



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 29 October 2014

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

Portfolio Question Time

Commonwealth Games, Sport, Equalities and Pensioners' Rights

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio questions. As ever, in order to get as many people in as possible, short and succinct questions and answers would be appreciated.

Equality Issues (Co-operation across Local Authorities)

1. John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind): To ask the Scottish Government how it encourages co-operation across local authorities on equality issues. (S4O-03601)

The Cabinet Secretary for Commonwealth Games, Sport, Equalities and Pensioners' Rights (Shona Robison): Local authorities are directly responsible for equality issues within their remit, including compliance with legal requirements. It is therefore for authorities themselves to identify and develop any suitable opportunities for co-operation in relation to equalities. Scottish ministers aim to create conditions for better collaborative working and co-operation across sectors, including local authorities, to improve performance against the public sector equality duty.

John Finnie: I recently met a senior local authority official to discuss Gypsy Travellers, and that individual commended to me the fact that a needs assessment was being done for the local authority area. I asked what collaboration there was with adjoining authorities, because clearly, by the very nature of that community, Gypsy Travellers are not resident in one place. I was surprised to learn that there was no co-operation at that stage, although I think that the situation has since been rectified. What is the Government doing to ensure that that does not happen, in respect of both local authority and health issues?

Shona Robison: If the member wants to write to me with more information about the local authorities concerned, I will certainly look into the matter. It obviously makes sense for local authorities to work together across such issues. The work that is under way to develop the new strategy and action plan for Gypsy Travellers

offers an opportunity to ensure that the issues are addressed. If he writes to me with more details, we can ensure that those issues are picked up both with the local authorities and as we take forward the strategy over the next few months.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Hanzala Malik.

Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to stem the reported decline in the number of female students—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry, Mr Malik. I think that you are ahead of yourself. I thought that you wanted to ask a supplementary, but that might be for the next set of questions.

Question 2, from Annabel Goldie, has not been lodged, and an understandable explanation has been provided.

Single-tier Pension (Discussions with United Kingdom Government)

3. Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding the level of the single-tier pension. (S4O-03603)

The Cabinet Secretary for Commonwealth Games, Sport, Equalities and Pensioners' Rights (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government has not yet had any formal discussions regarding the level of the single-tier pension. However, recent announcements at the Conservative Party conference suggest that the UK Government will set the single-tier pension at a level that is lower than our expectations. I have therefore written to the Minister of State for Pensions seeking urgent clarification.

Joan McAlpine: I, too, was concerned to hear the figure of £142 quoted by UK ministers recently, as it is far below the £160-a-week offer contained in the white paper, which would have ensured better pensions in an independent Scotland. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the offer needs to be upped by the UK Government and that the best way forward would be for pensions to be devolved to this Parliament?

Shona Robison: Yes, I agree with that. The level is significantly lower than the Scottish Government's expectations. However, the reference may be to the indicative starting rate set out previously by the UK Government, rather than a final determination of the level of the new pension. That is why I have written to the UK Government seeking urgent clarification. We argued in the referendum campaign that a starting rate of £160 per week for those with full entitlement would be fair and sustainable, helping

those reaching state pension age to have a decent retirement.

Our view, which we have expressed in our submission to the Smith commission, is that we maintain that decisions on welfare, including pensions, are best made by the Scottish Parliament, as the member has said, in line with the needs of Scottish pensioners.

Disabled People (Fair Treatment)

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

To ask the Scottish Government how it ensures the fair treatment of disabled people. (S4O-03604)

The Cabinet Secretary for Commonwealth Games, Sport, Equalities and Pensioners' Rights (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government is actively engaged in a programme of work to improve outcomes for disabled people across all areas of daily and public life, using domestic legislation and international treaties to lever change and to measure improvement. We are committed to working in co-production with disabled people and have provided funding of almost £2.4 million over the period 2012 to 2015 to build the capacity of disabled people's organisations in Scotland.

Claire Baker: The cabinet secretary will be aware of the blue badge scheme for drivers or passengers who have mobility problems. Although there was support for the tightening of the regulations to address occasional inappropriate use of the badge, I am still being contacted by constituents who are concerned that, although they have mobility problems, they are refused the badge, and are refused again when the appeal comes around. That happens particularly at the point when the badge is being renewed. Has the cabinet secretary had any discussions with the Minister for Transport and Veterans or the Minister for Local Government and Planning about such concerns and the impact on people who have disabilities?

Shona Robison: I will be happy to have those discussions with colleagues, and I am aware of some issues arising from blue badge applications. Some significant improvements have been made, particularly around abuse of the system, and they are to be welcomed. If the member so wishes, she can write to me with a bit more detail about the issues that she has raised. In the meantime, I will be happy to speak to colleagues who have more direct responsibility for the blue badge scheme. I will do that after this meeting.

Pension Credit Scheme (Uptake)

5. David Stewart (Highlands and Islands)

(Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how it will

improve the uptake of the pension credit scheme. (S4O-03605)

The Cabinet Secretary for Commonwealth Games, Sport, Equalities and Pensioners' Rights (Shona Robison): As the member will be aware, pension policy is currently reserved to the United Kingdom Government. Nonetheless, Scottish ministers are committed to ensuring that all Scottish pensioners receive the support to which they are entitled. The Scottish Government has already provided funding to support Age Scotland's helpline, which ensures that older people have access to quality-assured information and assistance across a range of topics such as money and benefits. We have also agreed an additional funding grant for 2013 to 2015 to support Age Scotland in its partnership with the Silver Line and to extend the scope of the current helpline service. I met Age Scotland this morning, and am encouraged by its commitment to the issue. I will continue to work with Age Scotland and other stakeholders to consider how we improve uptake.

David Stewart: Does the cabinet secretary support the work of Rights Advice Scotland in developing a benefit calculator for older people to encourage the uptake of pension credit, which is claimed by only one in three eligible pensioners? Across Scotland, as we enter the winter months, thousands of pensioners face a bleak and hard choice between having enough to eat and keeping warm. What action plan does the cabinet secretary have to increase the uptake of pension credit?

Shona Robison: I certainly support the work of Rights Advice Scotland, in addition to that of Age Scotland and Citizens Advice Scotland. All provide important information to pensioners. As I said, we particularly support Age Scotland and its helpline, which has received a huge number of calls from people for information. We encourage people who are entitled to pension credit to apply for it, and we will continue to do so.

In our submission to the Smith commission, we have set out that we will continue to argue the case that decisions on pensions are best made here in the Scottish Parliament, in line with the needs of Scottish pensioners. I am sure that if we can get control over pensions through the Smith commission, we can do more for our pensioners, including those who are on pension credit.

Tax Breaks for Sports Clubs

6. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will investigate tax breaks for sports clubs. (S4O-03606)

The Cabinet Secretary for Commonwealth Games, Sport, Equalities and Pensioners'

Rights (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government, through sportscotland, the national agency for sport, has invested significantly in Scotland's sports clubs. That investment is central to the development of a world-class system for sport in Scotland.

In addition to that direct financial support, we encourage all eligible sports clubs to make full use of the range of tax breaks and other options that are available, including business rates relief. In Scotland, mandatory business rates relief of 80 per cent is granted to registered charitable sports clubs and registered community amateur sports clubs. In addition, councils have discretionary powers to grant further relief of up to 100 per cent. Of course, further investigation of tax breaks would be a real option only if full fiscal levers were devolved to Scotland.

Liz Smith: The cabinet secretary will know that the Parliament has had several debates on the legacy of the Commonwealth games and the Ryder cup, and that some of those debates focused on the financial benefit legacy that can be left, particularly to some of our smaller sports clubs, which often find it difficult to survive. I note what the cabinet secretary says about some of the advantages—she spelled that out—but what facility does the Scottish Government have to allow those sports clubs to know which benefits they can take advantage of?

Shona Robison: Liz Smith makes a reasonable point; the issue is about knowing about the tax relief that is available. Sportscotland has a huge amount of information on its website, but I will ensure that it proactively informs clubs that they can apply for relief.

There are some developments on the horizon that are important to those clubs, such as the changes to water and sewerage charges. From April next year, exemptions to those charges will be awarded, subject to certain conditions, to all charities with an income of less than £200,000. That could make a big difference to clubs' overheads.

There is a debate around tax powers and the Smith commission, and the Parliament may well debate additional tax powers once we know what those powers are. In the meantime, it is important that sportscotland informs clubs about rates relief, and I will make sure that that happens.

Commonwealth Games Legacy (Disadvantaged Young People)

7. Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what the legacy of the Commonwealth games will be for disadvantaged young people. (S4O-03607)

The Cabinet Secretary for Commonwealth Games, Sport, Equalities and Pensioners' Rights (Shona Robison): Legacy 2014 has young people at its heart. There are many examples of Scottish Government programmes that use the games as a catalyst to support disadvantaged young people in overcoming barriers and achieving their full potential.

Sport Relief and UNICEF UK are using the power and inspiration of sport to improve the wellbeing of vulnerable young people, both at home and in the wider Commonwealth, empowering them to make positive changes to their lives. Programmes such as Scotland's best are providing those young people furthest removed from the labour market with new development opportunities that will support them into employment, further education and training.

I encourage Jayne Baxter and other members to visit the legacy 2014 website for more information on those legacy programmes.

Jayne Baxter: I welcomed the efforts that were made, for example, to provide free tickets to allow disadvantaged young people to access events at the games. However, that in itself will not create the long-term change that is needed.

I appreciate the cabinet secretary's comments on the efforts that are in place, but will an independent assessment be made of the effectiveness of the legacy actions that she has outlined?

Shona Robison: Yes. I confirm that there will be comprehensive analysis of all the impacts of the games, from the economic impact through to the legacy impact. There will be a very comprehensive post-games legacy report in summer next year. I will be happy to keep Parliament updated on that.

Sport and Legacy Budget (Priorities)

8. Gavin Brown (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what the priorities are for the sport and legacy budget in the next financial year. (S4O-03608)

The Cabinet Secretary for Commonwealth Games, Sport, Equalities and Pensioners' Rights (Shona Robison): I am delighted to say that the Scottish Government will continue to make significant investment in 2015-16 to build on the fantastic successes of this year, including £2 million of funding specifically for legacy, to ensure that we capitalise on the inspiration generated by the Commonwealth games. There will be investment of £24 million in the national performance centre for sport, and £6 million will be invested in a national parasport centre, which recognises the importance of equality of

opportunity and the success of Scotland's para-athletes in the games.

More than £4 million will go to sportscotland's institute of sport to continue to develop Scotland's world-class system for sport, and £14 million will be invested in more than 50 Scottish governing bodies of sport, to the benefit of clubs and athletes in communities across Scotland.

Gavin Brown: How does resource spending for the elite athletes programme in 2015-16 compare to spending in the current year?

Shona Robison: Sportscotland's budget has remained frozen and is the same as it was in the previous year. Sportscotland's elite athlete programme is also supported by lottery funds, of which sportscotland receives a substantial amount.

We are in discussions with sportscotland about the elite athlete programme. Commonwealth Games Scotland is also part of those discussions, which are to ensure that team Scotland receives the support that it requires when it competes in the Gold Coast in 2018. Those discussions are still under way, but elite athletes can be assured that they will receive the support that they require to perform at their very best.

Equality Issues (Discussions with European Commission)

9. Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions it has had with the European Commission regarding equalities issues. (S4O-03609)

The Cabinet Secretary for Commonwealth Games, Sport, Equalities and Pensioners' Rights (Shona Robison): The Cabinet Secretary for Training, Youth and Women's Employment met the European Commission director general for justice, Ms Françoise Le Bail, on 19 May 2014. Ms Le Bail leads on equality issues for the Commission. The focus of the discussion was the Commission's most recent report on equality between men and women, published in April 2014.

Christian Allard: Does the minister agree that it is important that all European Union workers have equal rights? That applies as much to those, like me, who come from Europe to fill the skills gaps in our buoyant economy—in the north-east, in particular—as it does to our young people who decide to work abroad in Europe.

Shona Robison: I agree with the member. There are 160,000 people from other EU states who have chosen to live and work in Scotland. They make a massive contribution to Scotland's economy and culture. The Scottish Government greatly values the contribution that EU migrants

bring to our economy and society and the benefits of freedom of movement that are enjoyed by our citizens, who can live, study and work in all EU countries.

EU migrants who move to Scotland, exercising their right to free movement within the terms of European law, have a legitimate reason to be here and will always be welcome, not only for their contribution to our economy but also for the vibrancy and diversity that they bring to our nation.

I very much agree with the member. That is a sentiment that we would want to send out from this Parliament.

One Scotland Equalities Campaign

10. James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its equalities campaign, one Scotland. (S4O-03610)

The Cabinet Secretary for Commonwealth Games, Sport, Equalities and Pensioners' Rights (Shona Robison): The one Scotland equality campaign was initially launched on 28 July to enable the Scottish Government to communicate about equality issues with a single voice and purpose. That was supported by the launch of the new one Scotland website: www.onescotland.org.

Following the forced marriage phase of the equality campaign, which was launched on 30 September, the next phase will focus on race and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex equality and will be launched on 6 November.

James Dornan: BEMIS is one of the key partners in the campaign. In its submission to the Smith commission, it suggested that, if equalities legislation were devolved to the Scottish Parliament, it would make sense also to fully devolve powers over welfare and employment. Will the minister reiterate her support for that analysis and outline what benefits that would bring?

Shona Robison: I am pleased that BEMIS and others have made submissions to the Smith commission arguing for that point. It is important that equality legislation is devolved to this place, alongside welfare policy and employment policy. That will not only enable us to do more around some of the work that we are already doing; it will give us the ability to do even more to ensure that the sentiments behind the one Scotland campaign are felt by everyone, in practice. By having powers over those matters, we can take much more action to ensure that people in Scotland have absolute equality of opportunity.

Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): I welcome the minister's remarks with regard to the devolution of

equalities. Does she support the devolution of the ability to legislate for gender quotas? If so, would she use that power?

Shona Robison: I think that we have made our position on that pretty clear. In our submission to the Smith commission, we are clear that we want the power over equalities legislation in Scotland for a purpose, and that that purpose is to ensure that we build on the good work and progress that has been made with regard to women in public life, particularly with regard to their visibility—I have always said that people cannot be what they cannot see. That is an important point. Of course, we would be able to use the power over equalities legislation to transform public life and to be a leading example for other sectors in Scottish society.

Training, Youth and Women's Employment

Employment in Dundee (Impact on Women and Young People)

1. Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what impact the reported 11 per cent fall in employment of people of working age in Dundee between 2011-12 and 2013-14 has had on women and young people. (S4O-03611)

The Cabinet Secretary for Training, Youth and Women's Employment (Angela Constance): The latest data from the annual population survey—July 2013 to June 2014—shows a drop of 5.6 per cent in employment levels between 2011-12 and 2013-14. The employment level for women in Dundee decreased by 2.5 per cent over the same period, while the youth employment level increased by 5.9 per cent. However, the latest data from the labour force survey shows a clear and sustained strengthening in the Scottish economy, with the number of women in employment at the highest level since records began and youth unemployment at a six-year low.

Alison McInnes: Unemployment is falling and Scotland's economy is growing thanks to the hard work of both of Scotland's Governments. However, does the cabinet secretary agree that there is still a lot of hard work to do to ensure that all our local economies benefit from the progress? In light of the statistics, what steps will the Scottish Government take to support Dundee in achieving its target of more and better employment opportunities for young people and 68,000 people of working age in employment by 2017?

Angela Constance: Yes, indeed. Let me be absolutely clear that, although the national indicators for women and young people

throughout the country are moving in the right direction and Scotland is outperforming the rest of the United Kingdom, as the economy strengthens and improves we need to ensure that nobody is left behind.

Alison McInnes might be interested to know that modern apprenticeship starts in Dundee increased from 238 in 2008-09 to 714 last year. Community jobs Scotland, the youth employment Scotland fund and the employability fund are all well used in Dundee. She might also be interested to know about a vocational English as a second language course in Dundee that is targeted at women. It focuses on various sectors, such as tourism, hospitality, bioscience, finance and customer service, as well as the early years in education.

Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): As the cabinet secretary stated, we have the highest number of women in employment since records began. With youth unemployment at a six-year low, does she agree that, even with the limited powers over the economy that are at our disposal, Scotland's economic health is improving?

Angela Constance: The figures speak for themselves. The economy has grown for two years and output has now passed pre-recession levels. However, I am acutely conscious that, although youth unemployment is at a six-year low, it still remains too high at 16.7 per cent. Indeed, youth unemployment pre-recession in Scotland was at 13.2 per cent, so our ambitions must be far greater than returning to pre-recession levels of economic performance and youth unemployment in particular.

I agree with Angus MacDonald's point that full fiscal responsibility for the Scottish Government would enable us to do more.

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Given the rates of youth unemployment in Dundee and the effect on women, what is the cabinet secretary doing to turn round the situation in which nearly 6,000 students were unable to get a place at Dundee and Angus College this autumn to train for the skills that they need?

Angela Constance: I point out to Ms Marra that the youth employment situation in Dundee is improving. Last year, the youth employment rate for Dundee was 47.8 per cent; it is now 51.1 per cent. That is an important move in the right direction, but there is far more to do, not only in Dundee but the length and breadth of Scotland.

I would be happy to consider any specific information that Ms Marra has about further education in Dundee and to share that with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning. However, there is no doubt that the college sector is delivering for more young people, who are studying more on full-time courses that

lead to recognised qualifications that improve their overall employability and work prospects.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is a lot of interest in the topic, so I make a plea for short and succinct questions and answers to match.

Part-time Vocational Courses (Decline in Number of Female Students)

2. Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to stem the reported decline in the number of female students studying part-time vocational courses. (S4O-03612)

The Cabinet Secretary for Training, Youth and Women's Employment (Angela Constance): Women form the majority of college students. Students can benefit from record levels of financial support of more than £104 million this academic year in bursaries, childcare and discretionary funds. That includes an entitlement payment of up to £1,215 per year to help lone parents with childcare costs. Additionally, we invested £6.6 million in 2013-14 and are doing so again in 2014-15 for additional part-time opportunities.

Hanzala Malik: The substantial drop in women taking up part-time places across the board is mirrored in vocational courses. A constituent who came to my office is struggling to find a suitable training opportunity to fit in with her caring responsibilities. Can the cabinet secretary assure me that action will be taken to increase economic involvement by providing females with the means of obtaining education while balancing a family and/or part-time work in future?

Angela Constance: As I indicated in my original answer to Mr Malik, we are continuing to invest in part-time places—there is an additional £6.6 million this year and next year. I remind Mr Malik that there is an all-age career service that is available to everyone, irrespective of gender or age, via Skills Development Scotland. I do not know the particular details of his constituent's case, but I am happy to receive information regarding the lady that he seeks to represent.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that, through the Wood commission recommendations, we can develop a world-class vocational education system that matches the best-performing economies in the European Union?

Angela Constance: The recommendations from the young workforce commission are indeed very important. They will help us to build on the great progress we have made in schools, in the college sector and in our careers sector to reach world-class vocational education. An important aspect of vocational education is that it is very

closely linked with low levels of youth unemployment. It is also crucial that, with the right approach to vocational education, we can address the needs of all young people and young women in particular; we can address the barriers that women face in the workplace and issues such as occupational segregation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 3 from Dennis Robertson has not been lodged, for understandable reasons.

Youth Unemployment (Dumfries and Galloway)

4. Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to address youth unemployment in Dumfries and Galloway. (S4O-03614)

The Cabinet Secretary for Training, Youth and Women's Employment (Angela Constance): This Government has invested in a wide range of employment initiatives that are directly helping to create sustainable employment opportunities for young people in Dumfries and Galloway. Those opportunities include more than 2,500 modern apprenticeship starts in the past three years; 145 young people being supported through community jobs Scotland in the past three years; the creation of 341 new jobs for young people through the youth employment Scotland fund in the past two years; and almost 1,000 starts on the employability fund between this year and the last.

Elaine Murray: In June 2012, the cabinet secretary convened a youth action summit in Dumfries. Can Ms Constance advise members what region-specific actions she subsequently took—or indeed intends to take—as a result of that summit to address unemployment and indeed underemployment of young people in the region, as both youth unemployment and underemployment remain higher than the Scottish average?

Angela Constance: I appreciate that the claimant count is marginally higher in Dumfries and Galloway than it is in the rest of the country, although the youth employment rate in Dumfries and Galloway has increased substantially over the year. It is now at 63 per cent, which is above the national average.

Nonetheless, the member is right that underemployment is indeed an issue for young people, particularly in rural areas. That was one of the reasons why we went the length and breadth of the country holding discussions in many parts of Scotland, because there are unique challenges in rural parts of Scotland. That approach has certainly helped to inform our views about how we progress with vocational education training to meet the particular needs of rural areas and has

particularly informed the work that we are doing in the strategic group on women and work.

There is also the need for added flexibility, bearing in mind that, for some young people in rural areas—this point applies to young people with disabilities as well—their transitions can be disrupted. Therefore, where we can, we have extended the offer of national schemes from people aged 16 to 24 to people aged 16 to 29—for example, with the youth employment Scotland fund.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): On whether south-west Scotland is to benefit from European Union funding through the youth employment initiative, has the cabinet secretary received any response from the United Kingdom on adopting the European youth guarantee to ensure faster intervention with unemployed young people to help them into work?

Angela Constance: Joan McAlpine raises two important issues. The south-west of Scotland, including Dumfries and Galloway, will indeed benefit from youth employment initiative funds. We are meeting our local authority partners to progress that and to discuss roll-out of that rather substantial fund.

It is no secret that the Government and I are whole-heartedly in favour of the European youth guarantee. Parliament also voted in favour of that position. I have written to the UK Government a number of times to make it clear that the work programme and the youth contract are failing to intervene early enough. The most recent reply that I received was from Esther McVey on 24 October, just last week, in which she said:

“We do not think that the UK endorsement of this initiative would either be necessary or cost-effective.”

I strongly dispute that view. We must prevent youth unemployment from becoming long-term unemployment, which means acting from day 1 of a young person's unemployment.

Employment (Young People with Learning Disabilities)

5. Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how it helps young people with learning disabilities into employment. (S4O-03615)

The Cabinet Secretary for Training, Youth and Women's Employment (Angela Constance): The Scottish Government recognises that young people with disabilities can face additional barriers to entering employment. Our aspiration is that, with the right support, they can find suitable and fulfilling jobs in mainstream employment.

By providing support for young people with learning disabilities, such as activity agreements that provide tailored learning, targeted employer recruitment incentives, and employment and training opportunities through Community Jobs Scotland, we ensure that Scotland's most vulnerable young people, including those with learning disabilities, have the support and the skills that they need to be successful in the workplace.

Siobhan McMahon: The cabinet secretary is aware of the young Scotland's got talent programme, which is run by the Scottish Consortium for Learning Disability. It is an initiative that I know she supports. Will she commit to funding the programme in the future, given the fantastic results that it has achieved in giving young people their first opportunities in employment?

Angela Constance: I have attended two young Scotland's got talent events—I even have a T-shirt to prove it. If I had known that Ms McMahon was going to ask a question about the programme, I would have worn that T-shirt today. The events were tremendous and absolutely blew me away. They were great networking opportunities for young people with learning disabilities, who were able to show proudly what they can and do achieve in the workplace.

I have already provided £31,000 to support the events. I cannot make any promises, given that finances are always tight, but if we find as we progress through the financial year that there is scope for providing further support, we will do that.

Employability Fund (Support for Women)

6. Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how the employability fund supports women into work. (S4O-03616)

The Cabinet Secretary for Training, Youth and Women's Employment (Angela Constance): The employability fund was introduced with the fundamental aim of improving outcomes for unemployed women and men throughout Scotland. The fund allows training providers greater flexibility to adapt provision to individual client and local labour market needs, and it will deliver 17,150 starts each year.

Kezia Dugdale: I have a breakdown here of the employability fund figures. Only 861 women over the age of 25 have been able to access the fund—less than 5 per cent of the total number. The number of women who have received support in Perth, East Lothian and Aberdeenshire can be counted on one hand. How, therefore, can the Government claim success in getting women back to work when so few have received support from the employability fund?

Angela Constance: From my experience, and the figures that I have seen, women make up about a third, or 36 per cent, of people throughout the country who receive support from the employability fund. I accept that there will be regional variations, and it is interesting to look at the reasons for them.

The employability fund took over from the get ready to work and training for work programmes, which tended to be used more by young men. It is true, therefore, that that is still reflected in the figures for the employability fund. Fewer women are referred to the programmes because more young women leaving school have positive destinations. However, Skills Development Scotland published its equality impact assessment for the employability fund earlier this year, and it is committed to looking at a more diverse participation and less gender segregation in the programme.

The NEET—not in education, employment or training—figures show that young men tend to fall out of education and training more than women, but I am particularly conscious that, although the figure for young men has fallen, the figure for young women NEETs has remained static. There are issues that we need to address, and we need to dig behind the headline figures.

Training Courses (Support for Women)

7. Drew Smith (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how it supports women in taking up places on training courses. (S4O-03617)

The Cabinet Secretary for Training, Youth and Women's Employment (Angela Constance): The Scottish Government recognises that women can face challenges in accessing training and is taking a range of steps to address them. For example, in implementing the recommendations of the commission for developing Scotland's young workforce, the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council and Skills Development Scotland have been asked to take action to reduce gender segregation in their courses and programmes, and to report on progress.

Drew Smith: Since the Government came to power, the number of women who access college courses has fallen dramatically while childcare costs have risen to among the highest in Europe. Does the cabinet secretary agree that one of the first priorities should be the provision of childcare places to any parent who has a child under five and who is seeking to access a college course?

Angela Constance: Drew Smith needs to recognise that women are not underrepresented in our colleges: 53 per cent of college students are women and 52 per cent of full-time students aged

between 16 and 24 are women. We must also recognise that, in the year ending June 2014, Scotland had the highest percentage in the United Kingdom of women with national vocational qualification level 3, or equivalent qualifications, at 63.3 per cent. We have to be proud of that achievement but, of course, we want to continue to take action to reduce the barriers that women still face.

My commitment and the Government's commitment to universal childcare is absolutely clear. I just hope that Drew Smith will join us in trying to get the full range of fiscal and welfare responsibilities to achieve that.

Skills Needs (West of Scotland)

8. Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what it considers the skills needs are of the west of Scotland economy. (S4O-03618)

The Cabinet Secretary for Training, Youth and Women's Employment (Angela Constance): The Scottish Government is committed to working with partners to increase sustainable economic activity across the regions of Scotland, including the west of Scotland. Responding to the skills needs of employers and businesses across Scotland is absolutely crucial to maximising our potential.

Through Skills Development Scotland, we have committed to establishing a robust and evidence-based understanding of Scotland's strategic workforce skills requirements. SDS will shortly publish a series of regional skills assessments, which will be developed with local partners to inform future skills planning and investment. In that way, we are ensuring that our skills and education system remain closely aligned with the needs of employers and regions across Scotland.

Neil Bibby: Does the cabinet secretary agree that skills needs vary across Scotland and that we need to ensure that regional skills needs are being met? We have had cuts of 140,000 college places across the country, so will she agree to analyse the impact that those cuts in training opportunities has had in places such as Renfrewshire and other areas in the west of Scotland?

Angela Constance: The regional skills assessments for local areas are important. They will be developed in collaboration with the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council, Scottish Enterprise, local partners and local authorities, and will need to be aligned with the outcome agreements for colleges and community planning partnerships.

To focus on some positive news, Mr Bibby might be pleased to know that the youth employment rate in Renfrewshire has increased to 59.1 per

cent and that the claimant count for young people in Renfrewshire has decreased, such that 500 fewer young people are claiming jobseekers allowance and related benefits, which should of course be good news. The claimant count is now lower than pre-recession levels, which is evidence that the Government's policies are working.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Stuart McMillan can ask a brief supplementary.

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): I welcome those comments from the cabinet secretary. I also welcome the Scottish Government's action in securing a buyer for Ferguson's shipyard in Port Glasgow. Does the cabinet secretary agree that closure of the yard would have resulted in the loss of valuable jobs and skills in the west of Scotland, and in particular the Inverclyde area?

Angela Constance: Of course I agree wholeheartedly that had Ferguson's closed, that would have resulted in the loss of valuable skills, not only in the west of Scotland but across Scotland as a whole, and there would have been a devastating impact on families and communities. Instead, thanks to the investment and ambition of Clyde Blowers Capital, Ferguson's will remain an integral part of the Inverclyde community.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that that concludes the time that is available for questions.

Education

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-11304, in the name of Liz Smith, on addressing the attainment gap in Scottish schools.

14:40

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The parties in this Parliament frequently disagree on education policy, no doubt partly because different principles underpin our respective party manifestos but all too often because we find it difficult to agree on the nature or extent of a problem.

The amendments to the motion make it clear that during today's debate we will argue again about policy. However, having read a great deal about what the other parties have had to say on the issue over a considerable period, I do not think that any of us will have too much difficulty in acknowledging the full nature and extent of the problem and in accepting the stark evidence that lays bare the differences in attainment between different schools and communities.

For the moment, I will deal with attainment, rather than achievement. The headline statistic shows a small improvement in overall attainment in Scotland over the past two academic years, but that masks the true picture for far too many young people. As Ruth Davidson said in her recent conference speech, when she spelled out Conservative education policy, fewer than 20 per cent of pupils from the most deprived areas are attaining five standard grade credit passes, while 60 per cent of their peers from more affluent communities are managing to do so.

In a number of local authorities, a pupil from a disadvantaged area is four to five times less likely to attain such qualifications than a pupil from a more affluent home. I am happy to give way to the minister.

The Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages (Dr Alasdair Allan): I think that we all agree on the importance of closing the attainment gap—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Sorry, minister. Could we have the minister's microphone on, please?

Dr Allan: It would help if I put my card in the console. *[Laughter.]*

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Bottom of the class.

Dr Allan: We all accept the importance of closing the attainment gap, but does the member dissociate herself from attempts to misrepresent

the nature of the problem? I am thinking of some extraordinary comments in this week's *Mail on Sunday*, in which the claim was made that

"20% of our pupils are in a school where they have literally no chance whatsoever of going into either tertiary education, skills training or any kind of productive activity."

I hope that the member will either name those schools or dissociate herself from such a claim.

Liz Smith: I completely dissociate myself; I did not say that.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): But that was your quote.

Liz Smith: That is for the newspaper to answer; I did not say that, cabinet secretary—and you will see from my speech that I completely dissociate myself from that statement, as I do from several other bland statements that do not go to the root of the problem.

The attainment gap is important in the context of the earliest years, which are mentioned in the Labour amendment. It is no surprise that, by the time pupils come to study for their higher grades, only one in 10 attains at least three A grades. Worse still, only 2.9 per cent of disadvantaged pupils, as opposed to 20 per cent of pupils from better-off families, manage to do that. That means that someone is seven times more likely to do well in their highers if they are born into a more affluent family.

In Edinburgh, which is supposedly an area that often boasts better results, only 1.1 per cent of pupils from the poorest 20 per cent of households attain three As or more—that is precisely six pupils. That exposes that there is a gap not just between children in different local authority areas but between children who might live just a few streets apart.

That is a bleak picture. No one, whether they are a Conservative, a nationalist, a Liberal or a socialist, can deny those findings or the deep-rooted unfairness that accompanies them. In short, far too many of our young people attend schools that, year on year, do not perform as well as they should do.

The chamber knows only too well that I am not a fan of having too many league tables, but I believe in the important ones. I also believe in the ones that measure a school against its own successes and failures, as those often provide the greatest accuracy when it comes to making comparisons. I recognise what the cabinet secretary has said in the past about the self-improving schools pathfinder, which can be extremely important.

I also believe in the need to be brutally honest. In March 2013, the cabinet secretary told BBC

Radio Scotland's "Good Morning Scotland" programme that Scotland does not have "failing schools". The phrase "failing schools" might not be fashionable or sit easily with the educational parlance these days, which seems always to tend towards mollification of a problem, but I think that it is time to acknowledge that a few schools in Scotland—and a few departments within some schools—are failing to deliver the results that they should be delivering.

Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Would the member at least countenance the possibility that many of Scotland's schools, particularly those that serve deprived communities, face a range of external forces that are acting against the strong efforts of teachers and educationists and many of which are being driven by the dogmatic agenda of her colleagues at Westminster?

Liz Smith: Of course, I accept that poverty is a serious problem—who could not do that? Let us be absolutely clear about the issue that poverty presents for some communities, but let us not pretend that there are not some schools that are not delivering the results that they should be delivering. The statistics over a long period of time show that the results that we are getting for some of our children are not as good as they ought to be.

The cabinet secretary's amendment says that we are performing very well against our international competitors. We are performing quite well, but we are not doing as well as we ought to be doing. If we look at the statistics that can be measured over a long period of time, it becomes crystal clear that we are not performing as well as we should be. People such as Keir Bloomer, Lindsay Paterson and Peter Downes have serious concerns because this is the very moment when we need to deliver competitive advantage. Why has the Scottish Government decided to take us out of some of the measurements, whether the progress in international reading literacy study—PIRLS—or the trends in international mathematics and science study—TIMSS? They give us first-class information about how well we are doing.

If I felt that the other parties in the chamber had the policies to deliver the change that will provide the benefit to our disadvantaged children, perhaps I could accept their amendments, but I do not. The statistical fact of the matter is that too many schools are not delivering the results that they ought to be delivering. What do we have to do about that? I think that we have to be brutally honest, and that starts with addressing the poverty issue.

The Conservative Party and the Liberals have been heavily targeted about the problems of poverty, but the Scottish Government has today

released some information about how well the economy is starting to do. Just a little while ago, when she was putting together “Child Poverty Strategy for Scotland: Our Approach 2014-2017”, Nicola Sturgeon said:

“Much has changed since 2011 and the latest published figures show decreases in the numbers of children living in poverty.”

Today’s statistics show that there has been a substantial fall in the number of children in workless families. Therefore, to ensure that we do not have as much poverty as we currently have, we must target economic growth. We have to benefit the companies and people who can offer skills in a way that enables them to deliver jobs—not just highly skilled jobs, but an upskilling right across the economy. There are some positive signs of that.

I fully admit that poverty is a difficult issue, but we on this side of the chamber are not going to accept that it is the problem. I absolutely refute any suggestion that the Conservatives are comfortable with poverty—we are not. That is why we are standing up and being brutally honest about the problem.

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

Liz Smith: I will not at this stage.

The second issue is that we need a complete change in structure. I have in front of me some interesting comments made by the cabinet secretary. He said:

“education is a field in which we have traditionally excelled but which in recent years, with the removal of a competitive environment and a weakening of a national as well as an individual striving for excellence we have slipped down the ranks.”

“Many commentators have noted the success in Sweden of education vouchers and a debate about their utility in Scotland would be instructive... The consumer ... would be able to choose the best facilities for their particular needs.”

He also said:

“Choice and diversity are the hallmarks of a mature and confident society”.

Cabinet secretary, that could be a Conservative Party manifesto. Why is it as cabinet secretary that you will not be able to address some of those principles? We need diversity; we need a system that offers far greater opportunity for youngsters.

On the back of that, I want to talk about the Wood commission. I fundamentally believe that Sir Ian Wood is trying to deliver an awful lot of that. He wants diversity and the best for every child. He is saying to us that, for some children who are not going to be fully motivated in school, there must be other opportunities.

The real problem is that schools are accountable to local and national Government. They are not accountable as they should be to parents, to pupils and to teachers. That must change. The cabinet secretary cannot deny that he spoke about that issue when he wrote his book “Grasping the Thistle”.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Liz Smith: I will in just a minute.

It is so important that we take on board the ideas of diversity and choice, and look around the world at the countries that have been doing well in their school education. It is those countries that have had that diversity and choice.

John Mason: Does the member accept that, certainly in my area, when the parents were asked whether they wanted to have more involvement in running the schools, they basically said no?

Liz Smith: No, I do not accept that and I will tell you why. I have been looking at some of the inspection reports for schools across some of our weaker schools in Dundee, Edinburgh, Perth and Glasgow. The reports make for very interesting reading about how the schools have managed to turn round their attainment levels as a result of top-class leadership and a much greater engagement of parents—parents who have said that they want to have greater diversity in their school systems—and also a back-to-basics strategy in literacy and numeracy. My colleagues Margaret Mitchell and Murdo Fraser will say a bit more about that.

The reports tell a very important story. However, they tell the same story that people such as Peter Peacock, when he was the Minister for Education and Young People, described when he was looking at how individual headteachers and their creative diversity had to be part of reducing the attainment gap. However, to be truly successful, we have to change the system.

We have a one-size-fits-all system. That is a matter that the cabinet secretary addressed when he wrote his book, stating that

“the one-size-fits-all approach does not work”.

Therefore, I would be interested to hear when he delivers his speech what has changed that will not allow that policy just now. The issue is about accountability; it is about how well we offer the educational experience to our young children.

I do not believe for a minute that any of us in the chamber will walk away from the problem, but we must be absolutely honest about the scale of it. The fact that the issue has lasted for a long time and that we have been, in Keir Bloomer’s words, complacent and self-congratulatory about it means

that we must accept that there is a significant problem for too many of our disadvantaged young people who are not getting the best opportunity to do well.

I will finish on that point, because it is the most important. I think—I hope—that we can agree on the nature and the extent of the statistics that define the attainment gap, but we will probably remain wholly divided about which policy will fix the problem.

By their reaction this afternoon and their amendments, the other parties clearly do not like our ideas. To them I say this: where have your policies got us so far? Where is the evidence that Scotland has regained her world-leading place in school education? Where is the evidence that if someone comes from the least well-off communities they stand as good a chance as anyone from the more affluent areas? That evidence does not exist. It is time to stand up and be counted. This party has the courage of its convictions to take that problem head-on.

I move,

That the Parliament believes that the greatest challenge facing Scottish education is the existence of the significant pupil attainment gap between different schools and different communities; considers that this leads directly to an unacceptably high number of youngsters from deprived backgrounds who do not participate in further or higher education, employment or training; believes that, as well as economic policies to address unemployment and poverty, educational policy should focus on removing the barriers that prevent too many young people in Scotland from obtaining better academic results and the ability of Scotland's schools to compare more strongly when measured against all aspects of international standards, and believes that policies to achieve this outcome should specifically focus on delivering maximum parental choice, greater diversity in schools, strong leadership in a school system that provides full autonomy for headteachers and a renewed emphasis on improving basic skills in literacy and numeracy and greater support for those pupils with additional support needs.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members to address their remarks through the chair, please. I also let those in the chamber know that the debate is tight for time.

14:54

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): I am very pleased that we are having this debate, because I want to reflect on the hard work that is being done in their schools by teachers and pupils across Scotland, on the progress that they are making to close the attainment gap and on the success of curriculum for excellence—a Keir Bloomer invention—which has increased diversity, as has the devolving of powers to schools. I also want to talk about what works in Scottish education, what we should be proud of and what more we can do.

We see progress wherever we look. Curriculum for excellence has been extensively rolled out and is now embedded in schools as the way we do education in Scotland. It has raised the bar on attainment—this year, we saw a record number of higher and advanced higher results across the system. The new national qualifications have brought deeper learning and a greater emphasis on analysis, engagement, understanding and diversity, and they represent a decisive shift for the better in Scottish education.

Against every main measure—despite what members have heard—Scotland's schools are moving in the right direction. The latest programme for international student assessment—PISA—study reinforces our international standing in education. Coupled with that, we have a record high number of school leavers in positive destinations, more new or refurbished schools and the lowest teacher unemployment in the United Kingdom.

Indeed, so much is happening across education—in early years, in primary and secondary, in colleges, in universities, in skills and in vocational education—that earlier this year we learned from the Office for National Statistics, which is much beloved of the Tories, that Scotland is the most highly educated country in Europe and is among the best educated in the world. As part of that work, we are making substantial progress in tackling the most stubborn problem of all—that of the attainment gap, which was a yawning chasm before devolution and remained far too wide under the Labour-Liberal Scottish Executive.

Alas, there is one area in education in which nothing changes—the relentless negativity of the Conservatives towards the tremendous work that is being done in our schools day in and day out.

Liz Smith: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Michael Russell: I just want to make this point. Again, we hear the Conservatives set out an approach that goes down the road of demonising individual schools and which will, as the Tories know, go on to demonise individual teachers. I hope that no other party in the Parliament will join the Tories in that.

Liz Smith: That is an outrageous remark to make. We are not in any way demonising schools. In fact, we are praising some schools that have done extremely well.

The cabinet secretary must address commentators such as Keir Bloomer and Lindsay Paterson, who—despite some of the good things that are happening in Scottish education—quite rightly point to the fact that far too many of our disadvantaged youngsters do not have the same chances as our more affluent children.

Michael Russell: That is precisely what I am going to address in my speech. That is a matter on which all of us—except the Tories—are working together.

I am certain that all the Tory members who speak in the debate will paint a negative, pessimistic picture, but I have to say that the performance of Scotland's schools compares strongly when it is measured against international standards and, in the main, it is improving.

Rather than dragging down our education system, Liz Smith and her colleagues would do well to get out more and to go into our schools to see exactly what is happening.

Liz Smith: Will the cabinet secretary give way?

Michael Russell: No.

Liz Smith has a habit of scaremongering. She did it in June 2010 when she said that CFE would be

“nothing more than a curriculum for confusion”.

Two months later, CFE was successfully introduced in secondary schools.

In February 2012, she predicted disaster over the introduction of the new exams. She demanded that the old standard grades should be retained, but the new exams went ahead this year without any significant problems.

Liz Smith rose—

Michael Russell: Liz Smith also predicted disaster for the Commonwealth games, which were subsequently described by Prince Imran, the president of the Commonwealth Games Federation, as “the best Games ever”. By any standards, as a prophetess, Liz Smith does not have a great track record.

I welcome any debate on closing the attainment gap and what we are doing to create equity in education, but we cannot escape from the fact that the real enemy to progress is poverty, and poverty is being exacerbated by the Westminster Government. The Westminster Government is attacking the poor for being poor and that is nothing short of a disgrace.

With the powers of independence—the powers of a normal state—we could have used tax, welfare and labour market regulation to develop a solution that is right in this context. However, Scotland did not vote yes, and we must all deal with the consequences of that decision. One major consequence in this particular portfolio is how we are going to make real and sustained progress in narrowing the attainment gap.

As it stands, welfare reforms at Westminster are going to make the situation worse. For decades Westminster's record has been abysmally poor,

but now the Institute for Fiscal Studies has estimated that an additional 50,000 Scottish children will be living in relative poverty by 2020 because of United Kingdom welfare reforms. When housing costs are taken into account, that figure could be as high as 100,000. That is nothing less than a sustained attack on Scotland's poorest children and, although we cannot fully mitigate the effect of the reforms, we will do what we can to limit their worst impacts.

Within this particular portfolio, we are doing just that. We recognise that the problems of poverty cannot be stopped at the school gates, but our education system must do more to raise attainment. Curriculum for excellence is an important development in that respect, as is getting it right for every child and developing Scotland's young workforce. Together, they are creating expectations, and we are building on those expectations with things such as the partnership programme, which I will touch on in a moment.

Instead of seeking every opportunity to criticise, Liz Smith should get out there and meet the young people who are being affected by the benefits of these programmes. She should get out and meet pupils such as Rhys from Coatbridge. In fact, she could have met him, first of all, in the video that I showed at the start of the Scottish learning festival and which I distributed to members of the Education and Culture Committee. Other members are welcome to have a copy of it.

When I met him, Rhys was a primary 7 pupil at St Bartholomew's. His headteacher had been a keen adopter of the attainment improvement methodology, and he had worked one-on-one with Rhys to help him make progress. When I asked Rhys, in his school, about the difference that that had made, he gave me a devastatingly simple and direct answer: “I am not afraid of my lessons any more.” Rhys has now made a successful transition to St Ambrose high school in Coatbridge and is continuing to enjoy his lessons.

Closing the attainment gap is about that kind of one-to-one work with individuals such as Rhys, which is happening now all over Scotland. It is about the inspirational actions of the team at Bellshill academy, who identified meeting the local authority average for higher passes as a key objective and then worked with individual pupils to help them get the results that they needed by, for example, providing things as simple as somewhere to do their homework. It is also about working with parents, as can be seen in Wester Hailes, where the senior management team ensures that every parent is able to engage with the school on their own terms.

That is the reality of improvement: it is about changing lives and prospects one by one in some

of Scotland's most troubled and difficult areas. That is being done right now, and we will do more and more of it. Surely this chamber should support that work, not attack it out of a lack of knowledge or in an attempt to demonise schools.

Liz Smith: No one would deny that a fantastic amount of work is being done in Scottish schools—and if the cabinet secretary thinks that we are saying otherwise, I am sorry that he has so misinterpreted the situation. What we are quite rightly pointing to is a situation that I believe every parent wants to be addressed, in which far too many of our youngsters do not have the same opportunities to succeed as other children. Surely that is the most important thing that we can do. The situation has not just developed but has been going on for some time now. We in Scotland once had a fantastic reputation for education, and we still have in some sectors—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can I hurry you along, please?

Liz Smith: We must get back to that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, you are approaching your last minute.

Michael Russell: We must get back to it, but we will not do so by demonising the poor, schools or teachers. We will get back to it with the type of work that we are doing now, which is worthy of support, not of being attacked.

In June, I launched the raising attainment for all programme. Twelve local authorities and more than 150 schools have now signed up to becoming part of a learning community that is forensically focused on closing the equity gap, and we are going to expand that even further.

We also have a nationally co-ordinated programme, led by Education Scotland, to partner schools so that they can share best practice. We have a co-ordinated programme of literacy and numeracy hubs; we have the access to education funds; and we have established—

Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary is closing.

Michael Russell: I really am sorry, but I must finish.

We have also established the Scottish College for Educational Leadership, which is now up and running. A range of good things is happening that we can work on together, but what we are hearing this afternoon is the old story of going back to the things that we do not want to do and insisting on progress that we are already making and which should be supported.

I do not believe that there is anywhere else in the UK or indeed in Europe that is prioritising educational attainment as much as we are—and the PISA results show as much. We have a unique curriculum that is fit for the future, schools that are eager for success and a system that is supporting them. I have confidence in our schools to deliver on that programme and, in moving my amendment, I implore the Tories to be part of success instead of trying to drag it down.

I move amendment S4M-11304.3, to leave out from first “believes” to end and insert:

“notes that Scotland's schools compare strongly when measured against international standards; believes that the greatest challenge facing Scottish education is the impact of poverty and inequality on pupils' ability to learn; further believes that the policies of the UK Government are increasing poverty and inequality; recognises that this leads directly to an unacceptably high number of young people from deprived backgrounds who do not participate in further or higher education, employment or training; further recognises that, in addition to economic policies designed to address unemployment and poverty, educational policy should focus on mitigating the barriers to educational achievement created by this inequality, and agrees that the curriculum for excellence is delivering improved outcomes using evidence-based approaches to raise attainment including a focus on strong leadership, high quality learning and teaching, literacy, numeracy and parental engagement.”

15:05

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I welcome this debate, which the Scottish Conservatives have brought forward. We can support the Government amendment on the basis of its recognising the challenges that we face and on which we must work together, but that will not deter us from raising those challenges in the debate. I know that Liz Smith raised a number of challenges for the Government.

Addressing the educational attainment gap and educational inequality is one of the biggest issues that the Parliament and the country face. This is an opportunity for us to put forward suggestions as well as to scrutinise the statistics, the research and the Government's record since 2007. However, before we propose solutions, we need to analyse and identify the problems, as there is a huge amount of work to be done to address the attainment gap in our education system and the inequality that it creates.

As Liz Smith said, the statistics show that there has been a small reduction in the attainment gap of pupils from the least and most deprived areas, but none of us can claim that there has been a significant or meaningful reduction in that gap. There is still a substantial attainment gap between pupils in respect of average tariff score, positive follow-up destinations, and literacy and numeracy levels.

Scottish Labour agrees that there needs to be a focus on the early years and literacy and numeracy, and we believe that that is something that all parties should prioritise and which all parents can support. The 2013 Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy showed that there is a substantial gap in literacy, and the most recent 2014 report, which focused on numeracy, highlighted that numeracy rates for primary 4 and primary 7 pupils were lower than those in 2011, which is worrying.

The inequality of opportunity is no better demonstrated than in the statistics that relate to looked-after children. The most recent Government research showed that only 2 per cent of looked-after children initially went to university, compared with 36 per cent of all school leavers. I do not pretend that that is an easy problem to fix. Improvements to aftercare support were made in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, but we will also need to improve the standards of support that looked-after children can expect during their school education.

John Mason: I am interested in the member's point about looked-after children. Does he agree that it suggests that many problems outwith the schools are coming into the schools, which they need to deal with, rather than that they are necessarily caused by the schools, as the Conservatives seem to suggest?

Neil Bibby: I think that there is a mixture of both. I definitely accept the member's point.

For our part, the Scottish Labour Party is developing a strategy to deal with the attainment gap, which includes reducing the gap before children start school through increased and improved pre-school provision; removing barriers to young people's opportunities and learning at school; and supporting families directly through initiatives such as family centres.

In May this year, Scottish Labour published our "Mind the Gap: Tackling Educational Inequality in Scotland" challenge paper, which set out 12 policy priorities in the area, including focusing on the crucial early years of a child's life; building relationships between families, schools and communities; expanding wraparound care; and removing barriers to inclusion, such as the cost of school trips and after-school activities.

The early years is a key focus of our work, but we also need to examine whether our primary and secondary school education system is well enough equipped and resourced to face the huge challenge of closing the attainment gap. Despite the hard work and professional commitment of teachers, parents and pupils, the Scottish education system is being stretched. That is through no fault of theirs. We all know that

teachers in Scotland are facing significant workload issues, and surveys by teaching unions indicate that the Government is failing to address them. Not only are teachers still teaching new courses and preparing pupils for new exams, but there are far fewer teachers in our classrooms. Given those circumstances, how can we seriously reduce the attainment gap?

Since 2007, we have seen a cut of nearly 4,000 teachers under the Scottish National Party Government. That matters because teachers and parents regularly tell me and others that they feel that the more time teachers can spend individually with pupils, the better. As a response to the teaching unions' concern, the cabinet secretary said recently at the Education and Culture Committee:

"As for teacher numbers, I am very keen to maintain and, if possible, expand them."—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 7 October 2014; c 27.]

Yet just two days later there was no mention from John Swinney in his budget statement of resources for maintaining teacher numbers, let alone increasing them. I hope that that issue will soon be addressed.

The number of teachers is one issue, but the issue of inequality is also linked to the increased reliance on private tuition. In March this year, a *Holyrood* magazine survey exposed that there had been a 300 per cent increase in the use of private tutors in the past year alone, with 95 per cent of those using them coming from state schools. Some families who were worried about their children passing their exams were found to be spending £1,900 a year to get an hour a week of extra tuition. Parents have to do what is right for their children, but it is concerning that we are seeing such an increase in the reliance on private tuition. Families from the most deprived areas cannot afford anywhere near £1,900 a year for private tuition. If that trend continues, it will only entrench and widen the attainment gap. I hope that the Scottish Government can look at that issue and respond specifically on that point.

Another issue of inequality in our education system—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that you must come to a close.

Neil Bibby: —that has been highlighted this week—I am sorry that I do not have time to talk about it—is charges for exam appeals. The judgment on an appeal should be based on the opinion of relevant teachers and not on the pupil's or school's ability to pay. The Scottish Government should urgently review what is happening in that regard.

I hope that the minister and the cabinet secretary will address those issues today. There

are of course many other challenges, which Liz Smith and others will raise, and I hope that we will be able to discuss them in this debate.

I move amendment S4M-11304.2, to leave out from “delivering maximum” to “headteachers” and insert:

“reducing the gap before children start school through increased and improved pre-school provisions, removing barriers to young people’s opportunities and learning at school, closing the attainment gap for all children with a particular focus on looked-after children”.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We turn to the open debate. There is no extra time available.

15:11

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I welcome this debate because I want to talk about some of the many positive things that have been happening throughout the country in education. I agree that we must do all we can to bridge the attainment gap to ensure that our young people can achieve their full potential.

As the Conservative motion states, it is true that

“the greatest challenge facing Scottish education is the existence of the significant pupil attainment gap between different skills and different communities”.

However, I have to ask where the Tories have been for the past couple of years. The Tory arguments are far too simplistic and the issue is larger than that. Poverty is a key part of the challenges that we have around attainment, but the current Tory welfare reforms are not helping families throughout Scotland with that. The motion indicates that school headteachers should be given full control of a devolved school budget. Such control might do a lot of things, but it will not do much to alleviate poverty in our communities.

In the real world, the Scottish Government has ensured that there is a record number of school leavers in work, training or education. The Scottish Government shares a strong commitment to driving improvement and ensuring equity in attainment to ensure that all young people achieve their full potential. In that regard, performance has improved against all 10 of the attainment measures that the Accounts Commission examined over the past decade. As the cabinet secretary said, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s PISA study shows that, unlike the rest of the United Kingdom, Scotland is narrowing the attainment gap.

Although the Scottish Government is making progress in reducing the attainment gap, it can go only so far in mitigating the damage caused by Westminster’s policies.

Liz Smith: I will just quote what Nicola Sturgeon has said:

“Much has changed since 2011 and the latest ... figures show decreases in the numbers of children living in poverty.”

George Adam: Yes, the Scottish Government has achieved so much with the limited powers of the devolved settlement, but we have to go further. As the cabinet secretary said, by 2020 more Scottish children will be living in poverty because of UK welfare reforms. That is the position before the next round of cuts, which are due in 2017-18.

It is unacceptable that children and families in Scotland are suffering as a result of the UK Government’s decisions. That is why the Scottish Government’s submission to the Smith commission for more powers set out the need for Scotland to have full responsibility over welfare powers. The Scottish Government’s child poverty strategy expresses the Government’s commitment to focus on the need to tackle the long-term drivers of poverty through early intervention and prevention, partnership and holistic services. Full powers over welfare and social policy will allow us to tackle child poverty and allow Scotland to become the fairer country that we all want it to be. Full responsibility over tax and national insurance will help us to create jobs and build the more prosperous Scotland that is necessary to support our ambitions for a fairer society.

During the referendum campaign, some of the best debates were about the kind of country that we all wanted Scotland to be, when we were out in our communities debating at various hustings. We disagreed on how we would get there, but we all wanted more or less the same thing. As I said during yesterday’s debate on the Smith commission, those are the transformational changes that the Scottish electorate voted for in September; I ask colleagues on the Opposition benches to be serious about the Smith commission and to take that into account during the commission’s deliberations. We must ensure that this Parliament receives the powers that it needs.

The Scottish Government has legislated for access to education, which should always be based on the ability to learn, not on the size of the wallet of an individual’s family. The Scottish Government removed tuition fees, saving more than 120,000 students studying in Scotland up to £27,000, compared with the cost of studying for a degree in England. Research from the Scottish Parliament information centre found that, since fees rose to £9,000 three years ago, the cost to students in the rest of the UK is £14 billion, while Scottish students studying in Scottish universities saved £1 billion.

Various universities are working towards ensuring that they give access to at least 20 per cent of people from the poorest backgrounds, and

I know that the University of the West of Scotland in Paisley has exceeded that figure. I agree that the retention of those individuals is important.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I welcome some of the steps that the Scottish Government has taken, but can Mr Adam tell me why Scotland has the lowest percentage of university entrants from the poorest backgrounds and the lowest proportion of entrants from state schools in the whole of the UK?

George Adam: That is why there is legislation to ensure that we can attain those targets and ensure that universities move towards getting the figures that we all want. The Office for National Statistics has found that Scotland currently has the best educated population in Europe and one that is among the best educated in the world. Surely that is an example of things that have been working for the Scottish Government within its limited powers.

In closing, Presiding Officer—

Kezia Dugdale: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that Mr Adam has to close.

George Adam: The answer is far more complicated than the Tories claim. The Scottish Government has achieved much in educational attainment, but there is still much to do in dealing with poverty, particularly child poverty, and this Parliament needs the powers to make the type of transformational change that we all want. The challenge to us all is to ensure that the Smith commission delivers the type of powers that can make that change. That is the type of change that Scotland voted for in September. Gordon Brown claimed that the proposals that were put forward by him and some of his colleagues with the vow were federalism.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am afraid that you must close, Mr Adam.

George Adam: Within a year or two, we will be as close to a federal state as we can be in a country where one nation has 85 per cent of the population.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have to close now, please.

George Adam: Promises and vows are not enough. This Parliament has to deliver.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I reiterate that there is no extra time in the debate.

15:18

Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I am pleased to participate in the debate, which provides the Parliament with the opportunity to

explore issues that have been the focus of much of the work of the Education and Culture Committee over the past few months. What has been clear from the committee's work, particularly its consideration of the impact of the curriculum for excellence and the recent exam results, is that the variation in attainment of pupils across Scotland is still marked. I welcome the fact that the Conservative motion notes that point.

The motion refers to attainment—the meeting of a standard—but I believe that we should also consider the achievement involved in reaching that standard. The two words are sometimes used interchangeably, but in this context they are not the same thing. In saying that, I am not ignoring the importance of attainment or the role that meeting standards plays in enabling young people to progress in their learning or employment, but for too many children and young people achievement, or progress towards the standard required, means a longer journey than for others. It means overcoming barriers relating to their own or their family's personal, domestic, financial or social circumstances, and supporting families and children to overcome those barriers and to make that achievement will improve attainment levels.

Although we deviate across the chamber in our views on how best to close the attainment gap, it is clear that we are united on the need to tackle it. As we have heard, the figures are stark. As the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission has highlighted in its recently published state-of-the-nation report, young people from the poorest areas in Scotland are four times more likely not to be in a positive destination on leaving school than their more advantaged peers. The attainment gap is not just apparent as a child progresses to maturity and on to post-school destinations; the inequalities that exist between children, including the language and number skills that form a huge part of the overall learning journey, start from day 1.

Many members will recall that, during the discussions on the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill, there was a broad and vocal coalition of organisations that urged greater support and recognition of the developmental importance of the earliest years of a child's life. That fact was illustrated by a 13-month and 10-month gap in vocabulary and problem-solving ability between children from the highest and lowest socioeconomic backgrounds.

Attainment and inequality also persist in affecting the outcomes of children who had additional support needs, with hearing-impaired pupils being 10 times more likely to leave school with no qualifications than pupils who do not have additional support needs. It is clear that that gap is also widening.

Returning to the work of the committee, the evidence from all the teaching unions during the inquiry into the curriculum for excellence was unanimous in presenting the increased burden faced by teachers in delivering the new national qualifications. From its own workforce survey, the Educational Institute of Scotland found that more than 80 per cent of respondents thought that the workload involved in the new system was a cause of severe stress. When teachers are focusing their energy on navigating the system as well as teaching, there is clearly a problem. I hope and believe that the cabinet secretary will take on board the challenges that are being faced by pupils, teachers and schools under the new national qualifications. There is broad support for curriculum for excellence, but we must make sure that it is fit for purpose.

I have said before and I say again that it is disappointing if what the figures suggest is true—that the life chances of too many children in Scotland will be determined by the circumstances into which they are born and not their potential to achieve, develop and thrive.

The Scottish Parliament can be rightly proud of some of the steps that it has taken in the past few months to improve the opportunities for care leavers and looked-after and vulnerable children, but it is important that we do not stop now. Almost 80 per cent of looked-after young people leave school at 16, with an average attainment level that is almost four times lower than their non-looked-after peers, and they are seven times more likely to have been excluded. Colleagues, we are still failing an entire generation.

Barnardo's has been keen to highlight the challenges that face those looked-after young people who remain in a home environment. Although they are similar in number to those young people who are looked after in foster care, for too many looked-after children who live at home there is not the same level of support. It will be interesting to see whether public bodies rise to the challenge of their new duties under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 of supporting looked-after children, and whether they take steps to specifically help to close the attainment gap that marks the life chances of too many young people.

Schools cannot be expected to tackle the attainment gap effectively on their own. For many pupils, their performance at school is intricately bound up in a web of other challenges, whether at home or in their wider community. For just as many pupils, a quality learning experience and the boost to aspiration and ambition that that can bring is just as likely to take place outside the classroom as inside. Sports, youth clubs and after-school activities can all have a beneficial effect on a

child's outcomes through experiential learning and confidence building. That is why we should look to the impact of health and social care integration, which, although focused on older people, brings with it consequent changes that are emerging in children's services. That, combined with the requirement for a child's plan, offers the potential for everyone who is involved in meeting a child's emotional and learning needs to work in partnership with the child as the focus.

In summing up, I refer to Labour's amendment and reiterate the importance of identifying the barriers to learning that face all children and young people, and of making sure that the child is the focus of the support that is available.

15:23

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): The Conservatives say in their motion that they believe in "greater diversity in schools". The Collins dictionary defines diversity as

"the relation ... between ... entities when ... numerically distinct".

In other words, there must be a multiplicity of entities. In my constituency, in the Moray Council area, the future of schools in Findochty, Portknockie, Portessie, Cullen and Rothiemay, of Crossroads and Cluny schools and of schools nearby at Portgordon and Newmill is under review. Milne's high school, which covers Fochabers and Mosstodloch, is under threat of closure.

The Tories also say in the motion that they believe in maximum choice. Are schools in Moray with good educational attainment being supported by what is proposed? No. They are threatened by proposals to merge, to close and to reduce the number of schools, thus reducing diversity and choice. The proposals will deliver not maximum choice but quite the opposite. They will not deliver greater diversity through reduced numbers.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Will the member give way?

Stewart Stevenson: I may come to Mary Scanlon later, because I will say things of considerable interest to her.

No educational case has been made for the changes that are proposed in Moray. Nor does the economic case stand any scrutiny. Many of the schools are below the 70 pupils level at which additional funding trips in. If the schools whose closure is proposed do close, Moray Council will sacrifice a seven-figure sum. The decision is not justified by diversity or by choice and it is hardly likely to be justified on economic grounds.

More fundamentally, there is not a squeak, not a sound and not a word from the community in

favour of such change. How do we know what the community thinks? On Saturday, the communities in Fochabers and Mosstodloch in my colleague Richard Lochhead's constituency were on the march to save their local high school—Milne's high school. It is an excellent high school, as are many of the schools that I have referred to, with good marks. We are not looking at closing failing schools; we are looking at schools with good education records.

Mary Scanlon *rose*—

Stewart Stevenson: Just wait, please.

We had a community energised in defence of its school—not quite unanimously, though. The local Conservative councillor, who is well known to Mary Scanlon, was not with the team in Fochabers and Mosstodloch. He was not standing shoulder to shoulder with his constituents; he was standing on the touchline at Easter Road as an assistant referee in the match between Hearts and Hibs. That is an important job and it is important that he gives support in that capacity, but on that day of all days, he should have been standing shoulder to shoulder with his constituents. I hope that in future he will do so. Does Mary Scanlon wish to comment?

Mary Scanlon: It is inappropriate to talk about a member of my staff who has a contract with the Scottish Football Association. I ask Stewart Stevenson, as the convener of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, to reflect on his comments.

My granddaughter is a pupil at Mosstodloch school—I declare that interest.

The only proposals to close Milne's are from Caledonia Consulting. I am sure that, as an SNP member, Stewart Stevenson will be aware that all the councillors in Moray Council will vote on Monday to determine whether that school is up for closure.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Hurry along, please.

Mary Scanlon: I am on the same page on attainment levels. I have a paragraph in my closing speech on Milne's high and I agree very much with Stewart Stevenson on the attainment level there.

Stewart Stevenson: I am perhaps encouraged by what I have just heard, but it sounds as if we may be hearing an attempt to outsource the blame for something that the council initiated. However, if on Monday we get the result that the communities have been marching for, I will make common cause with anyone in any part of the chamber to express gratitude for it. I am glad to have given the issue an airing today in the hope that we may see progress on behalf of our communities.

In my remaining 50 seconds I will say a little about disadvantage and where it comes from. It comes from economic circumstances; it certainly does not come from children's genetic circumstances when they are born. As a minister, I attended an event in Aberdeen in 2009 or 2010 at which I saw a film of a one-year-old child beating with music. From birth, children are affected by the environment, so having an economic environment in which we deny children the range of opportunities that they would get in wealthier environments is not a way forward. I ask the Tories to reflect on that and consider the effects on future generations of economic policies that are coming from Westminster.

I am happy to support the cabinet secretary's amendment.

15:29

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Like others, I welcome today's debate and thank Liz Smith for securing it. I listened to the earlier exchanges between her and the cabinet secretary and I agree with Save the Children's analysis that our education system serves the majority of our children well, but there is no room for complacency, as it is still failing too many of our poorest children.

I wholeheartedly support Neil Bibby's amendment, which focuses on improved pre-school provision and the needs of looked-after children. It reflects the content of the amendment that I lodged. However, the Government's amendment is the usual disappointing mix of self-congratulation and Westminster bashing.

There is undoubtedly much to be proud of in what we are doing in Scotland. Mr Russell highlighted a number of examples of remarkable work that staff and pupils in schools are doing across Scotland. In part, that reflects the commitment to the issue that has been shown by successive Administrations and by MSPs from across the political spectrum, as well as the work that is being done directly by those who are involved in the sector.

The risk in the SNP claiming credit for anything positive and blaming everything else on Westminster is that that approach absolves Scottish ministers and the Parliament of taking action when action is possible and necessary. That point was made by Tam Baillie, Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, in evidence to the Education and Culture Committee earlier this week. While reiterating the central importance of child poverty to child attainment issues, he made it clear that the Scottish Government could be doing things that would make a difference. Targeting resources where

they are most needed is perhaps the clearest example. However, Scottish ministers have been reluctant to act and have preferred to blame Westminster for an overall lack of resources, despite being in a position that is no different from that of any other part of the UK.

Interestingly, that point was also noted in the report of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, which was published earlier this month. Although it was extremely positive about the early years collaborative and the joint working and understanding that that facilitates, the report observed that programmes

“do not focus specifically on pupils from disadvantaged households in their project conception, design and evaluation.”

It went on to say:

“it is particularly worrying that these programmes do not use any data to target ... effectively”.

The criticism about a lack of transparent data was interesting. It chimes with the Education and Culture Committee’s concerns in the context of the extensive work that we have done since 2011 on attainment and outcomes for young people who are going through the care system and in the context of our more recent consideration of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill.

Time and again, ministers fall back on condemnation of welfare reform. That would be fair enough if the SNP’s alternative proposals were demonstrably different or credible but, in truth, they have been neither. After months of SNP ministers and back benchers railing against the work programme, sanctions and even universal credit, the SNP’s welfare reform commission recommended—surprise, surprise—a work programme, sanctions and the principle of universal credit. Meanwhile, its fiscal commission called for the Government to match the trajectory of debt reduction. Changing the names but adhering to the principle and offering no new money does not an alternative vision make. Let us please have a little more honesty and let us ensure that we are doing all that we can in the areas of our own responsibility.

One such area is early learning and childcare. Thanks to the case that was made by the Scottish Liberal Democrats and a range of children’s charities over many months, Scottish ministers have agreed to extend free provision to more of Scotland’s two-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds. One could argue that that is a rare example of effective targeting on those who are most in need instead of the ministers’ long-standing insistence on universal provision being made for three and four-year-olds. Welcome though the latter is, it fails to address the benefits

of targeting interventions at children below the age of three and those who are most in need.

Mark McDonald: Will the member give way?

Liam McArthur: I am sorry, but I have to carry on.

One of the strongest advocates of that approach has been Save the Children, which addresses it in the briefing that it supplied to members before the debate. It points out that the learning gap emerges in the early years, long before children reach school, and that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to close. That is why, although I welcome the steps that were taken in the budget in January, I urge ministers to go further and to match what is in place south of the border for two-year-olds from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

The evidence shows that, for every £1 that is invested before the age of three, £11 is saved later in life. That means that, as well as helping to close the attainment gap, that is a sound investment in the country’s economic and social wellbeing. That is perhaps not a bad way for the new First Minister to begin her tenure.

Save the Children calls for

“targeted initiatives that support pupils living in poverty to catch up quickly if they start school already behind”,

using a range of measures that include one-to-one teaching and parental involvement. That reflects the thinking behind the pupil premium, which is in place in England, and ministers should consider that in order to make the most effective use of the available resources.

The challenge that we face in tackling the attainment gap is significant and complex. It is impossible to do it justice in the short time that is available this afternoon, but I am grateful to Liz Smith for enabling the debate to take place. Like Jayne Baxter, I am proud of the work that the Education and Culture Committee has undertaken during this session of the Parliament and of the important progress that it has helped to achieve.

Further progress is clearly needed, and tackling poverty will be key to that, but evidence suggests that it is not necessarily a prerequisite. Save the Children points out:

“Some schools and local authorities are achieving great things for the poorest children in their areas, ensuring that their ability to do well in the classroom is not hindered by growing up in a low-income household.”

There is a basis on which to build, there are ideas to draw on for how we target resources and, I hope, there is a continued consensus that will allow us to make progress.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): We are tight for time today. I ask for speeches of up to six minutes.

15:36

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Over my years as an elected member in Aberdeen City Council, and since 2011 in the Parliament, I have had many opportunities to talk to teachers, parents and pupils about attainment and many other issues. One of the most interesting conversations that I ever had was with a teacher whom I had known for a very long time who had taught at a school in a disadvantaged community in Aberdeen, but spent her final years in a school in a posh suburb of the city. That woman was never backward in coming forward and giving her views. Although she praised many of the initiatives that had been instituted by the Scottish Government or the council, she was also critical of other things that were taking place in society.

Some of the things that that teacher said were extremely interesting. One of them was that we can reduce class sizes as much as we like in some areas, but if the kids come to school hungry, they will not be able to concentrate and will not be able to learn. We can send as many pupil support assistants—PSAs—as we like into schools, but if the kids are hungry, they will not be able to concentrate and learn. She used to take various snacks into school. In the morning, she would hand out cereal bars and fruit in the hope that stomachs would be filled and concentration levels would rise. Some people would say that that is not a teacher's job, but she saw it as her daily work in that school.

That teacher went on to talk about the school that she moved to. Because of demand, class sizes there were much bigger and the level of pupil support was much less, but attainment levels were higher. Why was that? It was because those kids went to school with full bellies and few worries. Beyond that, such schools also have the advantage of parent-teacher associations and parent councils that are able to raise large amounts of money for additional things.

We must take cognisance of the folks who work at the coalface and have worked in disadvantaged and advantaged areas. When they say to us that many of the problems that exist are not about education policy and are not even about education resourcing, but are about the day-to-day struggles that some families face, we have to listen to them.

Liz Smith mentioned poverty, but there is a bit of crocodile tears about that, because we know that 100,000 additional children in Scotland will be forced into poverty because of the policies of the

current Tory-Liberal Administration at Westminster.

Kezia Dugdale: I very much agree with much of what Kevin Stewart has said. I wonder whether he has read the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report on tackling the attainment gap in our schools, and whether he agrees with the report that we should support targeted funding and allocate additional resources to schools and nurseries.

Kevin Stewart: As I have said to Ms Dugdale, I have been involved at council level in trying to target resources at disadvantaged areas, and that approach is helpful in some respects. However, the social issues—the issues of poverty—have held kids back. We can continue to cut class sizes—I hope that we do—and we can continue to put PSA resource into poorer areas, but the reality is that we will not help a lot of those children unless we make sure that they are fed properly and have the advantages that others do at home.

Many poor families sacrifice a huge amount to try to ensure that their kids do well at school. Others wish that they could sacrifice more but cannot, but the kids who have the advantages tend to do that bit better. The key thing in all this is to maximise income, whether folk are on welfare or in low-paid work, in order to ensure that they have the ability to feed and care for their children properly and to give them the advantages that are required. GIRFEC is a great principle, but one thing that it does not take into account is the income of a household and how that affects the individual child.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Will you draw to a close, please?

Kevin Stewart: This is my last point, Presiding Officer. On the demonisation of individual schools, I was at a school that was demonised. We saw a huge number of kids and a huge number of teachers move out of that school to other schools, and that school basically failed. The school is no longer in existence and I would hate—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must close, please.

Kevin Stewart: I would absolutely hate to see the Tories get their way in this demonisation and for the same thing to happen right across this nation.

15:42

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): The motion highlights the need for greater support for pupils who have hugely varied additional support needs. The failure to ensure that that support is available cannot be in doubt, given, for example, the experience of dyslexic pupils. As convener of the cross-party group on dyslexia, I

pay tribute to the superb work that is done by its members, who are a diverse and accomplished group with a wealth of experience of dyslexia. Among other things, through the efforts of the group's members and Dyslexia Scotland, a dyslexia toolkit has been developed and a definition has been established that has been approved by the Scottish Government.

It is almost 10 years since the CPG on dyslexia came into existence and it is nothing short of a scandal that, during that time, the same obstacles have continued to prevail for ASN pupils who are seeking diagnosis and assessment and trying to secure the necessary support. Analysis of those obstacles reveals some common themes, starting with the discrepancies within, as well as among, local authorities. That has resulted in a school postcode lottery for ASN pupils who are seeking appropriate support. Furthermore, the situation is unlikely to improve when, as Liz Smith pointed out, schools are currently answerable and accountable to, first and foremost, local government and national Government, rather than to the parents and pupils who are best placed to comment.

Michael Russell: I share Margaret Mitchell's concern in relation to dyslexia. I point her to the example of Mainholm academy in Ayr, which has become a dyslexia-friendly school. It is within the existing structure, but it has pioneered an approach that is very important across Scotland. I am sure that the member will accept that increased funding has gone to Dyslexia Scotland and that consideration is being given to giving every bit of help to that model, so that it does not require the deconstruction of Scottish local authorities to change what is taking place.

Margaret Mitchell: Any dyslexia-friendly school is of course welcome, but let us look in a little bit more detail at what is happening with the additional funding that the cabinet secretary mentioned.

Not surprisingly, the CPG on dyslexia continues to hear about cases of parents who have reason to believe that their child is dyslexic having to fight to convince the school that an assessment is essential.

Educational psychologists carry out the assessments, but with ever-increasing demands on their time, it is, sadly, not uncommon for parents to have to pay for an independent assessment for their child, who should have been tested in school. That definitely raises equality issues in respect of parents' ability to pay for independent assessments, and is just one concrete area of education policy that the Scottish Government could address to mitigate inequality.

Instead, the cabinet secretary's "Nothing to do with me, guv" response to the problem has been

to glibly state the self-evident fact that education authorities have a responsibility to have an educational psychology service and to prioritise and manage the service in the light of local circumstances and priorities. I am sure that that has inspired and reassured the many anxious parents and pupils who are fighting for assessments.

I hope that the cabinet secretary will take on board the findings and recommendations of Education Scotland's independent review, which the Scottish Government commissioned in order to assess the experience of dyslexic learners and pupils with additional support needs in primary, secondary and special schools in Scotland. The CPG has welcomed the report's conclusion, which it considers accurately—if depressingly—lists the inconsistencies in policies and practices across and within local authorities. For example, the report found, in looking at two schools that are just a few miles apart, that one took an excellent approach in its response to a potentially dyslexic child while the other's approach was totally inadequate.

More encouragingly, the report states that there has been a significant increase in training on dyslexia at the initial teacher training stage. However, it also confirms that a staggering 24 per cent of primary schools in Scotland are not aware of the dyslexia toolkit that was designed specifically to help teachers and others who are seeking more information about dyslexia. Unbelievably, some local authorities are still trying to agree on a definition of dyslexia, despite a definition having been agreed by the Scottish Government in January 2009.

The report also states that many more pupils are identified as dyslexic in secondary school than are identified in primary school. Consequently, many primary school pupils are being denied early intervention and appropriate support, which could have a life-long adverse impact on them. In fact, the failure to identify dyslexic pupils at any stage of their schooling has been seen to have far-reaching consequences, so it is crucial that the Scottish Government, rather than focusing solely on literacy, recognises and addresses the wider impact in terms of the health, wellbeing, self-esteem, confidence, ambition and aspirations of those pupils.

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

Margaret Mitchell: The Scottish Government continues to assert that it is committed to preventative spend. If that really is the case, it must ensure that early identification assessment and support of young people with additional support needs is sufficiently resourced. Those

young people deserve and have a right to expect nothing less.

15:48

Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I represent a constituency of contrasts. Using some of the statistics that are available from Aberdeen City Council, I will outline why that is the case.

I will look first at the indicator of free school meals entitlement, which will very soon be less of a barometer for areas of deprivation as a result of the welcome roll-out of free school meals that the Government will undertake. In Aberdeen city, 15.2 per cent of primary pupils and 10.5 per cent of secondary pupils were registered for free school meals in 2013. In my constituency are the two primary schools in the city that have the highest levels of free school meals entitlement—Bramble Brae primary school at 65.6 per cent and Manor Park primary school at 46.8 per cent. Also in my constituency are the two schools that have the lowest entitlement levels: Danestone primary school at 1 per cent and Kingswells primary school at 0.2 per cent.

For secondary schools, the highest level of entitlement is at Northfield academy at 27.9 per cent, and the lowest level is at Oldmachar academy, at 2 per cent. Also within my constituency is the council ward that has the highest level of child poverty—Northfield council ward at 33 per cent—and the ward with the lowest, which is the Bridge of Don ward at less than 5 per cent.

I represent a constituency of extremes, and those extremes lead to the challenges that I referred to in my intervention on Liz Smith. Fantastic work is being done in many of the schools. I encourage members to visit schools such as Bramble Brae and Manor Park to see the work that is being done daily by teachers and pupils. However, at the same time, external forces are at work that the teachers and the pupils and their families are having to contend with.

The trend in Aberdeen, which mirrors the national trend, is for an increase in the number of pupils who go on to positive destinations when they leave school. The figure was 84.6 per cent in 2007-08 and 91 per cent in 2012-13. However, those figures are not necessarily mirrored in all schools. For example, in Northfield academy, 84.4 per cent of pupils go on to positive destinations, compared to the Scottish average of 91 per cent. Given the deprivation that is experienced in the Northfield community, that demonstrates the strong work that is being done there, but we obviously aspire to a situation in which more young people leave that school to go on to a positive destination.

The Tory motion mentions additional support needs, although we did not hear a huge amount about that in Liz Smith's opening speech. However, I was interested in Margaret Mitchell's comments on dyslexia. One organisation that I have met recently, through my involvement with autism, is called Steps to Inclusion. I am not sure whether Margaret Mitchell has met that organisation, which is focused on raising awareness among the teaching profession of autism and dyslexia, which it calls the "hidden disabilities" that can affect pupils' performance at school. I have raised with the minister in the chamber the prospect of areas such as autism and dyslexia featuring much more strongly in teacher training in order to increase the understanding and awareness that Margaret Mitchell spoke about, and to ensure that the issues are picked up on earlier. That is not necessarily a controversial aspiration or one that need divide the chamber.

On Tuesday morning, I visited Falkland House school in Fife. I was invited to do so as a result of some of the issues that I have raised on autistic spectrum disorder in education. I saw at first hand some excellent work being done at the school to advance the educational attainment of pupils, many of whom were referred there because a mainstream setting was not working for them. Again, I recommend that members visit the school. The school says that it is always happy to receive visits from members of the Scottish Parliament, and I was told about some of the members who have visited previously—I saw a photo on the wall of the cabinet secretary with some of the pupils. The school is more than happy to show members round and to show some of the fantastic work that it does.

In my area, the local council has launched a review of inclusion, the outcome of which is awaited. I will meet the council later this week to discuss the findings of the review, and the implications for additional support needs education in the city of Aberdeen.

Another group that merits a mention is care leavers. Many members will have met Alex and Ashley in the garden lobby and got their care leavers tartan ribbon. The Scottish Government has worked in partnership with Who Cares? Scotland to improve and enhance the rights of children in care and care leavers, which will play a huge part in increasing the number of young people who go on to positive destinations.

I wanted to say a little more about inequality, but I see that I am running out of time. One thing that I found disappointing is that although Liz Smith, in response to the minister, dissociated herself from herself, which was welcome, she then spoke about failing schools. However, I am willing to bet

that she could not name a single one. I hear a soundbite that has no substance.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please draw to a close.

Mark McDonald: Soundbites without substance are very dangerous, because they can lead to the stigma that Kevin Stewart talked about, which can be corrosive to the morale in a school and a community when people perceive that their school is being singled out.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must close, please.

Mark McDonald: I say to the Tories that they should think carefully about the language that they bandy about in the chamber and the effects that it will have outside it.

15:54

Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in today's debate. The subject is of great interest to me, given that I am a mother of three, all of whom are currently in full-time education—well, I hope they are. *[Laughter.]*

Devolution has brought positive change in education and early years. The Labour Party has sought to raise the level of achievement through increased public investment and to reduce inequality by providing resources for students from less fortunate backgrounds.

In the Parliament's first session, Scottish Labour made significant reforms in school education. It maintained its commitment to education by launching a national debate in 2002, which assessed the future of school education in Scotland and gave policy makers the opportunity to consider further reform. As a result, there was an agreement to review the school curriculum, end national testing for five to 14-year-olds and increase the emphasis on vocational skills and subject choices for 14 to 16-year-olds.

In Scottish Labour's second term of office in this Parliament, the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 was passed. Since 1999, Labour's approach has demonstrated its commitment to reforming and improving education in Scotland.

Since 2007, there has been a failure to meet targets on childcare provision, class sizes and free school meals. It could also be argued that university education has been prioritised at the expense of other areas, as the recent cuts in college places demonstrate. Colleges are dear to my heart. The 37 per cent cut has deprived 140,000 potential students of the opportunity for further education.

I understand that Scotland's devolved education system compares reasonably with systems in the rest of the United Kingdom and that Scotland continues to succeed. We are concerned about the lack of comprehensive progress, despite the best efforts of schools, teachers and Governments. There remain high levels of inequality across all areas of the Scottish education system. It is unacceptable that children from poor backgrounds do significantly worse than other children do, at all stages of learning. That potentially limits their life chances and perpetuates the poverty cycle.

The challenge is clear and the key point remains: if schools are to meet society's needs, there must be a change in culture and outlook that goes beyond the classroom, as Kevin Stewart and Kezia Dugdale said. What is needed if we are to improve education in Scotland is clear to me. We should continue to promote social inclusion and we should provide more high-quality childcare to families throughout Scotland. Kezia Dugdale has outlined the Labour Party's plans in that regard. Our commitment to investment of £45 million in childcare places for mothers who want to take up a college place will help our most vulnerable potential students and tackle high levels of inequality.

The Scottish Labour Party has played a key role in reforming education in Scotland. Although its work has been diluted somewhat, I hope that we will be able to ensure a better education system for all in the very near future. It is the responsibility of every elected member to make that a priority—we do not do so at our peril, because our children are our country's future.

15:59

Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP): I want to talk about local schools and the Conservatives' demonisation of schools. Like Stewart Stevenson, I can talk about what happened in rural Aberdeenshire in 2010 and 2011, when the Liberal Democrat and Conservative-led Aberdeenshire Council targeted two schools, Logie Coldstone school and Clatt school, for closure.

The communities managed to save the schools, but only after months of hurt for the parents, pupils and teachers. They were demonised month after month, week after week, by the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats, who were trying to find fault with the schools and were claiming that the quality of teaching was not good enough. We heard that again today. They tried to claim that the building was not good enough and that the problem was the number of pupils, but I can tell members that the numbers of pupils have grown since then. Logie Coldstone primary school was

supposed to be too small to survive, but it increased its roll by 50 per cent in 2011 and again by 50 per cent in 2012. I have learned not to trust the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition when it comes to choices for parents.

Today, Liz Smith told us that in order to close the attainment gap we should focus on delivering parental choice, greater diversity in schools and renewed emphasis on improving literacy and numeracy skills. However, she also talked about targeting poverty and said that the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition at Westminster will focus on tackling poverty. I am sorry to say that, as the communities that I represent in the north-east of Scotland see it, the coalition is targeting not poverty but the poorest in our communities. The welfare reforms that we have are not the way to target poverty. I concur with Kevin Stewart that children going to school without having eaten should not happen in 2014.

Liz Smith said that we do not like Conservative ideas on education, but I remind her of what happened to Michael Gove down south. Nobody likes the Conservatives' ideas on education. What matters is poverty. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation report "Closing the attainment gap in Scottish education" states:

"Who you are in Scotland is far more important than what school you attend".

That is at the core of the problem and is what we should have been talking about today. I could stop there in answering the Conservative motion—in fact, there is nothing to add: it all comes down to the level of poverty that too many of our young people suffer. The solution to the issue of closing the attainment gap is certainly not to give more choice to parents to select the right type of school in the right type of neighbourhood or to blame our teachers; the solution is for parents to choose a Government with a track record of closing the attainment gap and to show the door to Tory politicians such as Michael Gove. I remind the chamber that increasing parental choice and ending the one-size-fits-all approach were at the core of the education reforms of Mr Gove down south. That agenda did not work there and it will not work here.

Who you are in Scotland is far more important than what school you attend. Today, over one in five children live in poverty. It affects their health, their education, their connection to wider society and their future prospects for work, yet we know from the OECD programme for international student assessment—PISA—that Scotland is narrowing the attainment gap while the rest of the UK is not. We also know that Scotland is above the average of participating countries in maths, science and reading. Poverty impacts adversely on the attainment of too many of our young

people, but curriculum for excellence and getting it right for every child are policies that are making a difference in our schools and progress is being made across Scotland. Still, who you are in Scotland is far more important than what school you attend.

Reducing child poverty and addressing the inequality gap are the keys to closing the attainment gap in Scottish education, but we can go only so far in mitigating the damage caused by decisions made at Westminster. Children and families in deprived communities are suffering. I know, because in the rich north-east there are lots of pockets of poverty.

There is no question but that we need more powers. We need full responsibility over welfare and social policy to tackle child poverty. We cannot put a price on education. I will vote with the cabinet secretary tonight.

16:05

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I, too, thank Liz Smith for securing the debate. I cannot tell members how pleased and relieved I am to be discussing not only a subject that does not mention constitutional change once but a policy that is entirely devolved and always has been and where, if there are any problems, they are at least partly of our own making and, if there are any solutions, they lie entirely in our own hands. I am also pleased that the motion asks us to face up to the challenges in our schools and not simply those that have dominated recent political debate around early years and tertiary education.

There is much in our school system to be proud of, not least the achievements of our pupils and the high standards maintained by our teachers and staff. There are political achievements, too: from the advent of the Scottish Parliament and the first incoming Labour-Liberal Administration, we moved to restore teachers' pay and to rebuild the crumbling school estate. Those achievements, among others, have helped underpin the fundamental public confidence that exists in both the quality and the fairness of our comprehensive system, findings that were borne out in our national debate on education.

That said, the Tories are absolutely right to point out that, no matter the undoubted equity of our school system, it does not manage to overcome the inequalities in our society. The OECD findings on Scottish education a few years back still hold true: despite the best efforts of our best teachers and the fairness of our school system, the most accurate predictor of, or rather the key determinant in, a child's academic success is their socioeconomic background, a point just made by Christian Allard, as well as by several other

members. To put that another way, a more tabloid report that I heard last month said that the chance of a child going to university is directly related to the number of books to be found in their household.

We should not be surprised by those findings. Even our school-age children spend only a fraction of their lives in school—not just Anne McTaggart’s by the way, but probably mine, too—and are constantly open to the influence or the obstacles created by family, friends and often unfortunate circumstances. However, we are disappointed by that and by the fact that this equitable system of ours does not produce more equitable outcomes. Realistic or not, we set the highest expectations on our schools and our teachers.

What can we do about the issue? I have said that I have a lot of sympathy for the Tory analysis of the problems or challenges facing our schools. At first glance, the remedy that they propose looks attractive, too. After all, who could disagree with increased choice, greater diversity and stronger leadership? Unfortunately, most of us in this chamber suspect that those words are code. When we hear the Conservatives talk about choice, I usually ask, “Choice for whom?”

Increased choice often means only increased choice for some. Greater diversity as promoted by the Conservatives—certainly in the past—might sometimes be better described as greater division, and the strong leadership and full autonomy for headteachers that they aspire to is at the expense of accountability to democratically elected local authorities. In other words, having identified the problems of inequality, the Tories proposed solutions that may inadvertently or otherwise make matters worse. There is little evidence that people in England shared Michael Gove’s desire to hark back to some idealistic vision of the 1950s which, frankly, never existed, and every reason to believe that most people in Scotland would be utterly opposed to that desire.

Do not get me wrong: I want greater choice and greater parental involvement. We know that the more we can involve parents, the better the outcomes for their children. I want more choice in the state system, but I recognise the limits of that choice. Therefore, I believe in greater plurality, so I want far more science, sports, music and drama schools. Institutions such as Steiner schools could be part of the state system and, if I thought it ever existed, I, too, would reject a one-size-fits-all approach.

However, we have to recognise that some parents are better able to take advantage of the choices that exist. The answer cannot be a consumerist approach. Schools are not a product on a supermarket shelf; they are a taxpayer-funded investment in our children not only as

individuals but as part of society. Our belief in equity and fairness means that, where possible, we want the same range of choices to be available to all.

Mark McDonald: Many universities, colleges and private organisations develop partnerships with schools. Often, such partnerships tend to be developed in more middle to upper-class areas rather than in deprived communities. Perhaps we should encourage more links with schools in deprived areas.

Ken Macintosh: Indeed. That is not dissimilar to some of the suggestions that the Labour Party is already putting forward, which I hope to refer to, although I doubt that I will have time.

We need to address the attainment gap between schools, but there is an equally big attainment gap within schools, often for the same socioeconomic reasons—it is the same list of obstacles and challenges that can hold youngsters back—and one of the weaknesses of the Tory approach is that creating a pseudo market between schools does nothing to address that.

Those challenges, which are the subject of the discussion that we are having this afternoon, were one of the key motivating factors for the introduction of the curriculum for excellence. It was designed to get away from an overly strong focus on attainment at too early a stage in school and to put a far greater emphasis on learning, achievement and self-development.

I was always a big supporter of the schools of ambition programme. As I am the son of two headteachers, members might not be surprised to hear that I have come across some great school leaders, both the charismatic and the collegiate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Could you draw to a close, please?

Ken Macintosh: I believe that there should be room in the system for that leadership and that individuality to develop the unique ethos of a school community. Most schools now have little or no control over their own budget, but the schools of ambition programme gave key schools £100,000 of their own, which gave them the freedom to do something different—something inspirational.

There is more that we can do to remove the barriers to opportunity that Mark McDonald’s point was about, not just in the classroom but in the extracurricular activities that we offer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must close, please.

Ken Macintosh: At my oldest daughter’s parents evening, she had a procurator fiscal, a

hospital consultant and a lawyer. That should be available to all schools.

16:11

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): The Conservative motion begins with the statement that

“the greatest challenge facing Scottish education is the existence of the significant pupil attainment gap between different schools and different communities”.

However, a 2007 report by the OECD indicated that parents’ socioeconomic background mattered more for children’s attainment than their school.

At yesterday’s meeting of the Education and Culture Committee, we had the opportunity to question Scotland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People on his organisation’s annual report. On page 8, the report states:

“Child poverty is the single most negative factor in too many of our children’s lives and the eradication of it is the single most significant influence in the better realisation of their rights.”

It also states:

“There is persuasive and disturbing evidence of measurable gaps in social, emotional and cognitive development evident in our youngest children. These are amplified as they grow up. In other words, despite our efforts, remedial actions do not counter the destructive impact on children born into families living in poor circumstances.”

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation report of May 2014 entitled “Closing the Attainment Gap in Scottish Education” stated that children from low-income households in Scotland do significantly worse at school than those from better-off homes. When the report was issued, one of its authors, Sue Ellis of the University of Strathclyde’s school of education, said:

“Children who grow up in poverty tend to do less well in education because of factors in their home background for example having parents who are more stressed, less able to help them with their school work. To meet the needs of such children, schools need to dovetail their systems, curriculum and teaching to ‘bridge’ between home and school so that children living in poverty experience success in education and can use it to lever themselves out of poverty.”

I believe that the Scottish Government has the right policies in place to enable pupils from poorer backgrounds to achieve that success in education to an increasing extent so that they can lever themselves out of poverty. The Scottish Government’s access to education fund is specifically aimed at improving the attainment of children who grow up in poverty. Schools can apply to the fund to provide support to pupils and their families for school materials, trips, uniforms, information technology, coaching and mentoring, and parental engagement programmes. The

underlying principle is that pupils should not have to miss out because they cannot afford other activities that will enhance their learning.

In addition, unlike the Government south of the border, the Scottish Government has maintained the education maintenance allowance, which supports young people from the poorest families to remain in education.

Liam McArthur: Will the member give way?

Gordon MacDonald: No, thanks.

Curriculum for excellence is about supporting young people in being successful, confident, responsible and effective learners. In its paper “Raising Attainment, Improving Life-chances in Scotland’s Schools”, the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland said about curriculum for excellence that

“innovative teaching practice, increased collegiate time to discuss standards, increased emphasis on pupil choice and enjoyment and the radical overhaul of the senior phase curriculum are strategies likely to improve educational outcomes for young people.”

That builds on the trend identified by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. When it examined attainment at age 16, it found that the proportion of S4 pupils who had not achieved at least five awards had been reduced by 25 per cent over the five years to 2013. It went on to state:

“The proportion under-attaining fell every year between 2008 and 2013, whereas between 2000 and 2007 the numbers remained fairly constant.”

In training, the number of new modern apprenticeships has increased to more than 25,000, which is 60 per cent higher than 2006-07, and the Scottish Government is committed to further increasing that figure to 30,000 in the future. Young people who choose to move on to further or higher education will find that it is based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay, saving them the substantial cost of tuition fees.

All of that is designed not only to reduce the attainment gap between pupils from different socioeconomic backgrounds but to ensure that we have the best educated population in Europe.

Liam McArthur: Will the member give way?

Gordon MacDonald: No, thanks.

However, we have to recognise that, although we are making progress in reducing the attainment gap, we can go only so far in mitigating the damage caused by Westminster policies. The UK Government’s allowing of zero-hour contracts, its failure to keep the minimum wage in line with inflation and its further cuts in welfare will result in an additional 50,000 Scottish children living in poverty by 2020—and that is before the next round of cuts due in 2017-18.

If the Tories seriously want to tackle the pupil attainment gap in Scotland, they should accept the evidence from the experts that poverty is the main barrier to attainment. They should also support the Scottish Government's submission to the Smith commission that Holyrood should have full responsibility over welfare powers to ensure that this place can tackle the underlying reason for underachievement, which is poverty.

16:17

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I do not think that anyone can have failed to notice that this is a time of great change in Scottish politics. While the media concentrate on Labour's search for a new leader, we should not forget that the Scottish Government has lost its own First Minister and that we have the impending coronation of Nicola Sturgeon as the next incumbent of that mighty office. I must say that it was with some personal disappointment that I heard that Mr Russell had ruled himself out from standing. He now must be contemplating his own future as a long-standing holder of his current Cabinet position—which perhaps explains his rather tetchy manner and hysterical tone in this afternoon's debate.

As Liz Smith has pointed out, Mr Russell has always had some interesting views on education, many of which we in the Scottish Conservatives would be warm to. In "Grasping the Thistle", he praised the Swedish system of education vouchers and called for a debate about its utility in Scotland, shorn of ideological prejudice. He went on to say:

"choice and diversity are the hallmarks of a mature and confident society and such a system would ensure the emergence of new types of private provision, which are not seen as exclusive or class-ridden."

I find it very hard to disagree with those choice and thoughtful words.

The reality is that the Scottish education system does well by the great majority of our pupils. However, for a minority, it is not working. That is not good enough, and we should be open to looking at models from elsewhere to see how standards might be improved for that minority.

In what I thought was a thoughtful speech—I am not clear whether it was a leadership pitch, but perhaps we will find that out in the next 36 hours—Ken Macintosh said that choice was all very well, but it favoured the better-off. I take completely the opposite view. Our current comprehensive school system could hardly have been better devised if we wanted to deprive those from the poorest backgrounds of the best educational outcomes.

Those from better-off families will always have choice. Those families can choose to opt out of

the state system altogether and purchase education in the independent sector; they can choose to purchase a house in the catchment area of a better-performing school, such as Jordanhill in Glasgow; or they can choose, as Neil Bibby pointed out, to purchase private tuition, as many parents do. However, those choices are available only to those who have the necessary means. The ones without the means do not currently have the choice. They are the ones who are trapped with the schools that are not so well regarded and which are not performing so well, and the current system lets them down.

I want to concentrate briefly on two aspects, the first of which relates to literacy and numeracy, where the records are simply not as good as they should be. I will not read out all the statistics, as I am sure that the cabinet secretary will be familiar with them. However, not enough of our young people at primary 7 level or in S2 are meeting acceptable standards in literacy and numeracy. The numeracy situation deteriorated over the last two years for which we have records.

It is not unreasonable to expect that those who leave primary school should be able to meet basic literacy and numeracy standards. Those are vital life skills for young people who are trying to get on in the world and are trying to find employment or future training opportunities. That so many are failing is an indictment of our current approach.

The second aspect is early intervention. We have had many debates in the Parliament on that topic over the years. A wealth of evidence says that intervening with the youngest children is the most effective use of resource when it comes to improving life outcomes, but the Scottish Government's record in the area is patchy. The reality does not match the rhetoric.

A range of initiatives from the current Conservative-led Government in Westminster has focused on early intervention. There is the pupil premium, with additional resources following youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds through schools. We have seen an extension of nursery places to vulnerable two-year-olds and the introduction of free school meals for those in primary 1 to primary 3.

In each case, the Scottish Government has been left playing catch-up. There has been some movement on additional nursery places, but that has lagged behind what has happened south of the border, and the introduction of free school meals happened here only because of the initiative that was taken by Westminster—the Scottish Government followed suit. None of that represents the relentless focus on early intervention that we need.

As I said, it is not those from better-off backgrounds with supportive parents who are losing out in the current system. They will always do well. Those from less well-off backgrounds, with greater challenges, need the support, and the evidence is that they are not getting it from the current system.

That is where a more open and diverse education system would assist. We know that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning has no ideological opposition to that, as he has written about it in the past. Indeed, we already have some diversity in Scottish education. We have faith schools such as Catholic schools, and Gaelic-medium education. Why cannot we go further? Why cannot we have different types of schools, such as more vocational schools, as Germany has, or specialisms in schools—in languages, music, the arts or physical education—to play to the strengths of individual pupils instead of having a one-size-fits-all approach?

Surely it is time to open up the debate about the future of Scottish education and not simply pretend that everything is fine as it currently stands. Surely it is time to recognise that, above all, we have the greatest responsibility to those who are failed most by the current system. If the current cabinet secretary will not tackle the problem, perhaps his successor will.

16:23

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): In preparing for the debate, I thought that it would be useful, as one or two other members have done—especially Ken Macintosh—to look at some of the things that the Conservative motion says and see whether we can work out what they mean.

Early on, the motion mentions the “pupil attainment gap”. There has been broad agreement in the debate so far that such gaps definitely exist between different schools and different communities. Like others, I wonder whether one of the reasons for the wide gap is income and wealth in our society. Perhaps our schools simply reflect the problems in society. Perhaps the creation of a more equal society might also benefit our schools. As Murdo Fraser accepts, richer families can already move to Newton Mearns or Jordanhill and get choice, so perhaps it is no great surprise that the schools there do better.

I wrote down that extra tuition support is there for kids from families that can afford it—that has already been mentioned. I know that a voluntary group in Glasgow that tried to give extra tuition struggled to get voluntary tutors. It is also worth mentioning that there are attainment gaps within particular schools—Mark McDonald mentioned that issue. I have a secondary in my constituency

whose headteacher said to me that, such is the gap within the school, it is like having two separate schools.

The motion goes on to talk about those from deprived backgrounds being less likely to

“participate in further or higher education”.

I think that the situation is a little more complex than that and that some of the Conservatives’ points are a bit simplistic. For example, girls often do better than boys from similar backgrounds, and there can be considerable peer and family pressure against going on to further and higher education on youngsters who have the ability and sometimes the academic qualifications. One relevant factor is the need to widen horizons for some of our young people, and another is the need to increase their self-confidence.

The motion talks about “removing the barriers”, but, having listened to the debate, it is still not clear to me what the barriers are meant to be. The next section of the motion gives hints as to what the Conservatives might be looking for: it mentions “maximum parental choice”. I agree that parents have the prime responsibility for their kids’ education, which is why they ultimately have the right to home school if they choose to do that, but are we to increase choice only for richer families? Murdo Fraser, in effect, criticised that as well, but as far as I heard he did not really come up with a suggestion as to how any new system would improve the lot of people from poorer backgrounds. He mentioned specialisms—we already have that—and different kinds of schools.

Murdo Fraser: For the sake of clarity, I should explain that my point was that if choice is currently available only to the better-off, we need to extend it to those who do not have the means. That means having more schools of different types and greater accessibility to such schools for children from less well-off backgrounds.

John Mason: As others have said, there are a fair variety of schools, certainly within Glasgow, and they benefit from being in an urban community. However, I do not really see Murdo Fraser’s point. It would mean, for example, that one of the families who live in Jordanhill would not get their kid into the Jordanhill school and that the family of a kid from the east end would move to Jordanhill to get them into the school there. If that is his point, I fail to see how that would improve schools. I certainly do not see how it would improve the school in the east end of Glasgow if it is one that is struggling.

Somebody said that people think that everything is fine in education, but I know nobody who thinks that. Liz Smith used the word “complacent”, but I know nobody in schools or in the Parliament who is complacent about education. Clearly, there are

gaps, but the question is how we improve things. Ken Macintosh was correct in what he said about the consequences of the Conservatives' proposals, although he was slightly more generous to the Conservatives than I might be, because he said that the consequences might be inadvertent. I think that it is fairly clear that some of the Conservatives' proposals would make things worse.

As has been said, there is already diversity in education. For example, in Glasgow we have denominational and non-denominational schools, and schools that emphasise Gaelic, sports and dance. St Ambrose high school in Coatbridge, which I have links with, emphasises music. There is a fair bit of variety out there in our schools. Our party policy is that if there is sufficient demand from parents, we will publicly fund a particular kind of school. That is broadly what happened with the Gaelic school in Glasgow. I certainly support party policy in that regard. Equality does not mean that all schools have to be a uniform grey; it means that they all have to have equally good standards.

The motion also mentions "strong leadership" and "full autonomy for headteachers". I would say that strong leadership can be found at a variety of levels, not just at the individual school level. We can have, and have had, at times, strong leadership at the council level—for example, in Glasgow. We can also have strong leadership at a national level. Members might not always agree with the cabinet secretary, but I think that they would say that he gives strong leadership.

The motion emphasises more autonomy for individual schools, which has been suggested before. However, when that proposal was discussed by parent councils or parent school boards in my area, there was not a lot of enthusiasm for it. I feel that such autonomy would just widen the gap. Parents in my area often lack confidence and often did not have a good experience at secondary school, so they are wary about taking on more in terms of school autonomy.

I normally criticise Glasgow City Council, but I think that a lot of good things happen because schools are run at a council level, including the ability to move resources around.

16:29

Cara Hilton (Dunfermline) (Lab): I apologise to Liz Smith, who is not here, for missing the start of her speech. I welcome the opportunity to speak in today's debate on educational attainment and in support of Neil Bibby's Labour amendment.

Across the chamber, we all share concerns about the continued gap in attainment levels between children from the richest households and children from the poorest households in Scotland,

even if we do not quite agree on the solution. It is a gap that begins early in the pre-school years and continues and widens as children start school and throughout their school years. It persists when children leave school and move on into the labour market and college or university—it persists throughout their lives. It may be 2014, but thousands of children in our communities right across Scotland continue to be caught up in a cycle of disadvantage from which there is little prospect of escape. At least one in five children lives in poverty, which shapes and impacts on every aspect of their lives.

As Kevin Stewart said, no child will ever achieve their full potential if they turn up to school with an empty belly or if they are living in a damp, overcrowded home. I, too, have had conversations with teachers who have told me that they bring in cereal and snacks for kids in the morning. That is simply not acceptable. When teachers tell me that children are turning up at school hungry or without a warm winter coat, or when I hear that children living in poverty are three times as likely to suffer mental health problems, that makes me extremely angry, and I know that my colleagues across the chamber feel the same.

However, although I have no doubt that the coalition Government's austerity measures, cuts to tax credits and welfare reforms are all factors, the gap between rich and poor in Scotland is deeply entrenched, just as it is across the UK, and we need a more radical solution if we are to address the persistent poverty and inequality that too many of our children are brought up with. It is true that we have a good education system in Scotland, and I do not agree at all with the Conservative motion or many of the speeches, but the fact is that our education system is not doing well enough for our most vulnerable children, and our attainment gap continues to be wider than in similar countries across the world.

Our amendment talks about a greater focus on literacy and numeracy. As well as tackling poverty, we need to take different approaches if we are going to close the gap. According to an EIS report, by the age of three, children from deprived backgrounds are already nine months behind the average in relation to development and readiness for school, and by the age of six, low-achieving children from better-off homes start to outperform children from poorer families who were initially higher achieving. By primary 7, the gap in reading attainment levels between pupils in poverty and their better-off peers is 22 per cent. That gap is simply unacceptable, and the fact that it is getting worse is a huge concern and challenge.

The gap is starker still for looked-after children—Jayne Baxter touched on that earlier. Statistics show that 85 per cent of looked-after

children have left school by 16, compared with the average, which is 30 per cent. Just 2 per cent of looked-after children go to university—that is a stark contrast. Given the duty in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 to support looked-after and formerly looked-after young people, I hope that we will see further action from the Scottish Government to address that huge gap in educational outcomes.

In Fife, the Labour-led council has embraced a radical approach to closing the gap, based on early and targeted intervention to support children and families most in need. It includes intervening early to encourage secure primary attachment between children and their parents; embracing a family nurture approach that meets the needs of children and families from pre-birth to pre-school; providing extensive parenting support programmes, working especially with young mums and dads to build their skills and develop their confidence and self-esteem; and ensuring that families with extra needs can access the right intervention and support services in a non-stigmatised way, receiving as little or as much support as they need, such as help with drug or alcohol issues or with domestic abuse.

The approach is based on developing nurture schools, with a focus on making all our schools as inclusive as possible for all our children—and for parents who may have had a bad experience of education when they were at school.

All that works together to ensure that young people from more vulnerable backgrounds are fully supported at all stages of their education. I hope that the nurture school approach will make a real difference in Dunfermline and communities across Fife, and I hope that it is a model that local authorities across Scotland will embrace.

The rights respecting schools agenda is important too, and more than 100 schools in Fife are taking part in that fantastic UNICEF programme. I recently had the pleasure of taking part in a session at a school in Dunfermline where the children discussed in impressive detail the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly the right not to go hungry. They planned a campaign to encourage donations to the local food bank. One girl even told me that she knew how important food banks were because her family had had to use the food bank in the past.

Fife has also embraced the workshop for literacy approach, and I have visited a number of schools in my constituency to see that work in practice. I was extremely impressed to see the number of learning opportunities that could evolve from just one Katie Morag book, bringing learning to life and capturing the imagination of every single child in the class. That approach has been adopted in all Fife schools, and the evidence

already shows that it is raising pupils' literacy scores across Fife. It really is working.

Although the Conservative motion paints a bleak picture of what is happening in our schools and offers a solution that few of us in Scotland want to see, real work is being done in Fife to raise the attainment of our children and young people. Practical steps are breaking the cycle of disadvantage for families in Fife, closing the gap and ensuring that every single child has the opportunity and support that they need to be the best that they can be.

16:35

Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): I start by paying tribute to all the teachers, support staff and education staff in our schools across the country. Their life mission is to share knowledge and to ensure that kids have the best possible start in life. They have that public service duty to do what they can to close the education gap that we are talking about today, and they go above and beyond the call of duty all the time. I know that from having two parents who were teachers.

My mum later went into local authority work in an education department and, later in her career, built schools and nurseries. I remember her coming home one day quite upset about the extent of the child poverty challenges in Dundee, where she was involved in building a nursery. The child poverty in that particular part of Dundee was so extreme that it was common for the majority of kids to turn up hungry, tired and dirty in the morning. The mission for that nursery school was first to feed and wash the kids, and to let them sleep. Only after that were the teachers in a position to teach the kids and give them the opportunity to learn. My mum was struggling with the concept of putting fast and powerful washing machines into nurseries as standard equipment because it meant that there was a presumption that the kids needed that facility. What a damning indictment of the level of child poverty in this country that is.

That story demonstrates how the gap in education equality begins. I agree with the SNP that that cannot simply be addressed between the times when nursery or school gates open and close. The cabinet secretary is right to talk about the damage that the UK Government's welfare policy is causing, but we are not powerless to act. We will therefore support the SNP amendment tonight, and will do so in the spirit of critical friendship.

I turn to the Conservative motion. I was sorry that we did not hear more from Liz Smith about parental choice, greater diversity in schools and strong leadership. That was partly because she

had to work so hard to defend her Government's record on child poverty and the damage that her Government is doing with its welfare agenda. I would have liked to have heard more about those issues because I would like a better understanding of what she means when she raises them.

Let us take parental choice. Liz Smith said that the schools around the world that do best at education emphasise diversity in choice. I disagree with that and offer the example of Finland. I was there earlier this year. There is no such thing as choice in the education system there because all the schools are at the same standard, and there is no suggestion that anyone would need to choose a school, because every school has the same merit and value.

Liz Smith: Finland has a completely different ability to tax the population and has very high taxation. Is that something that the Labour Party would support in order to provide that additional service?

Kezia Dugdale: It is not entirely to do with tax. In fact, I would say that it is everything to do with the ethos, the value that is placed on leadership and the role that teachers play in schools. For example, teachers in Finland spend less time in the classroom than teachers anywhere else in the world because they are constantly developing their skills and sharing knowledge about how to tackle the problems that we are talking about today. It is not a question of taxation; if Liz Smith would like to see further evidence of that, I invite her to go and see what I saw. I know that the cabinet secretary has a lot of similar views, in that regard.

Again, I would have liked to have heard more from Liz Smith on greater diversity in schools. I imagine that she was talking about free schools, and perhaps she has sympathy with Michael Gove's agenda. Nobody in the Labour Party could have any sympathy with that agenda, which is why we are not in a position to support her motion.

I have some sympathy with Liz Smith on the issue of strong leadership in schools and I welcome the SNP Government's work on that with its college of leadership. I would be willing to debate whether there is a need for more autonomy for headteachers, but let us look at school budgets. Schools are already in charge of their budgets, but the pressures on those budgets mean that there is very little flexibility for them to be spent in different ways. Liz Smith need look only at Highland Council for an example of that. It is talking about merging schools, sacking teachers and having to reduce options as a consequence of some of this Government's financial decisions. It is a very complex picture.

I would have liked to have heard more today about the cost of school. Anne McTaggart touched

on that and used her great sense of humour when she did so. There is no doubt that 70 per cent of parents say that they have struggled with the cost of school.

I was grateful that Gordon MacDonald mentioned the access to education fund, but there are problems with that. If he looks at the detail of the criteria, he will see that the fund cannot be used to subsidise costs that should be paid for by a local authority. The fund exists to fund new initiatives, not to replace funding that is being cut by local authorities. He should look at the detail of that. A maximum of 300 schools—just 8.5 per cent of all schools—can access that fund, because of the nature of the criteria. That is far from getting to the point of the problem that we face.

I would have liked to have had the opportunity to say more about care leavers, because there is a problem in respect of moving care leavers from one school to another, especially when they are facing exams. Many people who met Alex earlier today in the garden lobby would have heard about his first-hand experience of that.

I welcome the opportunity to debate education inequality. It is the first time we have done so in the chamber since January 2012; we have debated golf more regularly than we have debated it. That is something on which we should all reflect.

I have heard today that the Tories believe that inequality is the fault of the SNP's failing education system, and that the SNP blames the Tories for inequality because of the welfare cuts. Scottish Labour thinks that they are both right.

16:41

Michael Russell: On the whole, this has been a very positive debate. Kezia Dugdale was right to acknowledge the role of those who work in education. I am also the child of two teachers, and am the husband of a headteacher of two schools. I know, and have known, how hard teachers work, how dedicated they are and how they aspire to a better society.

I have earned my living in less onerous ways than teaching, including writing, and I am delighted that my works are still well read. The Scottish Tories and Neil Findlay are my most obsessive readers, of which I am glad, because I still get public lending right, which is a useful source of income.

However, I would look for more intelligent reading than we have heard today. The Tories are well behind the curve on what has happened in Scottish education. Murdo Fraser has underestimated the extent to which choice and diversity are now established in Scottish

education. That has developed since devolution: through Labour's policies between 1999 and 2007, building on a tradition of diversity and intensifying it through curriculum for excellence, while permitting increased diversity in models such as specialist music schools, the denominational sector, the Gaelic sector and the private sector—which, of course, gets public benefits. The Public Petitions Committee will examine that matter shortly.

The great strength of the Scottish education system is that it is increasingly the case that one size does not fit all. There is a national context, a local authority framework and local decision making and delivery. Could that develop more? Of course it could, but I agree with Ken Macintosh—I never thought that I would say those words—that if we are going to discuss that, let us do it up front, straight and honestly, and not by the Trojan horse of the motion that we have debated today.

The historical compromises in the system actually arise from the Education Act 1918 and the way in which that act has been built on. There are lots of models elsewhere that we could look at. Vouchers, for example, have been abandoned in Sweden, because they were too bureaucratically complex. Free schools have created many problems for the Swedish system and are now creating many problems for the English system. Scotland now betters Sweden in its PISA scores.

Liz Smith: I have been reading the cabinet secretary's book and am interested in the philosophical journey that he has taken from the time when he wrote his book to the situation that he is in now. He seems to be moving away from the idea—which he liked then—that the money per child that is available through the state could be used for extra parental choice. Has he changed his mind on that?

Michael Russell: I have the experience of five years as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning. I am sorry that Murdo Fraser views me as—to quote a 19th century English politician—a burned-out volcano, because I still feel that I am erupting all over the place, and I am happy to go on doing so. I have to say that, given that experience, I do not see how that system could work within what we have inherited in Scotland at this time. However, I can see that diversity has grown and developed.

I want to focus on some of the things that have been said in the debate, but the most important thing that I can do in the time that is available to me is a bit of myth busting, because we have heard quite a lot of myths this afternoon and we need at least to correct them on the record.

On the first myth that I want to address, it is absolutely important that Liz Smith understands

how Scottish schools work. We do not have failing schools, because we do not allow schools to fail. Continuous self-evaluation and improvement is the ethos of the system that has been built, largely since devolution, by successive education ministers. I pay tribute to Sam Galbraith in that regard—I think that this is the first education debate that we have had since he died. He, Jack McConnell, Cathy Jamieson, Peter Peacock, Hugh Henry, Fiona Hyslop and I have all been agreeable to the idea of continuous self-evaluation for schools, and a system that, when it intervenes, ensures that correction takes place there and then. When we read inspection reports, we see that they say that the inspectors will come back at a specific point. Schools are not abandoned in those circumstances, so schools are not allowed to fail.

Another myth is that school leavers have no place to go. I am glad that Liz Smith has corrected *The Mail on Sunday*—I look forward to reading that correction next week and shall buy the paper just to see whether it is there. However, the fact is that 81.2 per cent of school leavers from the 20 per cent of areas that are poorest achieved a positive destination. Could we do better? Yes, we could. However, it is not true that those from the poorest locations do not have positive destinations. The figures tell us that.

I was keen to agree with Neil Bibby about looked-after children, because I have been strongly engaged in that issue ever since I came into this Parliament, and I do not believe that we have done nearly enough. However, we also have to say that progress is being made with regard to positive destinations. In 2009-10, 44 per cent achieved a positive destination. That was very poor, but it was better than some years earlier. In 2012-13, the figure was 74 per cent. We are moving on, and I welcome the support of the Parliament in ensuring that we have an even greater effect.

Kezia Dugdale: In the spirit of consensus, I welcome what the cabinet secretary has just said. Could he comment on the specific issue of giving care leavers a right to remain in a particular school? The collateral damage that results from having to move school often means that they cannot achieve the results that they need to achieve.

Michael Russell: I believe that that is an important issue and I am open to discussing it, just as I am open to the point that Kezia Dugdale made, in one of her interventions, about targeting resources. We are targeting resources at, for example, the two-year-olds policy. To the extent that we can, we are targeting resources as we expand early years education. However, one of the issues that the Parliament needs to

acknowledge about targeting resources is that when the budget is under substantial pressure and there are increasing costs, we have to ask where money will be taken from in order to create new opportunities. That is a discussion that we can have during the budget process.

I want to make a point to Margaret Mitchell, which will be the only negative point that I will make. I thought that her contribution was inappropriate. The issue of dyslexia is important. Margaret Mitchell chairs the cross-party group on dyslexia, and it is important that the issue is discussed in a context in which there is an acknowledgement of all the partners that take part in the process. I am afraid that her contribution on the matter became an argument for radical political change. She is entitled to hold that position as a Tory MSP. However, I would have expected her, as chair of the cross-party group, to acknowledge the work that is being done by Dyslexia Scotland, the Scottish Government and schools to tackle this exceptionally important issue.

Margaret Mitchell: Clearly, the cabinet secretary was not listening to the main point of my speech, which concerned dyslexic children who are not getting assessments and are not being identified, mainly due to a lack of educational psychologists. He has washed his hands of that, completely. That is an issue that he could do something positive about in order to help to address inequality, which he says he is passionate about.

Michael Russell: Margaret Mitchell has condemned herself from her own mouth. Instead of taking the opportunity to argue constructively for change, she is making political points. That is unacceptable, particularly as she is chair of the cross-party group on dyslexia.

John Mason said that there is no room for complacency. I agree utterly. It is not possible for someone to be complacent if they visit as many schools as I do because they would see in every school diversity of provision and that every school has ambition. I want to carry those forward with the support of the Opposition.

I like the phrase that Kezia Dugdale used: "critical friendship" in supporting educational change. If that is the tone that is being taken, I am desperate to work with people. However, I am determined to make a difference to attainment, no matter what.

16:50

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I am pleased to close the debate, and I thank all the members who contributed positively and constructively on this critical issue.

I was sorry to hear Mike Russell's speech. I had hoped for something more positive. As the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, he protested a little bit too much. I remind him that Tories are always looking for good value for money and for a bargain. Given that his book is 50p in Bargain Books, many of us have been picking it up recently and reading it avidly.

I also thank Mr Russell. When I was appointed as education spokesman earlier this year, he invited me to his office to talk about education. I welcomed that because, although I was a lecturer for 20 years before coming into the Parliament, it was my first role in the education portfolio. While I sat below the glowing portrait of Mr Russell, he gave me his time and advice, which I welcomed. He advised me to meet leading figures in Scottish education, but the main thing that he advised me about, which I have never forgotten, was that one of the main critical issues in education was the attainment gap.

The final point that Mr Russell made is that he is very happy to work with other parties to reduce the attainment gap. I remind him of page 225 in "Grasping the Thistle":

"the SNP needs to recognise ... and give up its outmoded prejudice against talking with the Tories".

Here we are. I am always waiting and even willing to tolerate and view that portrait through all the future meetings. I look forward to that.

Michael Russell: I am always happy to talk to Mary Scanlon. She is the acceptable face of the Tories, unlike the ones who are sitting immediately behind her. I am also happy to gift her the portrait, as she seems so keen on it.

Mary Scanlon: It is just that I cannot afford Mr Russell's book at 50p and have to borrow it from Liz Smith.

Every speech from Labour members welcomed the debate and acknowledged that more could be done. They focused on the critical early years, which we have not all had time to do because of time constraints. We often consider primary, secondary, further and higher education, but the more that I read in the job that I am doing the more I appreciate that it is the early years that count. I commend everyone who mentioned the difference that a good nursery education can make.

We should all value the childcare workers in Scotland, who now have to be qualified, have to be registered with the Scottish Social Services Council and are accountable to the Care Inspectorate. They do a brilliant job for children before they go to school, and most of them are on the minimum wage, never mind the living wage. I ask that, when we talk about teachers, we do not

forget the excellent job that all childcare workers do.

I commend Jayne Baxter's remarks on looked-after children. I also mention Anne McTaggart and Ken Macintosh. He was cut off at his remarks on extracurricular activities, which are identified as one of the many things that can help future opportunities. Despite our different political ideologies, I thank the Labour Party for acknowledging the challenges that we face.

Liam McArthur was measured and considered. On the early years, he mentioned that each £1 invested before the age of three can save £11 later in life. Margaret Mitchell spoke about dyslexia, and I commend her for her commitment to chairing the cross-party group on dyslexia over many years. Mark McDonald also made some very good points on additional support needs, and I hope that his speech has not been detrimental to any ministerial prospects that may be coming his way in the pending reshuffle.

I say to Stewart Stevenson that perhaps he should have checked how many of the SNP Moray councillors were on the education steering group that was responsible for the review of the school estate in Moray prior to speaking in this Parliament.

When it comes to local authorities looking at the school estate, perhaps we have more in common than Mr Stevenson realises because I agree with him that it is not enough to focus just on pupil numbers, particularly in rural areas. A good example of that is Milne's high school in Fochabers, which was recommended for closure by consultants. However, those consultants failed to pay any attention to the school's excellent attainment levels, which compare very favourably, as the member said, with other schools in Moray and with virtual comparators across Scotland.

Like others, I commend the excellent work that is done by teachers and support staff across Scotland and I commend their commitment and dedication to pupils from all backgrounds every day of the week. One thing that I have noticed, particularly during the recent referendum debate, is the pupils' political knowledge, which I certainly did not have at school. It is the knowledge of the environment and the knowledge and confidence that young children have in a partnership with teachers that was probably not there many years ago.

As Liz Smith said, in S4 fewer than 20 per cent of the most disadvantaged pupils attain five standard grade passes, while 60 per cent of their more affluent peers do. That is neither fair nor sustainable. It cannot be the case that a child's postcode determines their educational attainment. I think that we can all agree on that. We may

disagree on the solutions; we may disagree on the way forward; but I am very pleased that, under the convenership of Stewart Maxwell, the Education and Culture Committee is to spend time and energy looking at attainment. That is an opportunity for all parties across the chamber to look at the issue that we have been looking at today.

Good attainment at school is directly linked not only to the opportunities that are available to young people when they leave school but to their wellbeing and quality of life in future. As others have said, there has been an increase in the number of school leavers entering positive destinations and remaining in those destinations in the past few years. That is very welcome. The number of those who are entering employment, which is a positive destination, has also increased in the past two years, and that is in no small part due to the UK's economic policy, which has resulted in a strong recovery from the recession.

The UK has had the biggest growth of employment within the G7 countries. The Scottish economy grew by almost 1 per cent, employment increased from 73 to 73.9 per cent in the second quarter of this year, and young people's unemployment is now at a six-year low, so the link between a strong economy and providing opportunities cannot be disputed.

One of the main things that we should look at is that the number of children in workless households in Scotland has fallen again and is now lower than in the rest of the UK. In fact, the number is down by 38,000 in the past year.

Given that I have one minute left, I will move to the end of my speech. I want to say something consensual to finish the debate, although I appreciate that there has been a fair degree of consensus over the issue from some people.

I think that the one issue that we can all agree on is Ian Wood's commission for developing Scotland's young workforce. It is possibly the most exciting initiative in training and education that I have seen in decades. Many of its elements—the focus on preparation for work in schools; the option for vocational education; the reduction in snobbery as expressed in the attitude that everyone has to go to university; and the need to respect people no matter what job they do—are absolutely first class.

While we recognise the brilliant work that is done by teachers in schools and by childcare staff, I hope that we can all agree that every child in Scotland deserves an equal chance in life, and that improvements can be made to reduce the attainment gap if we all work together not only in the Education and Culture Committee but across the chamber.

Business Motion

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S4M-11318, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following programme of business—

Tuesday 4 November 2014

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Historic Environment Scotland Bill

followed by Ministerial Statement: Scottish Greenhouse Gas Emissions Annual Target Report 2012

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Town Centre Action Plan, One Year On

followed by Legislative Consent Motion: Deregulation Bill – UK Legislation

followed by Legislative Consent Motion: Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill – UK Legislation

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.15 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 5 November 2014

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions
Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth

followed by Scottish Labour Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 6 November 2014

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Ministerial Statement: Winter Resilience

followed by Standards, Procedures and Public

Appointments Committee Debate:
Inquiry into Lobbying

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 11 November 2014

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 12 November 2014

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions
Rural Affairs, Food and the Environment;
Justice and the Law Officers

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 13 November 2014

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Questions

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time—[Joe FitzPatrick.]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

The Presiding Officer: The questions on the motions will be put at decision time.

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of five Parliamentary Bureau motions.

I ask Joe FitzPatrick to move motion S4M-11334, on amendment to the name, remit and duration of a committee.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament amends the name, remit and duration of the Referendum (Scotland) Bill Committee established on 23 October 2012—

from—

Name of Committee: Referendum (Scotland) Bill Committee.

Remit: To consider matters relating to The Scotland Act 1998 (Modification of Schedule 5) Order 2013, the Referendum (Scotland) Bill, its implementation and any associated legislation.

Duration: Until 31 December 2014.

to—

Name of Committee: Devolution (Further Powers) Committee.

Remit: To consider matters relating to The Scotland Act 1998 (Modification of Schedule 5) Order 2013, the Scottish Independence Referendum Act 2013, its implementation and any associated legislation. Furthermore, (i) until the end of November 2014 or when the final report of the Scotland Devolution Commission has been published, to facilitate engagement of stakeholders with the Scotland Devolution Commission and to engage in an agreed programme of work with the commission as it develops its proposals; and (ii) thereafter, to consider the work of the Scotland Devolution Commission, the proposals it makes for further devolution to the Scottish Parliament, other such proposals for further devolution and any legislation to implement such proposals that may be introduced in the UK Parliament or Scottish Parliament after the commission has published its final report.

Duration: For the remainder of the current session of the Parliament.—[Joe FitzPatrick.]

The Presiding Officer: I ask Joe FitzPatrick to move motions S4M-11319, S4M-11320, S4M-11322 and S4M-11323, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments.

That the Parliament agrees that the Bankruptcy and Debt Advice (Scotland) Act 2014 (Consequential Provisions) Order 2014 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Bankruptcy (Money Advice and Deduction from Income etc.) (Scotland) Regulations 2014 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Common Financial Tool etc. (Scotland) Regulations 2014 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Debt Arrangement Scheme (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2014 [draft] be approved.—[Joe FitzPatrick.]

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): There are five questions to be put as a result of today's business. I remind members that, in relation to today's debate, if the amendment in the name of Michael Russell is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Neil Bibby falls.

The first question is, that amendment S4M-11304.3, in the name of Michael Russell, which seeks to amend motion S4M-11304, in the name of Liz Smith, on addressing the attainment gap in Scottish schools, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Allard, Christian (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baxter, Jayne (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hilton, Cara (Dunfermline) (Lab)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)

Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMahon, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

Against

Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)
 Buchanan, Cameron (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 94, Against 18, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The amendment in the name of Neil Bibby falls.

The next question is, that motion S4M-11304, in the name of Liz Smith, on addressing the attainment gap in Scottish schools, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Allard, Christian (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baxter, Jayne (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunningham North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hilton, Cara (Dunfermline) (Lab)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)

Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMahon, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Salmond, Alex (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Yusuf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

Against

Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)
 Buchanan, Cameron (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Milne, Nanette (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 94, Against 18, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament notes that Scotland's schools compare strongly when measured against international standards; believes that the greatest challenge facing Scottish education is the impact of poverty and inequality

on pupils' ability to learn; further believes that the policies of the UK Government are increasing poverty and inequality; recognises that this leads directly to an unacceptably high number of young people from deprived backgrounds who do not participate in further or higher education, employment or training; further recognises that, in addition to economic policies designed to address unemployment and poverty, educational policy should focus on mitigating the barriers to educational achievement created by this inequality, and agrees that the curriculum for excellence is delivering improved outcomes using evidence-based approaches to raise attainment including a focus on strong leadership, high quality learning and teaching, literacy, numeracy and parental engagement.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-11334, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on amendment to the name, remit and duration of a committee, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament amends the name, remit and duration of the Referendum (Scotland) Bill Committee established on 23 October 2012—

from—

Name of Committee: Referendum (Scotland) Bill Committee.

Remit: To consider matters relating to The Scotland Act 1998 (Modification of Schedule 5) Order 2013, the Referendum (Scotland) Bill, its implementation and any associated legislation.

Duration: Until 31 December 2014.

to—

Name of Committee: Devolution (Further Powers) Committee.

Remit: To consider matters relating to The Scotland Act 1998 (Modification of Schedule 5) Order 2013, the Scottish Independence Referendum Act 2013, its implementation and any associated legislation. Furthermore, (i) until the end of November 2014 or when the final report of the Scotland Devolution Commission has been published, to facilitate engagement of stakeholders with the Scotland Devolution Commission and to engage in an agreed programme of work with the commission as it develops its proposals; and (ii) thereafter, to consider the work of the Scotland Devolution Commission, the proposals it makes for further devolution to the Scottish Parliament, other such proposals for further devolution and any legislation to implement such proposals that may be introduced in the UK Parliament or Scottish Parliament after the commission has published its final report.

Duration: For the remainder of the current session of the Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: I propose to ask a single question on motions S4M-11319, S4M-11320, S4M-11322 and S4M-11323, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments. If any member objects to a single question being put, they should say so now.

There being no objections, the next question is, that motions S4M-11319, S4M-11320, S4M-11322 and S4M-11323, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick,

on the approval of Scottish statutory instruments, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Bankruptcy and Debt Advice (Scotland) Act 2014 (Consequential Provisions) Order 2014 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Bankruptcy (Money Advice and Deduction from Income etc.) (Scotland) Regulations 2014 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Common Financial Tool etc. (Scotland) Regulations 2014 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Debt Arrangement Scheme (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2014 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: That ends decision time. I remind members that the reception for Poppyscotland is in the main hall at 6 o'clock this evening.

Fire Risk Assessments

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S4M-11175, in the name of Michael McMahon, on fire risk assessments. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament is respectfully aware that the tragic fire at the Rosepark care home in Uddingston, Lanarkshire, that caused the deaths of 14 residents took place 10 years ago; notes the contents of Sheriff Principal Lockhart's findings after the fatal accident inquiry into the fire, in particular, his conclusion that some or all of the deaths could have been prevented if the home had had a suitable and sufficient fire safety plan; further notes the contents of the Scottish Government's *Practical Fire Safety Guidance for Care Homes*, published in March 2014; believes however that an awareness campaign would help duty holders responsible for care homes to understand the contents of the guidance and duty holders in commercial premises to appreciate the requirements placed on them by the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005, in particular that of obtaining a fire risk assessment specific to each premise, and further believes that people offering services in fire risk assessment should be properly qualified, preferably by third party certification.

17:06

Michael McMahon (Uddingston and Bellshill)

(Lab): Ten years ago, in March 2004, the tragedy of the Rosepark nursing home fire occurred in my constituency. Fourteen elderly people lost their lives in that appalling event. When they should have been safe and secure, they were not; when they should have been protected, they were not; when they put their trust in others, they were robbed of their final years, their families were bereaved and the community was left in shock. It is therefore with my deepest sympathy and respect for their memory that I lodged the motion and speak to it this evening.

There has been progress on fire safety since that day. The previous coalition Administration put the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005 on the statute book and, quite recently, in March, the present Scottish Government produced the long-awaited "Practical Fire Safety Guidance for Care Homes". Obviously, the Rosepark incident occurred before the act and its associated secondary legislation. As subsequent investigations demonstrated, the fire should never have taken place. One of the key findings in Sheriff Principal Lockhart's determination, after hearing the evidence at the fatal accident inquiry in Hamilton, was that the fire risk assessment at the care home was inadequate and that the person who had carried it out was not qualified to do so.

Care homes are of course only one type of business. They are now systematically and

actively visited by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. However, the 2005 act dealt with fire safety in all commercial premises. Part 3 of the act concerns fire safety, and section 53 sets out the requirement to carry out fire risk assessments in premises on owners, employers and persons who are responsible for those premises. Those so-called duty holders must also keep fire safety under review.

As Sheriff Principal Lockhart noted, at the time of the Rosepark incident, there was

"no statutory requirement as regards the qualifications"

of those carrying out a fire risk assessment, but neither the act nor any subsequent regulations has altered that situation. The reason was and remains that, in many premises, duty holders can carry out a self-assessment. In many small premises, such as a one or two-room greengrocer's shop, the risks are minimal and fire exits are obvious to staff and customers. That is not necessarily the case in, for example, factories or care homes or indeed a building such as the one that we are in now.

I emphasise that many duty holders can rely safely on their judgment and self-assessment. That is perfectly acceptable in some circumstances but, with complex buildings, advice should be readily available and should be of the highest standard. Accordingly, in those situations a duty holder is heavily reliant on the capability and professionalism of the fire risk assessor and has to take his or her qualifications at face value.

This is the crux of what I have to say this evening: is it really good enough to impose a statutory duty on people if the Parliament and the Scottish Government do not ensure that there is a reasonable chance of people being able to meet their obligations, in all circumstances? In other words, how can a duty holder in a business be confident that the fire risk assessor is competent and that the advice given is sound and up to date?

The answer lies in Sheriff Principal Lockhart's determination:

"An alternative approach, short of statutory regulation, would be the use of third party accreditation schemes, with appropriate support being given to the importance of using accredited assessors in non-statutory guidance to those responsible for running Care Homes and in the actions of regulators. The inquiry heard evidence that there are now registration or accreditation schemes for fire risk assessors run by four bodies (all but one of them post-dating the fire at Rosepark), and that the industry is actively engaged in developing third party certification schemes."

Third-party certification schemes are indeed in existence, including those of British Approvals for Fire Equipment, Warrington Certification Ltd, IFC Certification Ltd and Registrar of Skilled Persons, or ROSP.

What is the Scottish Government's role in relation to enhancing fire safety? In my view, three things must happen—and must happen soon. First, the Scottish Government must, in conjunction with other agencies, lead and co-ordinate an awareness campaign among businesses about the requirement to have a fire risk assessment. There are numerous opportunities to do that, which time precludes my listing, but direct contact is possibly the best approach. For example, why not ask the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to seek the agreement of local authorities to send out a notice or leaflet alongside business rates demands? The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, too, has a key role to play in disseminating information, in addition to its enforcement role.

Secondly, the Scottish Government must embrace and advocate third-party certification. The current firelaw website is inadequate, in that it fails to highlight sufficiently the benefits of using a third-party certificated assessor and fails to advise duty holders to ask for such certification.

Thirdly, under the 2005 act the Scottish ministers have powers to make regulations. It is time to consult the industry and stakeholders on making third-party certification mandatory for people who offer their services as fire risk assessors. Such provision would not affect duty holders who opt for self-assessment and would make the industry responsible for setting and ensuring standards.

I thank all the people who have drawn my attention to the need for vigilance. British Approvals for Fire Equipment has been active in promoting third-party certification—and not, I may say, for any commercial advantage. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's business engagement forum has been looking carefully into that and other fire safety issues. Other bodies and groups have been involved, too.

I hope that the Parliament and the Scottish Government will agree that we owe it to the memory of all those who lost their lives at Rosepark 10 years ago, and to their friends and relatives, to act decisively to prevent further fires. Although much has been done, more remains to be achieved in the area of fire risk assessment. Let us take matters forward so that we can all be confident in saying that everything possible, everything imaginable, everything practical and everything sensible is in hand to prevent another such tragedy.

17:13

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): I commend Michael McMahon for lodging a motion to mark 10 years since the Rosepark care home

fire in Uddingston. I live close to Rosepark and I vividly remember the shock and horror that victims' relatives and the local community felt at the nature and scale of the tragedy. As Michael McMahon said, the fatal accident inquiry established that the tragic loss of 14 care home residents' lives could have been prevented if suitable measures had been taken. Ten years on, it is appropriate to consider whether sufficient requirements are placed on care homes, to prevent such a tragedy from happening again.

I welcome the new guidance, which was issued in March by the Scottish Government and which aims to assist those who have responsibility under the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005 for ensuring that fire safety duties in care homes are fulfilled. Although it is helpful that, following feedback from a public consultation, the Government edited the guidance to make it more user friendly, the issue of third-party certification for fire safety products and advice is still likely to cause confusion.

The guidance states:

"Fire protection products should be fit for their purpose and properly installed and maintained, while installation and maintenance contractors should be competent."

It goes on to say that, where possible, a reputable third-party certification body that has been accredited by the United Kingdom Accreditation Service should independently check that standards are being met, although that is not a requirement. In addition to UKAS, there are numerous professional bodies that operate registration schemes for fire prevention officers and fire safety consultants. However, it would surely be simpler to have one authority with an approved list of fire safety consultants, as that would also decrease the opportunities for rogue consultants.

Nonetheless, it is reassuring to see that lessons have been learned since the Rosepark fire. Furthermore, other care home fires—even this year—show that fire safety awareness in care homes has improved. For example, on 28 July a fire broke out in Foxley house care home in Glasgow. Twenty firefighters were required to attend the scene, but the 22 residents and three staff members who were present escaped mostly unharmed, with only one resident taken to hospital with minor injuries sustained due to a fall.

The fire door safety week campaign, which ran this September, has highlighted the importance of fire doors in care homes across Britain. Although the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service runs successful campaigns during the festive period each year, I welcome the suggestion in the motion that there be a targeted campaign for care home owners, managers and duty holders.

The fire at the Rosepark care home in Uddingston 10 years ago was a tragedy and, although fire safety in care homes has improved as a result, the preventable loss of life will continue to affect the relatives. It is only by ensuring that fire risk assessments are adequately undertaken and guidance adhered to that a future tragedy like that one will be prevented. It is, therefore, to be hoped that today's debate not only will help to raise awareness of this vital issue but will ensure that it remains the subject of the public's consciousness and scrutiny.

17:18

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I thank Michael McMahon for securing valuable debating time to discuss a tragic and sensitive matter and to assess what measures can be put in place to ensure that such a tragedy never happens again as well as those measures that have already been put in place.

As Michael McMahon said, the Rosepark care home fire resulted in the deaths of 14 residents and constitutes the worst incident of its kind in Scottish history. The fire that tore through the building on that evening 10 years ago was started by an electrical defect and was fuelled by nearby aerosols, quickly growing out of hand. A catalogue of errors, including failure to contact the fire brigade quickly, failure to properly maintain electrical circuits and lack of a cohesive and effective fire plan point to the fact that some of those deaths—or all of them—were preventable.

The Rosepark care home fire has been subject to much legal scrutiny. Charges were brought against the owners of the home on successive occasions, with the case being dismissed by the Lord Advocate and, subsequently, by the appeal court. Following those unsuccessful attempts to prosecute, a fatal accident inquiry was held, with evidence heard from 212 witnesses between August 2010 and November 2011. Central to that inquiry was the examination of progress made in fire safety and prevention.

The key document on this issue is the Scottish Government publication "Practical Fire Safety Guidance for Care Homes"—the CHG. The document was originally issued in 2006—two years after the Rosepark fire—primarily as a response to the fire in order that the most glaring lessons from the tragedy could be learned. The document was amended in 2008.

Although the sheriff principal considered the document to be "excellent" and "the clearest guidance" available to those operating care homes, it was agreed that the CHG would be updated to reflect the fatal accident inquiry's

findings in order to make the guidelines even clearer and more robust.

In 2011, following the inquiry determination, the CHG was updated to include recommendations made during the inquiry, along with other issues unrelated to the Rosepark fire. There has been further revision, with the CHG continually updated. Also, in 2012, to meet a commitment by the Scottish Government to deal with issues raised in the fatal accident inquiry, the fire and rescue services division of the safer communities directorate issued a consultation document with the hefty title of "A Consultation on the Revision of the Scottish Government Practical Fire Safety Guidance for Care Homes and the Quality Assurance of Persons Who Offer Risk Assessment Services".

The 12-week consultation attracted a great number of responses and the guidance was updated again, strengthened and then reissued in March this year. Crucially, the new CHG includes greater guidance and detail on evacuation procedures and the requirement to have a comprehensive plan in place; guidance on the benefits of third-party certification; information on staff training and testing in fire safety; and details on sprinkler retrofitting and the benefits of sprinklers in areas with high dependency residents. Following publication, a targeted awareness campaign was carried out with key organisations, the healthcare sector and all registered care homes.

The matter of the competence and suitability of fire risk assessors was also considered in the 2012 consultation. It was deemed the best way forward that care home duty holders should check the competence of those carrying out fire risk assessments at their care homes. Registration schemes exist for companies and individuals carrying out a fire risk assessment. However, there are no plans to make that compulsory and enhanced guidance for duty holders is available online.

Ultimately, a fire safety certificate does not guarantee fire safety and it must be remembered that final responsibility for fire safety in care homes lies with those who operate the premises. The Rosepark care home fire was a terrible tragedy and it is poignant that Michael McMahon has brought such matters to the chamber 10 years on from the events.

The actions taken by this Government and the previous Administration have brought us to the point where legislation, assistance and guidance have substantially reduced the likelihood of such a horrible accident taking place again. However, there is no room for complacency when it comes to ensuring the safety and security of the most vulnerable in our society and we must ensure that

those who are entrusted with the care of our older people are properly regulated and are held to account for the quality of care that they provide.

17:22

Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I congratulate Michael McMahon on obtaining this important debate and I endorse what he said in his speech.

The Rosepark fire was a tragedy in the true sense of that overused word. No one can guarantee that such an event will never happen again, but we can at least make every effort to make sure that it does not. How often do we hear when an inquiry into an accident occurs that lessons will be learned only to find that they were not and a repeat occurrence underlines our collective complacency? Let us ensure that that is not so with fire safety.

If we take Sheriff Lockhart's recommendations, we can see that much has been achieved—the 2005 act, recent care home guidance and the revision to the firelaw website—but there is more that we can do.

I read the section on fire risk assessment in the conclusions in the learned sheriff's determination. Nothing could be clearer: self-assessment by duty holders of fire risk is fine in many but not all circumstances. However, where help is needed, duty holders must be assured that the advice they receive is up to date, competent and sound. The sheriff is clear that third-party certification of fire risk assessors is a very good way to ensure that that is so. He was not the only one at the time to say so. Chapter 46(6), paragraph 11 of the determination says:

"Scottish Ministers have indicated that United Kingdom Government has made it plain that they do not intend to change legislation in order to make the use of registered and accredited persons compulsory. The responsibility for the fire risk assessment remains at all times with the duty holder and cannot be delegated."

The remainder of the paragraph, which I particularly want to emphasise, says:

"However, it was said on behalf of Scottish Ministers that they recognise the benefits of the alternative approach of highlighting the benefits of using third party accreditation schemes."

The Scottish ministers were also said to be awaiting a UK Government-developed standard for competent fire risk assessors prior to introducing an equivalent scheme for Scotland. One wonders why.

It was also stated that revisions would be made to practical fire safety for care homes

"to make appropriate reference to the benefits of selecting fire risk assessors who have the appropriate accreditation."

Perhaps the minister can tell us specifically what she and her department have done to achieve any or all of that, and how long it has taken them to do so.

Changes have been made to the firelaw website, but if finding references to fire risk assessment on the old version was like looking for a needle in a haystack, doing so on the new version—albeit that the site has improved—is like looking for a knitting needle in a haystack.

I ask the minister what her department knows about the quality of existing fire risk assessments. Has it asked the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to report its experiences? What do we know about the quality of fire risk assessments for major buildings such as this one, conference centres, department stores and factories, or for recent events such as the Ryder cup or the Commonwealth games? I look forward to hearing her reply and would suggest to colleagues that the subject is well worth an investigation by the Justice Committee or the Health and Sport Committee in the near future.

17:25

The Minister for Community Safety and Legal Affairs (Roseanna Cunningham): This year marks the 10th anniversary of the tragic events at Rosepark care home, which led to the deaths of 14 of its residents. Our thoughts are with the families and friends of those whose lives were lost, who will still be grieving even now. It has been a short but important debate, and I congratulate Michael McMahon on bringing the subject to the chamber and thank all those members who have taken part.

Michael McMahon raised a number of key issues, some of which were echoed by other members, and I will deal with each of them in turn. I begin by laying out what has changed since the tragic fire at Rosepark care home took place. Much has changed. New fire safety legislation was introduced, new guidance was issued and the Fire and Rescue Service has adopted a proactive role in advice and enforcement. In addition, sprinklers are now required in new care homes.

As the motion states, the Scottish Government published a revised version of "Practical Fire Safety Guidance for Care Homes" in March this year. It is the third version of the guidance that has been produced since the Rosepark fire. The guidance was revised in consultation with key stakeholders, and the changes that have been made reflect findings from the Rosepark fatal accident inquiry.

With regard to Mr McMahon's proposal for an awareness campaign, the guidance was promoted when it was published. That was done in a series

of targeted communications with key stakeholders, including all registered care homes in Scotland, as well as more than 70 other prominent healthcare sector organisations. I appreciate that, when it comes to communicating such advice, people might expect that to be done through, for example, television adverts, but the guidance for care homes was promoted in a very targeted way so that it would reach directly those who would be most interested in it and most affected by it.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service continues to support care home providers with advice and education on how to comply with the guidance, and at every visit to a care home service SFRS staff will bring the revised guidance to the attention of the duty holder and explain to them how to access and use the provisions in it.

The SFRS adopts a risk-based approach to fire safety enforcement, and a key focus on high-risk buildings is set out in its "Prevention and Protection Directorate Strategy 2013-16" and its fire safety enforcement framework. The strategy sets out that in all cases the service's aim is to enable compliance and to work with occupiers and other responsible persons to achieve a satisfactory level of safety within the built environment. How it achieves that is a matter for the service.

The creation by this Government of the single Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has enabled a consistent approach to be taken to enforcement across Scotland. The SFRS recognises the opportunities that that brings. Its fire safety enforcement framework document, which it issued last year, includes a target to audit all care homes and some other registered care premises every year.

Figures for the percentages of care homes audited by the previous eight fire services showed significant variation. It is important that people understand that that has been a very significant change. Prior to the advent of the single service, some services were achieving a 100 per cent audit rate, while others were achieving about only 40 per cent, and we have now created a target for all care homes to be audited every single year. I must reiterate that that was simply not happening when we had the eight different fire services. In a very real sense, a huge step change is already taking place in safety, and it is a real benefit of the reform that has been made.

With regard to fire risk assessment and the competency of those carrying it out, which has been a key part of the debate, it is not the SFRS's responsibility to undertake fire risk assessments, and I remind members that responsibility for compliance with the fire safety duties in care homes as well as all other commercial premises sits with the employer and other persons who

operate or have control of the premises to any extent. That includes managers, owners and staff, who are referred to in the guidance as duty holders.

Although there is no legal requirement on duty holders to engage external fire safety consultants, the guidance acknowledges that proprietors of certain care homes are likely to need specialist advice to assist with an initial fire safety risk assessment. The Scottish Government acknowledges the difficulty facing duty holders in judging the competence of any external services that they might use, and general guidance to help them can be found on the firelaw webpages on the Scottish Government website, which provide further information and detail on recognised certification and accreditations.

Both the Scottish Government and the SFRS believe that, based on the information that we currently have and the changes that are already being made, there is no requirement at the moment to introduce further legislative changes. The on-going promotion of the practical fire safety guidance supports duty holders in the sector in complying with their obligations to ensure fire safety compliance. In its fire safety enforcement framework, the SFRS sets out its commitment to providing advice to duty holders to help enable that compliance, and that advice will include making them aware of the guidance that is available to them on both fire risk assessment and, indeed, the use of external risk assessors. As well as containing a page on how to complete a fire risk assessment, the SFRS website also provides necessary links to the firelaw and Fire Sector Federation webpages in its section on safety information for businesses.

The regulatory review group—an independent group that advises the Scottish Government on business regulatory matters—is looking at non-domestic fire safety legislation and is due to report in spring 2015. I am not sure whether Michael McMahon is aware of that, and he might wish to look at some of the work that the group is doing. I undertake to write to the group after the debate and ask it to look specifically at the issue of the competency of risk assessors as part of its review, and I invite the member to engage with that process, too.

In light of the on-going promotion of guidance and the current review by the regulatory review group, we do not at this point consider it necessary to introduce any additional requirements. However, we will, of course, continue to monitor the situation and will consider closely the regulatory review group's findings when they become available next year.

Meeting closed at 17:34.

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