has nothing to do with the debate; rather, it is a comment to help the Presiding Officer on timings.

This is a vital report on young people in care and their future. The committee is correct to observe that

“Few issues are of greater importance”

than improving the outcomes for some of our most disadvantaged children.

I start by thanking the committee of which I was a member for almost all the inquiry. The report asks some very searching and legitimate questions of the Scottish Government and society as a whole. I will be candid. When we consider the outcomes for looked-after children, only one conclusion can be reached: we have failed and are failing looked-after children very badly, despite the heroic efforts of front-line staff in some cases and the resilience of the young people themselves.

Various measures evidence that failure. Liz Smith gave the stark educational attainment figures for looked-after children. The Scottish Prison Service's bulletin from the 13th prisoner survey on “Prisoners who have been in care as ‘looked-after children’”, which was published in 2011, shows that 28 per cent of all respondents—prisoners in Scottish jails—had been in care at some point and 20 per cent had been in care at the age of 16; 38 per cent of young offenders had been in care as a child and 26 per cent at the age of 16; and 37 per cent of female prisoners had been in care as a child and 28 per cent at the age of 16. However, only 2 per cent of children are in care at any given time.

The same survey found that 82 per cent of prisoners who were previously in care were using drugs in the 12 months before going into prison, compared with 60 per cent of those who had not been in care, and that 33 per cent reported being prescribed methadone compared with 19 per cent of those who had not been in care.

Prisoners who had been in care also had greater problems with reading, writing and numbers. A range of other differentials exist between such prisoners and the population.

Those figures and many other sets of statistics represent our collective failure of young people in care. The committee acknowledges those failures but also underlines the need for sufficient resources to be provided to ensure that those who are in care and who are most disadvantaged get

the best and most effective support and help available. If we genuinely believe that how we are judged as a society depends on the support that we provide to our weakest and most vulnerable people, it will be the actions following the report that will, to use a cliché, test that to the full.

One of the main issues examined was about the decision to remove children from their home and place them in care, as many members have mentioned. The decision to remove a child should always be based on what is best for that child. Will the child be better protected, cared for and nurtured and given more opportunity to develop well if they remain with or are removed from their family? Some young people who we met very powerfully argued that they should have been removed much earlier from their family; others suggested that leaving the young person with their family was the better option. It became absolutely clear through the inquiry that each case has to be considered individually and that the young person and their rights have to be at the centre of any decision making. I think that we can now put to bed the view that removing children is a last resort, as that is simply wrong.

The committee heard that young people who remain at home, and their families, need much more intensive family support than they appear to get at present, and that requires resources. Unison, which represents many of the front-line staff, told the committee:

“Our members are reporting more and more cases involving mental health issues. We are taking some children into care in cases where, if the proper services had been around and if their parents had received the mental health support in the community that was required, they should not have needed to come into care.”—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 28 May 2013; c 2514.]

The same is true of young people who are removed from the family home. They have often experienced trauma in their relatively short lives and they need help to move on. In their lives, they have often been badly let down by adults for a range of reasons that may include addiction, abuse, crime, illness, homelessness or a parent being in prison. Too often, these young people are moved from placement to placement, separated from siblings or moved back and forth from home to placements, more often than not without the adequate support and tailored care that they need, and without counselling and psychological or emotional support that is tailored to their needs. The care that they do receive often finishes way too early in their lives.

Those who have come through the care system positively, who are the exception, often point to a key individual who they trusted and who cared for them, respected them and treated them with dignity. That is fundamental to a successful young

life for any child, but especially for those who need to be cared for outside their natural family.

I think that the committee took a bit of convincing to take evidence from young people themselves. I am glad that it did that. Their evidence and their experiences were—

Clare Adamson: I would not want to misrepresent Mr Findlay any more than he would want to misrepresent me. My understanding is that the committee was concerned about the public record and the impact that that might have on the young people. It was not that we did not want to hear their voices. They were given plenty of opportunities. The concern was about the public record and how that might have been interpreted by some areas of the media. That is where our concern was—it was for the young people.

Neil Findlay: I think that that is the position that we eventually came to, but my view is that, at the beginning, there was some reluctance. I am not trying to do down the committee. It has done a fantastic job. However, I think that that reflects the reality of the discussions that we had at the time.

Stewart Maxwell: It does not.

Neil Findlay: We can disagree on that.

The young people's evidence and experiences were the most powerful evidence that the committee took, and if the report lies on a shelf and effective action is not taken, I hope that they will hold every member of this Parliament to account for our collective failure.

The issues are not unique to Scotland as countries across Europe are wrestling with the challenges, but we have a duty to do as much as we possibly can.

16:18

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): To address the point that Mr Findlay has just made, I note that, as a member of the committee from the outset of the current parliamentary session, I have made it clear that I have always wanted to hear young people's voices in both our inquiries into young people in care. The teenagers whom we spoke to in a round-table session that was organised by Who Cares? Scotland gave harrowing accounts of their lives and, as my colleague Clare Adamson said, they were given a good amount of time to do that. That meeting was not held in public because it was felt—quite rightly, in my view—that we have a duty of care to the young people, so we should not expose them to media scrutiny because many are already traumatised by a lifetime of abuse and neglect.

The young people who came to see us first staged a short play about the experience of being

in care—or, as we now call it, being looked after. It was a physical piece of drama with little dialogue, but it spoke volumes. The young protagonist was pushed between the adults who were supposed to care for him and was constantly rejected. The more he was rejected, the worse his behaviour became—he was uncommunicative, angry and silently aggressive. Therefore, when an adult offered help, the boy rejected them; he mirrored the rejection that he had had to deal with all his life. As a result of his challenging behaviour, which was caused by emotional damage, he was, of course, rejected by adults even more.

Afterwards, what alarmed me about those teenagers' experiences of care was the fact that they had been identified as being in need of protection very early in their lives—many of them had been taken into care before the age of five. Despite that, none had achieved permanent placement; most had had multiple placements and had experienced foster family rejection and breakdown. Their life experience certainly vindicated the central purpose of our inquiry.

Many of the young people said that they would have gained more stability and permanence in a small residential unit in their teenage years—I was certainly impressed by the residential unit in Glasgow that we visited—albeit that they would have liked such residential care to have allowed them to have as normal a family life as possible, for example by having friends round for sleepovers and all the other things that are part of growing up for most young people in our society.

It is also important to emphasise, as other members have done, that the majority view of the young people whom we spoke to was that they were better off in care than they would have been with their birth parents. One boy who was doing well in his education and who was an extremely engaging and articulate young man said that he believed that being taken into care had saved him from disaster and turned his life around.

However, the young people want the experience of care to be improved. They want more permanence and, above all, they want to be listened to. They also want their privacy to be respected and their views to be considered. Sometimes, that simply means that those in authority should adhere to their own recognised good practice.

Other members have mentioned the meeting at which young people talked about the children's hearings system. They said that if they wanted to make their views known to the children's panel privately, they had to ask others, including their birth parents, to leave the room. Many of them had felt too inhibited and intimidated to make that request in public. Those children loved their parents, even when they had not, for whatever

reason, been capable of providing them with the nurturing home and stability that they needed. Those young people did not want to articulate their own needs because they were afraid of hurting the feelings of their birth parents and—on some occasions—the feelings of other family members and professionals who were involved in their lives. All a children's panel would have to do is ask the child in advance whether he or she would like a private session.

For anyone who is interested, that issue is dealt with on page 13 of the committee's report. I was interested in the evidence that we took from the children's reporter, in which the problem was acknowledged. As I understand it, the Children's Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011 will improve the situation. However, as the report says, the committee is concerned about the issue, so we will return to it to find out how the 2011 act is working in practice and whether it has resulted in improvement in some of the areas that the young people complained about.

As the convener has already detailed, the committee's long-running inquiry dovetailed with the introduction in Parliament of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill, and many of the concerns that were identified in the inquiry will be addressed by measures in that bill. Indeed, the Government has already put in place measures, such as the establishment of CELCIS at the University of Strathclyde.

Other members have expressed their gratitude to the large number of witnesses who gave their time to speak to the committee during our inquiry. I reiterate those thanks and take the opportunity to say how impressed I was by the oral evidence from CELCIS. It gave me a sense of encouragement that we are taking the problem very seriously indeed at the highest level. From now on, we will have a body of research and expertise to draw on to tackle the issues that the most vulnerable children in Scotland face. I very much hope that the work of CELCIS will inform good practice on the ground. I know that it is working closely with local authorities, just as it has helped to shape Government policy for the good.

I welcome the Government's response to our report and the minister's letter to the committee, which reiterates the commitment to early intervention in tandem with early permanence. I note, too, that the young people whom we spoke to had been affected by mistakes in the system that are already being addressed, and that there is already evidence of change. For example, the trend for children to become looked after—and the trend for them to become looked after at an earlier age—shows that social workers are now acting more quickly to assess families and to intervene.

There is some way to go, but there is no doubt from the minister's speech and the work that she has done on the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill that she is extremely committed to addressing the problem, and in no way underestimates the job that needs to be done. By putting the key elements of GIRFEC in statute and introducing measures such as the named person, the bill will legally require local authorities to improve permanence planning and collaborative working, which our report shows to be essential in tackling the issue. Although much work needs to be done, I feel optimistic that we are going in the right direction and that we will do the young people justice.

16:25

Liz Smith: The debate has been interesting, despite one or two scraps about contentious issues. The subject is interesting because it deals with a complex and difficult situation. As I said in my opening speech, it is incumbent on all of us to accept the complexities, and to accept that we have not got everything right in the past. I was just thinking that, if we look back to the Orkney inquiry in 1992, it dealt with some of the complex issues in terms of when it is right to remove children from their parents and take them into care.

In an eloquent speech, Ken Macintosh raised a central dilemma that we all face—I am not talking about the named person, which involves a political argument that we will have fairly soon in Parliament. The dilemma is challenging because, as he said, although we know in some circumstances that the categorical answer is that we should remove the child from the parents, it is sometimes difficult to do. I absolutely agree with the convener's comment that, when a sibling might be involved in the situation that Mr Macintosh described, it is not appropriate for that other child to be left. Given the grave difficulty that faces the parents or family concerned and those who look after such children, we cannot easily put ourselves in the places of the people who must take such decisions.

Stewart Maxwell: I make it clear that I do not underestimate the complexity of the difficulty for professionals who face such situations. Every case must be considered individually, but given the evidence that we received, I feel that in the past mistakes were made in clear-cut cases.

Liz Smith: The convener is absolutely right. There is probably no question but that this is the most complex issue that we have come up against. It has been one of the reasons why people have held back from decisions to take the child into care—that did not happen just because of the past mistakes that he mentioned—although

the decision was intrinsically correct, as Mr Macintosh said.

I do not think that the minister in any way underestimates the task in hand, but I understand what Mr McArthur was getting at; we need to deal with a few issues in the report in more detail. I will flag them up to the minister. We say clearly in paragraph 34 that terminology could

“be used more clearly and consistently.”

Perhaps we need to address that. People who gave evidence were slightly troubled by some of the wording that has been used, so it would be helpful for the terminology to be more consistent. It would help if the minister would reply to that point.

In paragraph 39, the committee raised reasonable concerns about children falling through the gaps. The committee seeks clarity on the adequacy of current resources, which a couple of members have mentioned. The minister's response was that

“We take our role in helping service providers to set the policy and resource framework very seriously”,

but we would expect that. If she will forgive me, we want her to give a little more detail on how that will be done and not just to make the point.

At paragraph 51 the committee asked the Government

“to explain how it will work with local authorities to help child social work carry out its role more effectively.”

The Government response states that

“It is a matter of public record that the Scottish Government's approach to improving the quality of children's social services centres on the needs of the child”.

We know that, but it would be enormously helpful if the minister could expand on it.

Aileen Campbell: It is all out there.

Liz Smith: Perhaps the minister can give us a bit more detail in her reply. If we are to convince some of the doubters—

Aileen Campbell: Liz Smith has characterised some of the Government's responses in a wholly negative way. What she has described is not the sum total of our response. I noted in my speech that we have established a strategic forum that brings together all the parts of the social work force so that we can move the sector forward strategically and draw on the expertise that is out there.

Liz Smith is being a bit unfair in her characterisation of some of our replies, which we had hoped would be met with some of the spirit of consensus and co-operation that should exist between Government and the committee in carrying out its work.

Liz Smith: I think that I was pretty constructive and positive in my earlier speech, and I think that I am being positive now. I am not saying that there is anything wrong with the Government's responses; I am simply indicating that we need to go a bit further in order to give clarity and direction to those who—we must be honest—have been quite critical on some issues in the past.

Stewart Maxwell spoke earlier about the issues that have stayed with him over the course of the committee's deliberations. One thing that struck me and which has stayed with me throughout the process is the very strong criticism that we heard in evidence from one of our witnesses, who was clear that we had not moved on sufficiently quickly because there has not been enough detail from the Scottish Government—not just the current Scottish Government—over a period of time. I go back to that sense of frustration; I do not think that we are doing enough to allay fears because we are finding it difficult to go into sufficient detail.

The committee's deliberations have been enjoyable, but challenging. The report has certainly thrown up some interesting issues that we still have to resolve but—in a spirit of relative consensus—I think that we have dealt with that.

I thank the convener for his guidance throughout the committee's inquiry. We have a lot to think about. I welcome much in the Scottish Government's responses, but there is still a great deal to do if we are finally to resolve what must be one of the most challenging social issues in this country.

16:32

Jayne Baxter: The debate has contained a number of interesting and thoughtful contributions from members on all sides of the chamber, and a wee bit of drama around the named person provision. With the Presiding Officer's forbearance, I will clarify the Labour Party's position on the named person provision. We fully support the principle and have no problem with it, but we are very worried about the resource implications. We agree with the Royal College of Nursing and the Educational Institute of Scotland that a bit more work is needed in that respect. For example, we could be looking at a requirement for an additional 450 health visitors, which would be an issue in terms of the successful implementation of the provision.

It is clear that there is, among members on all sides of the Parliament, a real willingness to improve the decision-making processes that lead to children being taken into care and—perhaps most important—to improve the outcomes for those vulnerable children and young people in our society. I was struck by Liz Smith's comments

about the frustration that is felt on all sides of the Parliament and beyond about the lack of progress on the issue.

I do not wish to set a negative tone—I think that we all agree that we would like to make progress as fast as we can, and I hope that where we are today is a good starting point for moving forward without further delay. In her response to the committee's report, the minister said:

“Both early intervention and early permanence are needed to meet our aims of reducing the number of children on long term supervision requirements and increasing the numbers finding secure legal permanence.”

I was heartened to hear the minister say that she is committed to improving outcomes for children and young people across all levels of government. The care and permanence strategy is to be welcomed, as is the minister's reference to a whole-system approach, which is important, as we cannot have a piecemeal approach. Because the field is so complex and so many agencies and organisations are involved, as well as families, children and professionals, we need a whole-system approach to making improvements. The minister also referred to the important role of social workers. That is perhaps stating the obvious, but they are fundamental to improving services, as the minister acknowledged.

A number of concerns have been raised. I am pleased that George Adam referred to the support that is available to social workers and other staff. We need to consider whether that support is sufficient and is available when it is needed, and where staff are left if they do not get support and help. They feel exposed and might well leave the profession or seek promotion to get away from the pressures of being on the front line. Any reduction in support or training for a workforce always leads to worries about morale, skills development and staff retention. We need to be mindful of that and keep the needs of the staff very much at the fore in our thinking as we move forward.

I was struck by Ken Macintosh's comments. He raised the question whether access to resources influences decisions on where to place children. That made me think because, clearly, if there is good access to foster carers, children's homes and social workers, that might widen the choices and influence the options for a child. However, if that access is not available, the choices are much more limited, which might influence decisions. It is not for me to say whether that happens, but Ken Macintosh's comments certainly made me think. He also made thought-provoking comments on the culture in social work. He made valid points about the role of judgment and good decision making, and on how staff can be protected in exercising that judgment.

To return to the named person, as the minister is aware, we need to do more work on when the named person passes on responsibility to the lead professional, which is a different role. That will also be a judgment, and how it will work needs to be negotiated and agreed. We are not at that stage yet, but we know that we need to do more work on it.

As we have heard, one of the report's conclusions is that

"the sheer volume of ongoing work could suggest that deep-rooted problems are being addressed on an incremental basis."

I agree with the convener's point that any future action must be co-ordinated and happen across the system. Everybody has to understand their role. Just doing a lot of work does not necessarily achieve a lot of benefit, so we need to ensure that we work effectively and well together to make the changes that are needed.

In future, we must ensure that any progress is co-ordinated and, where possible, that the outcomes of reforms are measurable and make real improvements to the decision-making systems, which have a huge impact on the lives of children and their families. Several colleagues have referred to the starting point. If we are to start measuring the difference that we make, sadly, on some of the indicators, we will be starting from a low point. Liam McArthur, Liz Smith and Neil Findlay gave sobering figures that point clearly to the size of the challenge in improving those outcomes. Some of the worrying statistics apply to children in all settings—whether they are looked after at home or in a children's home—and of all ages, so not just in the early years but as they grow up in care and move out of it. Neil Findlay referred to the link between outcomes for young people in the prison system and their time in care. The situation is not good enough and we have a chance to make it better. We have to take that responsibility seriously.

Ahead of today's debate, I was in touch with a number of childcare charities and excellent organisations such as Who Cares? Scotland that do their very best to put the voices of looked-after children at the centre of debates such as this one. It might interest colleagues to know that I used to work in childcare and I can remember Who Cares? being set up more than 30 years ago. It is great to see the way in which it has continued to work and fight. It has never given up its campaign to have the voices of children built into our decision making, and I pay particular credit to it in relation to the committee's report and the work that we are doing on the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill.

George Adam and others spoke about the impact on them of hearing the evidence from

young people. We really cannot go forward without continuing to listen to those young people. They want to know that we are serious about what we are doing. We need to demonstrate that we have conviction and that we want to make progress. They are watching us and they have expectations of us. I do not know whether they are here today, but I hope that they will note that we want to work to improve the life chances of children in Scotland and that this issue does not end with this debate.

The challenges that face our most vulnerable children have been described as a hidden problem, which would shock the majority of Scots if they knew the day-to-day reality of life for looked-after children. One campaigner said that the solution lies in Scots caring and feeling a sense of responsibility for all children in Scottish communities and Scottish society. In my opening speech, I referred to the need to change attitudes and culture.

The report that we have debated today goes some way to exposing the hidden problem of our children in care. I look forward to hearing the minister respond to a number of the points that were raised today on the actions that we will be taking to improve the lives of Scotland's children.

16:41

Aileen Campbell: This has been a thoroughly constructive debate. The committee's report and work have highlighted many areas that require further attention. The debate has shown that, regardless of political party or ideology, each of us here shares the dedication, commitment and passion to get things right for our looked-after children and young people.

I hope that I have never tried to portray a situation that is all okay. We understand that we are on a journey to try to make things right for children and young people, particularly those who need our care. I hope that in that spirit we can work together to ensure that the policies and opportunities that lie ahead allow us to work together to ensure that we can get things right.

I will break down my closing remarks into themes, hopefully to capture much of what has been said, to demonstrate real and tangible actions that the Government has taken and of course to recognise the progress that previous Administrations have made, because I do not think that this issue is owned by any one party. That has been clear from the passion that members have shown this afternoon.

In my opening remarks, I said that early intervention and early permanence are crucial in securing the best possible outcomes for children who need us to look after them, as is finding a way to intervene with care that wraps around children

and is effective and swift. I welcome Liz Smith's acknowledgement of the need for early intervention and early permanence. I understand what she said about making sure that our language is clear. Of course we will always make sure that that is the case. We are clear that early years is different from early intervention.

To pick up on the points that Liam McArthur made, we can intervene effectively in a child or young person's life at any time. If there are other areas in which we can improve clarity, I am happy to embrace that.

Liz Smith: I am grateful to the minister for that. The example that I was referring to, which came through in evidence on the bill, is the fact that we use the term "service providers" in very different categories throughout the bill. That causes a bit of confusion about who the service providers are and the duties that are put on them. If we can tighten that up, it would be helpful.

Aileen Campbell: I understand. I am sure that some of that will come through in the further debate that we will need to have on the bill. It will also be clarified further in any guidance that accompanies the bill. There is always the opportunity to ensure that we consult fully on guidance to ensure that things are absolutely clear in the minds of the people whom we are trusting to deliver the services that benefit the children we care so much about.

Some members suggested that there was a degree of complacency in our approach. I absolutely refute that. Our priority since the SCRA report in 2011 has been to inject pace into reform. PACE is specifically designed to change practice sustainably across different systems. The whole-systems approach needs to bring together councils, children's hearings and the courts to identify barriers and delays and to test solutions. That approach, which I think has been universally welcomed by members across the chamber, will be a good step forward. I am very grateful to Aberdeen and Renfrewshire for agreeing to bare all and to show all local authorities how it can be done and where there is room for change.

In response to Ken Macintosh, I agree absolutely that we need to intervene earlier, support families and make quick decisions, but it is not just about quicker or firmer decisions. In many cases of low-level need, providing low-level, long-term parenting support could be better for that child as opposed to rehoming them permanently. That is important because of the understanding that we have of the importance of attachment.

Our efforts on the strategic commissioning of resources within community planning partnerships for children's services will help to deal with some of the issues around resourcing. The bill contains

an explicit commitment to family counselling to help families and help children's services to avoid having children taken into care.

John Pentland (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab): Jayne Baxter mentioned in her closing speech that Labour agreed with the principles of the bill but that there could be resourcing issues. The SNP's white paper says that childcare for 50 per cent of two-year-olds would cost nearly £100 million. Considering today's autumn statement when nearly £300 million is coming in consequentials, does the minister agree that £100 million from the consequentials—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is not a question.

Aileen Campbell: I am always happy to take interventions from members who have contributed to the debate. John Pentland asked about the resources, and the bill has an accompanying financial memorandum that sets out that information clearly. If the member wants to refer to that, I am sure that he can get a copy of it.

GIRFEC is our overarching approach for delivering children's services and ensuring that they are at the centre of design and delivery. I do not need to remind anyone that the letters "EC" in GIRFEC stand for "every child", including our looked-after children. GIRFEC is about co-ordination of approach and the evidence of its positive effect is bearing fruit. I do not know why Fiona McLeod started her speech by saying that she had no expertise, because she went on to say that she was the chair of a children's panel advisory committee. That is a very good qualification for today's debate.

Fiona McLeod spoke about GIRFEC and the named person issue. I do not wish to rehearse previous debates about the named person, but I want to correct some members' misunderstanding of the issue. It is not a scheme for a social worker for every child and it will not dilute the role of the parent. It is about a support network for parents that will have a light touch, and will knit together information about a child to ensure that appropriate interventions can be made. As has been proven in the Highlands, the results have shown a reduction in inappropriate referrals to reporters, a greater ability to target resources at the most vulnerable, and the ability to redeploy saved resource into bolstering services. If that holistic approach is delivered throughout Scotland, it will have a hugely positive impact for children, particularly those whom we are talking about today.

That leads me on to talk about the voice of the child, which has been a strong theme. Colin Beattie, Jayne Baxter, Clare Adamson, the committee convener, Joan McAlpine and George

Adam all mentioned the importance of hearing the voice of the child, and it has had a profound impact on members who have had the privilege of listening to our looked-after young people. Those real-life stories add poignancy to the crude statistics and remind us of the impact of our decisions on young people. It is always impressive to hear from young people who have been through the care system about how keen they are to put something back into the system that will make improvements so that other young people do not have to suffer the same problems that they have had to deal with.

I want to mention two young people to whom I listened at a recent LACSIG event at which we launched the staying put guidance for young looked-after people who are going through aftercare. I heard about two different experiences of the care journey, one of which was less positive and one of which was very positive indeed. That shows that we can get things right for people. We need that good practice to become the norm as opposed to the exception.

Joan McAlpine talked about the children's hearings system, and I agree that the new national system gives an opportunity—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I regret to say that you must close.

Aileen Campbell: I am sorry, Presiding Officer, I thought that I had eight minutes.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have now had exactly eight minutes.

Aileen Campbell: The new system allows us to ensure a consistent approach. We should remember that next year is the 50th anniversary of the Kilbrandon report, which set Scotland apart because of the way that we dealt with children who need additional help.

I want to mention one final issue.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You are in your final 15 seconds.

Aileen Campbell: I want to mention the voluntary mentoring scheme, because the committee said that we should make use of volunteers. The mentoring scheme that I launched the other day will take us further towards embracing the contribution that volunteers can make to providing a stable relationship for young people who have lacked that in their lives.

There are opportunities to make things better for young people, and the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill is one of them. I appreciate the committee's work and look forward to working further with committee members as we create improvements for young people who are looked after.

16:50

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity, on behalf of the committee, to close the debate on an important subject. It has been a good debate with a number of thoughtful and constructive contributions, and I join other committee members in thanking all the individuals and organisations who have given evidence throughout the inquiry for their valuable contributions. I also thank the young people who have been through the care system and from whom we heard directly, at the Who Cares? Scotland office in Glasgow and here in the Parliament, and in particular the young people from the Kibble who performed a thought-provoking play in the Parliament for the committee.

We know that all too often looked-after children have poorer outcomes than other children and, as Stewart Maxwell set out at the start of the debate, the purpose of the inquiry was to investigate the decision-making processes involved in determining whether a child should be removed from the family home and whether those processes are delivering the best outcomes for children and their families. It is quite clear, both from the evidence presented to the committee and from the contributions that we have heard this afternoon, that that is not always the case. We can do more to improve those processes and we can and must do more for looked-after children.

The committee's inquiry covered a number of areas and, as has been said, recommendations for improvements were made in almost every one. It is clear that there is work to do and action that needs to be taken. Many of the questions and issues raised are difficult and often sensitive, but Stewart Maxwell was quite right when he pointed out that open, public discussion of those issues is positive and I welcome the wider discussion that the committee's inquiry has stimulated around the issue of children and young people in care.

As members have highlighted, there is a great deal of work going on in that area, not least the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill, which we debated in the chamber recently. However, there is a fear and a danger that a lack of overarching strategy means that that work is not tied together. We need to be absolutely sure that problems are not being missed, that reforms are co-ordinated and that the key priority is that any changes that are made lead to better outcomes for children and young people.

In the report, the committee recognised the role of local authorities, community planning partners, social work and the relevant public and third sector bodies in bringing about change, but what is clear is the importance of the Scottish Government's role in leading the process. I hope that the minister

and the Government will listen to and act on the issues and challenges highlighted by the inquiry and will do so in a timely fashion. It is recognised across the chamber that the pace of progress in improving the experiences of looked-after children has simply not been good enough. Things need to improve and they need to improve more quickly.

I welcome what the minister said about supporting the social work workforce, listening to young people, early intervention and the care permanence strategy. Those are clearly good intentions. I welcome the minister's responses to a number of the committee's questions and I hope that she will follow up on the points that she has not had time to address today and respond to the report in full. I know that a number of issues have been raised about the use of terminology, about more detail on preventing children from falling through the gap and about other matters on which we would welcome more detail.

A number of members have mentioned resources. At a time of budgetary pressure, the issue of resources is, unsurprisingly, extremely important. As members have said this afternoon, the committee heard evidence suggesting that decisions about removing children from the family home were affected by the availability of appropriate placements. That is why the committee repeatedly pressed the Scottish Government to outline the total sum of money that all relevant bodies spend on protecting children and to say whether that spending is providing value for money.

The Scottish Government has made it clear that work on understanding spending and future demand is best undertaken at a local level. However, as Stewart Maxwell said, it is critical that we know the level of current spending, what it is delivering and whether spending is achieving the best possible results. The committee is right to question in its report how the Government's approach will allow for the establishment of a national picture of future spending and placement needs. Again, I press the minister to address how that fits in with and is fundamental to the Scottish Government's leadership role in this area.

More than one member has referred to social work training. I do not think that anyone would disagree that social workers have a key role in implementing improvements, so I would expect the Government to take action if the evidence supports the claim that cuts to local government are having a severe impact on social work training.

We know that the decision to remove a child from his or her home is always extremely difficult. The committee report recognises that and states:

"deciding whether or not a child should be removed from the family home and taken into care is one of the most difficult tasks carried out by public authorities."

It has far-reaching consequences for the child involved, for the parents and for other members of that family. It is no exaggeration to say that the future of the child is at stake and therefore the decision has to be made at the right time and for the right reasons. It is essential, therefore, that we do everything possible to support the decision makers to get the decisions right.

The committee was determined to listen to the views and hear about the experiences of children and young people and put them at the centre of its report. Like other members, I have talked many times in the chamber about the importance of listening to young people rather than just talking at them. That is especially important here.

Aileen Campbell: Does the member agree that we need to ensure that we watch our language around young people? Rather than talking about them failing, we must ensure that, where we can, we talk positively about young looked-after people. Does the member support our investment in Who Cares? Scotland and our collaborative approach with it on the anti-stigmatisation campaign?

Neil Bibby: Who Cares? Scotland is a fantastic organisation and I welcome the Scottish Government's support for the good work that it does in the campaign that the minister mentioned.

It is key to listen to young people and it is our responsibility to take their views on board and address the many challenges that that presents in relation to intervening in family life. Those challenges are not easy to address but we must work to tackle them if we are serious about improving outcomes for children and young people in care.

Barnardo's Scotland states that the biggest improvement to outcomes for looked-after children and young people would come through improving the consistency, speed and earliness of decision making on whether to take children into care. It also made the point that once that decision has been made, there should be an absolute focus on securing permanence for that child. On that point, I welcome the Scottish Government's policy aim of early permanence. When developing the care permanence strategy, I urge the Scottish Government to act on the committee's call for it

"to establish a shared vision of what success would look like for looked after children, and ensure that resources and processes are built around that vision."

I also urge all those active in the process of reform to involve children and young people who are in care and to listen to their opinions. The overriding aim must always be the improvement of outcomes for looked-after children, which is more likely if we listen to the very people we are trying to help.

The committee recognises the good work that is being taken forward as a result of GIRFEC and other child protection measures. On behalf of the committee, I, too, pay tribute to the hard work and dedication of social workers, education professionals and healthcare professionals throughout Scotland and to the very challenging work that they do, often in extremely difficult circumstances.

However, the reality remains that current decision-making processes are not always delivering the best outcomes for children and their families. We need action to improve those processes and the outcomes for looked-after children, and we need to improve the pace of reform for the benefit of those young people. The inquiry report says that the Scottish Government should take a leading role in that process if we are to see the improvements that we all want in outcomes for children and young people in care.

Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of motion S4M-08489, in the name of Liam McArthur, on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, on the appointment of the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland. I call Liam McArthur to move the motion on behalf of the SPCB.

17:00

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I will set out a little bit of the background before I move, on behalf of the corporate body, the motion in my name, which invites members to agree to the appointment of William Thomson as the new Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland.

The Scottish Parliamentary Commissions and Commissioners etc Act 2010 provides that the commissioner is to be appointed by the SPCB with the agreement of the Parliament. The SPCB sat as a selection panel on 25 November 2013. The panel was chaired by David Stewart; the other members were Mary Scanlon and me. On behalf of the panel, I thank the independent assessor, Louise Rose, who oversaw all aspects of the process and has provided the SPCB with a validation certificate that confirms that the process complied with good practice and that the nomination of the new commissioner is made on merit after a fair, open and transparent process.

I turn to our nominee. William Thomson is the panel's choice from a very strong field of candidates invited to interview. Many of us here will know Bill, as he is one of the Parliament's assistant clerk/chief executives. He has 25 years of public sector experience. He worked at a very senior level for East Lothian Council before he joined the Parliament at the outset in 1999.

The commissioner's role is an important one in securing high ethical standards in public life. The commissioner is responsible for investigating complaints about the conduct of MSPs, local authority councillors and members of public bodies, and also regulates how people are appointed to the boards of public bodies in Scotland.

The SPCB believes that the skills that Bill has deployed in the Parliament and his previous local government experience will more than equip him for his new role. The panel believes that he will bring to the post enthusiasm, professionalism, fairness and integrity, and I am sure that the

Parliament will want to wish him every success for the future in his role.

I know that the Parliament would also wish to record its sincere thanks to Stuart Allan for his considerable contribution. Mr Allan's term of office will end on 31 March next year. We wish him a long, happy and healthy retirement.

I have pleasure in moving,

That the Parliament agrees to the appointment of William Thomson as the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland.

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

Decision Time

17:02

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S4M-08480, in the name of Stewart Maxwell, on decision making on whether to take children into care, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the conclusions and recommendations contained in the Education and Culture Committee's 10th Report, 2013 (Session 4): *Report on decision making on whether to take children into care* (SP Paper 386).

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-08489, in the name of Liam McArthur, on the appointment of the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the appointment of William Thomson as the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: I close the meeting and wish you a safe journey home.

Meeting closed at 17:03.

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