



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Tuesday 3 February 2015

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection, for which our leader today is Ms Samina Ansari, who is the employability co-ordinator at Amina—the Muslim Women’s Resource Centre, in Glasgow.

Ms Samina Ansari (Amina—the Muslim Women’s Resource Centre): Presiding Officer, members of the Scottish Parliament: thank you for inviting me to address you today.

A man whom I have never met, never heard speak and never even seen a picture of, but whom I love and respect so very dearly, taught me, and millions of others, to love for my brothers and sisters—Muslim or not Muslim—what I love for myself: to treat others how I want to be treated.

The Prophet Mohammed—peace and blessings be upon him—said:

“None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.”

What is it that we love for ourselves? Is it respect and honour, or to be understood and valued? Is it to be comfortable and have good things in life? I work with some of the most isolated and vulnerable women in the community, who are often invisible to the rest of the world. They are women who desperately want to be a part of society: they want to be valued and respected and to give their children the opportunities and the things that they never had in life.

How many of us take the same route to work day in, day out and week in, week out? We see the same faces and the same people, not knowing their stories or anything about them—not knowing their struggle. We all have struggles.

It is the small acts of kindness that show respect, compassion and love for one another. Recently, a friend of mine reminded me that giving is not always monetary. We were passing by a young homeless gentleman, who was sitting in the freezing cold and pouring rain. I searched for change and felt frustrated because I thought that I had nothing to give. At the same time, my friend opened her handbag, handed over her lunch and started chatting to that man. The respect and time that she gave him was probably more valuable than the actual food. So many passers-by were pretending that the young gentleman was not

there. They thought that it was not their problem—or, like me perhaps, they thought that they had nothing to give at that time. Here is the thing: we all have something to give, even if it is a smile, a hello, a kind gesture or a few minutes of our time.

I urge you, as men and women in positions of power and influence, to know the communities that you serve and represent, and never to forget to love for the people what you love for yourselves, and to desire for the people what you desire for yourselves.

Topical Question Time

14:03

Oil and Gas Summit

1. Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland)

(Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it will take in response to the oil and gas summit in Aberdeen on 2 February 2015. (S4T-00926)

The Minister for Business, Energy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): The First Minister led the Scottish Government's involvement at yesterday's oil and gas summit, where industry leaders, academics, trade unions, representative bodies and three layers of government came together to discuss the future of the industry and the region.

The Scottish Government has acted decisively and swiftly, using our devolved powers, to support the oil and gas industry—for example, by establishing a jobs task force to play a part in maintaining skills and employment and to help those who might face redundancy. We will continue to press the United Kingdom Government to make the urgent and substantial tax changes that are required to sustain investment and the North Sea's long-term future. I hope that Alex Johnstone supports our proposed changes.

We also support the prospect of a city deal for Aberdeen and we will liaise with the UK Government, Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council on that.

Alex Johnstone: I thank the minister for his answer, and I am sure that the industry will welcome the opportunity to see Scotland's two Governments working together for the benefit of the industry.

Given the longer-term significance of the potential downturn, will the minister commit the Government to improving confidence in the north-east by ensuring that, in the future, a higher proportion of locally generated resource is reinvested in the economic growth and invigoration of the north-east?

Fergus Ewing: Of course we want to continue to work closely with Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council. The First Minister emphasised that at what was a very constructive meeting yesterday. I am pleased that the task force that is being led by Lena Wilson—the chief executive of Scottish Enterprise—came up with a large number of practical suggestions. I know that Lena Wilson is absolutely determined to drive forward those suggestions, working closely with the Scottish Government.

I am happy to share the sentiments that Mr Johnstone expressed, but it is fair to say that it is clear that the priority of the industry is that the tax changes that are expected to be announced on 18 March are substantial. That is the number 1 priority for us all at this time.

Alex Johnstone: I share the minister's enthusiasm for the tax changes that he mentioned. Aberdeen is well known as Europe's oil capital, but we have the opportunity to consolidate the city's position as Europe's energy capital.

Will the minister give a commitment that efforts will be made to concentrate energy-related activities in Aberdeen, to acknowledge the work that is done by the offshore industry and to recognise the potential that exists in an onshore oil and gas industry, in hydrogen technology and in renewables?

Fergus Ewing: I certainly agree that as well as being the centre of oil and gas activity for the United Kingdom continental shelf, Aberdeen is an international hub from which projects—in particular, projects that operate in broadly the same time zone—that extend down to South Africa are managed. Just last year, the income from international supply-chain activity in oil and gas exceeded the amount that was generated from UKCS and west of Shetland activity; it amounted to just over £10,000 million.

I also agree with Mr Johnstone's point that we should continue to look at other energy opportunities, including those that are provided by renewables. We should also seek to work with Colin Parker and others at Aberdeen Harbour Board to bring about improvements to the harbour and the possible expansion to Nigg. I discussed those matters with Colin Parker when I met him last week. In all those respects, we have a lot of work to do, and I hope that there is wide agreement on the points that have been made.

With regard to onshore activity, I made clear our position on the work that needs to be done. I set out the basis for a moratorium pending the carrying out of further studies and the holding of a public consultation, which I think is right, given our assumption of responsibilities for such matters. I made all that crystal clear last week.

Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP):

Does the minister agree with the members of the award-winning Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce, who said that they believe that the supplementary charge that was introduced in the 2011 budget must be abolished?

Fergus Ewing: I had the opportunity to speak to Bob Collier of Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce. I am delighted that he is one of the members of Lena Wilson's task force. That will mean that it will be possible for the excellent work

that the chamber does—on, for example, mentoring—to be brought to bear to meet the significant challenge that lies ahead in assisting those who have been made redundant or who may face redundancy over the coming months and the next year or so, and in ensuring that they get maximum help.

To respond to the question that was asked, we think that the supplementary charge hike of 12 per cent that was made in 2011 should be reversed; we set that out in the paper that I presented to Parliament on 8 January. That is so important not necessarily because profits are being made at the moment—I know from my meetings with many operators in Aberdeen over the past three weeks that, in general, profits are not being made at the moment. The real significance is to reinstall confidence in boardrooms throughout the world. I cannot, having had a series of private discussions, emphasise highly enough that investment has leaked away on a very substantial scale since 2011. We are not talking tens of millions or even hundreds of millions of pounds; rather, we are talking about billions of pounds of investment that has gone from the UK because of the damaging tax hike in 2011.

This is an opportunity for the UK to send a clear signal and it is an opportunity that almost everyone who I have spoken to wants to grab.

Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab): This morning, a constituent of mine who is working in Houston told me that there must be in place an emergency response system to deal with dramatic ups and downs in the oil industry and the impact on the economy of Aberdeen and the north-east. Does the minister agree? Will the Scottish Government play its part in such a system? Is such a system any closer to development following yesterday's summit?

Fergus Ewing: As I outlined in the partnership action for continuing employment—PACE—debate last week, we of course already have, through the employability fund and European structural funds, the capability to assist in a number of ways people who are affected by the downturn, across the whole country, including in East Ayrshire and in Fife—I have spoken to Roderick Campbell about RAF Leuchars, as you know well, Presiding Officer.

Many parts of Scotland face shocks, but there are—as I argued in last week's PACE debate—provisions to deal with the situation. We have set up a task force to do that. I was extremely pleased to have received a report in principle about the actions that will be taken, including action to promote better and to highlight through the industry the major PACE meeting that will be arranged in March; action to promote the PACE team's employability helpline, which is available

for the people who have been affected; and, above all, action to gain from the ideas that have been presented by industry, trade unions and academics at the task force and at yesterday's summit meeting in order that we can provide a wide range of supports for each individual. That is the goal. We will work together with all other parties and everyone else to achieve that.

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): Yesterday, it was agreed that the north-east needs proper support and investment in order to make it an attractive place for business. At present, Aberdeen City Council is short changed on the local government funding formula by £13 million, according to the Government's supposed funding floor. Will the minister support a change to local government allocations in order to bring up Aberdeen City Council up to the funding floor and allow investment that would enable the city to be a vibrant place for business?

Fergus Ewing: It is correct to point out that we were the first Administration to place a floor on the amount of funding that would be made available. *[Interruption.]* Although Alison McInnes is protesting otherwise audibly from a sedentary position, the funding floor was not put in place when the previous Administration was here. That is a matter of fact.

We face difficult times. It is not going to advance us to have a partisan approach—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Order, Mr Macdonald.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy (John Swinney): Shocking.

The Presiding Officer: You, too, Mr Swinney!

Fergus Ewing: That is why, Presiding Officer, I always seek to ride above expressions of partisan opinion from whatever source they may emerge, no matter how unlikely.

Police Resources (Celtic v Rangers Match)

2. John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what impact the recent Celtic v Rangers match had on police resources. (S4T-00920)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Michael Matheson): Police Scotland put in place more than 1,000 extra officers across Scotland to help manage the game, with more than 600 in and around the stadium and more than 400 in towns and cities across the country.

Police Scotland had a co-ordinated response, with officers readily available to manage fans. That included spotter teams, which worked jointly with partners outwith Scotland to target high-risk fans

who may have travelled to Scotland for the game. The British Transport Police and the football co-ordination unit also played an important role.

It was disappointing to see that a small minority of the 50,000 football fans were intent on causing violence and disorder. At this stage, 56 people have been reported to the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service by Police Scotland for football-related offences. We must recognise that those individuals are not representative of the positive attitude and behaviour of the vast majority of Scottish football fans and others who attended Sunday's game.

John Mason: Is the cabinet secretary able to say whether any of the behaviour of those 56 people was sectarian, anti-Irish or anti-Catholic?

Michael Matheson: I advise the member that, of the 56 people who have been reported by the police to the Crown, nine were reported for offences under section 1 of the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act 2012. A number of other offences were committed, which the Crown will consider as the cases go forward. However, it is entirely a matter for the Crown how it chooses to proceed with those individuals.

John Mason: It has been suggested that alcohol should be made more freely available at football games. Does the cabinet secretary feel that alcohol made the situation worse on Sunday? Would more alcohol really help the situation?

Michael Matheson: It is important that a football match is an environment in which people feel safe and to which they feel they can bring their children and families. It is important that such factors are taken into consideration in how we manage football events. The Government wants our national game to be seen as a positive thing that people can enjoy.

I have stated previously that if there is to be any possibility of introducing alcohol at football matches again, we will have to consult widely because the matter goes way beyond what happens in the stadium. It is for the football authorities to come forward with proposals if they would like it to happen.

I am clear in my support of the approach that Police Scotland took on Sunday. I joined them as an observer, to see the policing operation at the game. Their approach demonstrated Police Scotland's professionalism in managing such major events extremely well.

Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab): In the commissioned report into sectarianism, Dr Duncan Morrow made a number of recommendations for football clubs and governing bodies to act on. Has the cabinet secretary met any of the clubs or

governing bodies to discuss the implementation of those recommendations?

The Presiding Officer: I am not sure that that has anything to do with the recent Celtic v Rangers match, and I do not know whether the cabinet secretary wishes to respond.

Michael Matheson: It may assist the member to know that my colleague Paul Wheelhouse is responsible for that area of policy. She may wish to write to him on those matters.

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that we are only ever going to get football in this country to move into the real world, with the challenges that it faces, if we ensure that there is much more family involvement? Does he agree that it is time that the football authorities woke up, smelled the coffee and introduced summer football to get more families into the game?

The Presiding Officer: I am not sure that that question has anything to do with police resources, but the cabinet secretary may wish to answer it.

Michael Matheson: I do not think that my powers go as far as directing Scottish football to play matches during the summer. However, as a regular attender of football matches with my children, I think that having matches on Saturday afternoons when the temperature is warmer would make taking families along to the football much more attractive.

It is for the football authorities to ensure that Scottish football is an attractive product not just on the pitch, but off the pitch. Other European countries have been successful in achieving that. There is a challenge for the Scottish football authorities in ensuring that they create the right environment for fans off the pitch, and one in which they are seen as valuable. They must provide the resources and support that are necessary to ensure that the football environment for fans in Scotland is first class.

The Presiding Officer: I point out to members that, when I call someone to ask a supplementary question, they are meant to address the question that was originally asked. I do not mind it when members are clever and link it to something else, but I have to say that that degree of cleverness was not on display today.

Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-12220, in the name of Marco Biagi, on the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill. Mr Biagi, you have 14 minutes.

14:19

The Minister for Local Government and Community Empowerment (Marco Biagi): Thank you, Presiding Officer—and I begin this stage 1 debate by thanking a lot of other people, too. Although “stage 1” suggests that we are at the first stage, all parliamentarians will know how much work has gone into the bill before this stage, as is the case with all bills.

My colleague and predecessor Derek Mackay took what began as a scattered set of suggestions in the Scottish National Party manifesto, tended the proposals through two consultations and 40 engagement events and helped them to spring forth in the bill that we consider today. All I can say is that he took much better care of the proposals than he took of the plant in what is now my office in Victoria Quay.

I thank the Finance Committee and the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee for their consideration of the bill. Most of all, I thank the two subject committees: I thank Kevin Stewart and the members of the Local Government and Regeneration Committee; and I thank Rob Gibson and the members of the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee, who looked at part 4, on the community right to buy, in particular.

The two subject committees produced a ream of recommendations—I mean “ream”; the paper in front of me runs to 44 pages. The Government will consider all the recommendations closely in advance of stage 2. In the spirit of producing the best possible bill, we will also consider ideas that members put forward today.

The committees were no doubt helped by their efforts to take evidence from an unusually wide range of organisations and individuals. Meetings took place in Fort William and Dumfries, and there was innovative use of social media and online video to help explain aspects of the bill. It is heartening to see colleagues making it easy for people to participate in the development of a bill that should be all about participation.

Thanks are also due to everyone who took the time to offer their views and experiences to the committees or the Scottish Government. Time and time again, I have been encouraged to hear

organisations and individuals express confidence that the bill will make a real difference in helping to make public bodies and agencies look at community empowerment in a different way.

I come to the debate to present the bill and endorse its aims, and to ask members of all parties to join together to back it. We all know that communities can do great things when they are empowered to achieve their own goals, given the freedom to choose their own path, given responsibility for their surroundings and trusted to take their own decisions.

In places such as Craigmillar, Inverness, Govanhill, Irvine and Kilmarnock, I have met grass-roots groups that are doing remarkable things in their communities, in their own way and on their own terms. There is so much talent out there—it just needs a bit of self-belief, some encouragement and the taking away of unnecessary obstacles.

That is what the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill sets out to do. By creating new rights for community bodies and conferring new duties on a range of public authorities, it will provide a new legal framework and, I hope, stimulate the growth of a new mindset—we can never legislate for that—which will promote and encourage community empowerment and participation.

Since the bill’s introduction in June, the demand for participation and empowerment has grown. Our historic referendum proved, if proof were needed, that people will get involved when they know the issues that are at stake and that they can make a difference to them.

Members across the chamber believe in more powers for this Parliament, because that, too, is a form of bringing control over decision making closer to the people whom decisions affect.

We now need to build on that new sense of what can be achieved. The bill contributes to the spirit of democratic renewal. It does so tangibly, in ways that can instantly be recognised—even if I accept the Local Government and Regeneration Committee’s point that things can sometimes be hidden by a bit of gobbledegook. We have done our best to produce an easy-read policy memorandum and we will put our guidance in plain English—more than anything else, we accept that recommendation.

Part 1 will put into statute the national outcomes approach, which is currently represented by Scotland performs, and will place duties on the Scottish Government to develop, consult on, publish, review and report on a set of indicators for the kind of Scotland that we want to see. For the community of the whole nation, that has to be, and will be, an empowering process.

Part 2 puts community planning partnerships into statute, and we will develop the role and performance of CPPs, not least by ensuring that public bodies work together in CPPs and with the public.

Through the participation requests in part 3, the bill will give communities a new power to enter into dialogue with public authorities to ensure that their voices are always heard. That simple power will remind everyone that communities should always be around the table when decisions that affect them are being taken.

The provisions in part 4, on which my colleague the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform will lead, deal with the community right to buy that exists in the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003. Part 4 will simplify the process and make it more flexible, and it will extend the type of community bodies that are able to access the right to buy. Crucially, it will expand the extent of the communities that can take forward such a right: the community right to buy will be extended from rural Scotland to all of Scotland.

The community right to buy will also be extended through the introduction of a right to buy neglected or abandoned land, even where there is no willing seller. We recognise that committees and stakeholders have all asked for clarification of the type of land that is covered by that provision. We have sought stakeholders' views and have discussed with them what would be required. My colleague the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform will therefore provide draft regulations in advance of stage 2 that will detail the matters that must be considered when the question whether land is neglected or abandoned is determined. Those matters could include the physical condition of the land and the use, or lack of use, to which it is being put and the effect that that has on the surrounding land.

Part 5 will make it easier for communities to take control of a public asset. Whether it is a community centre, a patch of public land or whatever, the sky is the limit for what can be achieved by the ingenuity and local knowledge released by community participation.

The common good asset registers in part 6 will mean more transparency over common good assets as well as increased community involvement in the decisions that are taken about them.

Part 7 will create a new duty on local authorities to keep a waiting list of those who want an allotment, which will be paired with a duty to "take reasonable steps" to ensure that those waiting lists do not grow too long. Let me be clear: that will mean more allotments.

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): On allotments, I think that all members have received a piece of lobbying from the Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society. For whatever reason, the society feels threatened by the bill, but I am not sure whether the threat is perceived or real; indeed, I am not sure what the real issue is for the society.

Could the way forward be for the minister to indicate that he would be prepared to support the exploration of grandfather rights for individuals who already have allotments and who could keep those rights for the future? We could enshrine that in law, with any new allotments that were created falling under the bill. That potential solution may help everyone through a difficulty.

Marco Biagi: On Friday, I spoke to Ian Welsh of the Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society. I committed to consulting on the use of one of the powers that the bill will create with the aim of addressing concerns about size, while allowing flexibility to ensure that those who want differently sized plots also have their needs met. However, that focuses on people who get an allotment for the first time. It is clear that anyone who has a lease or agreement with a local authority under existing legislation will come up against a lot of contract and rental law. We could certainly look at that issue. I do not believe that the changes would lead to there being significant impacts on existing contracts, although councils have the ability to review rents—that applies to any council rental contract.

There is a possibility that we could look at the additional rights that are coming in and examine whether to have transitional arrangements or, indeed, to continue existing arrangements if that approach would be disadvantageous. The bill takes areas that have not been legislated on for, in some cases, 123 years and creates additional rights in relation to allotments in every area that I have looked at, as far as I can tell. However, there is on-going dialogue, and I will continue to speak to the Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society so that we understand each other and can reach an agreement.

After what I have just said, perhaps I should say "last, but not least" as I turn to part 8 of the bill. Part 8 will allow councils to support and encourage businesses in target areas through local business rates relief schemes.

Each part of the bill individually provides new measures; taken together, we hope that they will help to change the culture around community empowerment to make such local approaches routine. We recognise, however, that if all our communities are to be empowered, some will require support. The Local Government and Regeneration Committee was right to highlight

that. We want all communities to be able to keep up in the race to take advantage of the new powers.

We will therefore not stand still at stage 2. While we have been considering the evidence to the committee, we have already been discussing and debating with partners and stakeholders how we might improve the bill, which was introduced to Parliament seven months ago. We propose to lodge amendments on appeal procedures for asset transfer requests and the publication of asset registers, but the central change has to be an even greater focus on reducing inequalities.

The bill stands alongside the whole range of existing duties and policies that target inequalities, and we believe that by empowering communities, inequalities are reduced and that, where communities lead their own regeneration and control their own future, they will take the right steps forward. We will, however, lodge amendments to ensure that the national outcomes and approaches to community planning are aligned to the aim of reducing inequalities.

We also intend to require public bodies to make inequality a material concern in decisions on key participation requests and asset transfer mechanisms. We want to see the communities that have been most excluded take their well-deserved seats at the table and those that have been most disempowered take control of their surroundings. The cabinet secretary therefore announced today an extra £5.6 million for the people and communities fund. That will be part of the overall empowering communities pot, which now stands at £19.4 million of support.

With the aim of empowering those communities, we have been particularly impressed by participatory budgeting, where funding decisions are taken directly by the people who are affected. Scottish Government-funded PB training events in recent months have drawn crowds from public bodies and local authorities, and we have received a great deal of interest in our offer to new PB projects. We know of about two dozen that have taken place in the past decade, including the well-established annual Leith decides project, which will go ahead this weekend. Together with the cabinet secretary, I have consulted the participatory budgeting working group and I am considering options, including legislative ones, to ensure that the agenda moves forward.

Participatory budgeting is a relatively new form of community engagement, but public bodies have been doing—or have known how to do—community engagement well for many years. The national standards for community engagement have been the basis for that, and I intend to use them as the foundation of the guidance on community participation that will go to community

planning partnerships under the new statutory guidance powers.

CPPs must be the forum where high-level decisions are taken for entire authority areas, but there is much to commend the taking of similar partnership approaches more locally, where grass-roots community groups in all their diversity can more easily input directly.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): Will the minister take an intervention?

Marco Biagi: I am afraid that I am in my final minute.

On Saturday, I will visit a charrette hosted by the Glasgow canal regeneration partnership, where the community will be able to come together in just such a way with facilitators and designers and, over a few days, develop an image or set of options for the design of their community. Charrettes are a participatory approach to planning. They have been supported by the Scottish Government for four years and they are just one of the countless examples that are already out there of people coming together to play their part in their own future.

I do not want to say that we need to up our game because it is clear that there are already so many great examples of excellence out there, but with the bill we have a unique opportunity to ensure that our greatest asset—the people who live and work in Scotland—are even better able to make decisions about their future on their terms. We believe, will believe and always have believed that, if they come together in that way, the decisions will be better. The bill is an opportunity that we must come together today to seize.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

At this stage of the debate, we have a little time in hand if members wish to take interventions.

I call Kevin Stewart to speak on behalf of the Local Government and Regeneration Committee.

14:34

Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in this debate on behalf of my colleagues in the Local Government and Regeneration Committee. I thank the current and past members of the committee for the work that they have undertaken, not only in scrutinising the bill but on the wider topic of community empowerment. The committee has been examining community empowerment in one form or another for the past three years. I will elaborate on that later.

I extend my thanks to all the witnesses who provided written and oral evidence to the committee as well as to the hundreds of people from all over Scotland who took part in various community engagement events with us. Thanks are also due to all the people who helped to facilitate the committee's various fact-finding visits across Scotland over the past three years. They proved to be invaluable preparation for our scrutiny of the bill.

I thank our colleagues in the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee and the Finance Committee for their scrutiny of the bill and, in particular, I thank the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee, under the convenership of Rob Gibson, for its consideration of part 4, on the community right to buy. I know that that work proved to be a big ask for a committee with a very full programme of work, but my colleagues and I greatly appreciated the knowledge and expertise that its members brought to the examination of the community right to buy. We have accepted its recommendations to us in full. I am sure that members of that committee will say more about that during the debate.

I thank the former Minister for Local Government and Planning, Derek Mackay, and all the Scottish Government officials who have worked to bring the legislation to fruition. I hope that we can work in tandem with the current minister to ensure that we make the bill the best that it possibly can be.

Ernest Hemingway once said:

"The best way to find out if you can trust somebody is to trust them."

That piece of advice neatly sums up the core philosophy at the heart of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill. At first glance, it may be difficult to see a unifying theme to the bill, as it seems to cover so many different areas, but, in truth, trust is the unifying theme at the heart of it: trust that communities all over Scotland know what is best for them and have the desire and ability to help to bring their ambitions to reality; trust that, despite all the challenges that our public services have faced and will continue to face, they can work together to empower communities and deliver the outcomes that they need; trust that communities can make better use of public assets such as buildings or land than local authorities or the wider public sector can; and trust that CPP partners will help to facilitate public trust by being able to work in partnership with communities.

The bill is not about imposing a framework or compelling various public bodies to undertake various actions that we wish them to undertake; rather, it is about providing communities across Scotland with the tools that they need to take

decisions for themselves and about trusting them to use those tools wisely. In short, it is about putting the power in community empowerment.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): On compelling organisations to do things, Kevin Stewart will be aware that the Scottish Woodlot Association has expressed concerns about the Forestry Act 1967, which prevents community groups from taking Forestry Commission land for woodland projects. What is the committee's view on that?

Kevin Stewart: Andy Brown of the Scottish Woodlot Association was in touch with the committee on Sunday and yesterday. He is pleased that we have recommended that Forestry Commission Scotland should be able to lease state forest land to not-for-profit co-operatives. I hope that that helps the Scottish Woodlot Association with what it is trying to achieve.

I have mentioned trust. With all trust comes a degree of risk; indeed, risk is at the very heart of what it means to trust. As we heard during our evidence taking on the bill, many public sector stakeholders are keenly aware of potential risks that may arise as a result of the change that the bill will help to foster. However, from the widespread community engagement that we undertook as a committee, we feel confident that the legislation will benefit not only communities, but the wider public service.

In our scrutiny of the bill, we have made great efforts to engage with the people whom the bill will affect. First, since early 2012, we have sought to use our entire work programme to take opportunities to examine community empowerment and inform ourselves of how it has developed as a mechanism for delivering change over the past decade or more. Over the past three years, the Local Government and Regeneration Committee has taken advantage of seven major pieces of work to examine the issue of community empowerment: our scrutiny of the Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties etc) (Scotland) Bill; our three-strand inquiry on public services reform, in which we undertook three interlinked inquiries over 18 months; our scrutiny of the 2013-14 draft budget; our scrutiny of the third national planning framework; and, most recently, our inquiry into the delivery of regeneration in Scotland.

Secondly, we have taken every opportunity to communicate with real people and communities the length and breadth of Scotland, and to do so in as clear a manner as possible. We undertook 10 fact-finding visits and held four full meetings of the committee outside Edinburgh. We visited places as diverse as Kelso, Cumbernauld, Paisley, Maybole, Stornoway, Dumfries and Fort William. During those visits, we held round-table

discussions with local people and community groups about community empowerment. The clerks have estimated that more than 600 people attended the engagement sessions in person, with more joining in via social media.

Thirdly, the committee has very much taken to heart the reform agenda set forth by the Presiding Officer to engage with the people of Scotland as widely as possible using modern technology. To this end, we made widespread use of both Twitter and Facebook to engage with people and garner their views on the bill. We also recently established the first-ever Scottish Parliament committee Instagram account to make use of the visual evidence that we have collated.

During our visit to Stornoway, we held a live interactive Twitter discussion in both English and Gaelic with people in all three island areas. The discussion focused on what those communities felt they needed to empower themselves.

We also had some YouTube videos made, and I invite members to have a look at them. We have already made differences to people's lives in the course of dealing with the bill. We visited Dumfries, and our video highlights the excellent work of a community group there called the Usual Place and the vital services that it provides in the Dumfries and Galloway area, such as a changing places toilet. I am happy to say that the committee was able to play a small role in helping that worthy organisation to secure a lease with Dumfries and Galloway Council on a property for its use. That is a good example of community empowerment at its best. I give thanks to the Parliament's media team for allowing us the opportunity to participate in those videos.

The minister mentioned gobbledegook and officialspeak, which are a great turn-off for many folks who want to become involved. I am glad that the minister raised that point today, and I hope that he will continue to follow the committee's line that we must eradicate them, to allow for the maximum possible amount of participation.

Let us now consider the committee's findings and recommendations. Part 1 of the bill addresses national outcomes. Given the focus on scrutiny of outcomes, we consider that the Scottish Government should report annually on the extent to which national outcomes have been achieved. That would inform the Parliament's budget scrutiny process. Such reports should be available before the publication of the draft Scottish budget each year.

Part 2 relates to community planning. The committee is concerned that local communities are not sufficiently and directly involved with community planning partnerships. We recommend that the Government amends the bill to require

CPPs to seek involvement from a level below that of community representative, as well as to set out how that involvement will be assessed. There should be an explicit requirement on all CPPs to include community capacity building in local plans and to report on progress in every annual report.

Part 3 deals with participation requests. There can be no doubt that the bill is generally a welcome boost towards putting power in the hands of communities. However, the committee was struck by the fact that, although the bill is designed to empower, it contains a requirement that only groups with a written constitution may submit a participation request. That seems to be out of step with the whole ethos of the bill. In the words of Jeanie Mackenzie, who responded to our video on participation requests:

"Sometimes an individual has a very good idea for improving public services, but lacks the time or opportunity to find others and form a constituted group."

We therefore recommend that the bill be amended to allow individuals to submit participation requests.

Given the need to legislate in this area, it is vital that progress on participation requests is closely monitored. We therefore also recommend that the bill requires all public service authorities to produce periodic public reports. That is covered in paragraphs 261 to 270 of our report, which sets out our recommendations for the areas to be covered by that process.

As I have already stated, part 4, on the community right to buy, was considered by the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee, so I will leave members of that committee to speak about that issue.

Part 5 deals with asset transfers. Some of our recommendations in that area are directed at the changes that are required to public bodies to ensure that the bill's intention is achieved in practice. That, too, will require close monitoring.

Part 6 relates to the management of common good assets. Given the approach that the minister outlined in oral evidence, we see no difficulty with the bill specifying a maximum timescale for the compilation of common good registers.

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

Kevin Stewart: Part 7 relates to allotments. We have already heard a little about that from members. We have made recommendations on that, too.

Part 8 deals with non-domestic rates, which I may come back to if I have a chance to intervene.

I go back to the first principle, which is that all of this is about trust. It is about time that we trusted our communities, and I hope that we will do so.

I commend our stage 1 report on the bill.

14:45

Alex Rowley (Cowdenbeath) (Lab): Lyndon Johnson said:

“You do not examine legislation in the light of the benefits it will convey if properly administered, but in the light of the wrongs it would do and the harms it would cause if improperly administered.”

For me, that is a good starting point on the bill. I welcome the fact that the minister has said today, and the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners’ Rights has said previously, that they want to have more discussions and are willing to consider addressing some of the issues in the bill at stage 2. The Labour Party certainly supports the principle of the bill, but we see a need for greater clarity, and there are still far too many unanswered questions; I hope to go through a few of them. I will highlight one. On participation requests, I say that if there is no right to appeal—there is uncertainty on that, in some senses—what is the point?

The bill needs teeth and more strength. Marco Biagi said that “inequalities are reduced” when we empower communities, and I do not disagree with that, but I am not sure that the bill will do that, particularly if we are aiming at the least empowered communities. A real worry about that comes through in the evidence to the committee. Therefore, the bill needs more strength and more teeth if we are serious about community empowerment. I am not sure that it actually goes there.

There is a great need for improvement in the bill, which is why I commend Kevin Stewart and the Local Government and Regeneration Committee for the exhaustive work that they have carried out. They have produced a report that contains a range of detailed recommendations. That demonstrates not only that the committee has been active in taking evidence but that it has listened to that evidence. I am sure that the committee’s recommendations will form the basis of discussions with the Government, as we move forward.

I draw attention to the Finance Committee’s report. We cannot go past today without highlighting that, although that committee

“acknowledges the difficulties faced in quantifying potential future costs arising from services that will be demand driven”,

it

“remains concerned that, despite the requirements of Standing Orders, best estimates have not been fully provided.”

A number of local authorities gave evidence to the Finance Committee and the Local Government and Regeneration Committee, and highlighted many concerns. For instance, East Lothian Council said:

“Local government will incur extra cost as a result of these provisions (which constitute a new legislative burden) and it is not possible to allocate money to these”.

There were submissions from Inverclyde Council, Glasgow City Council, North Ayrshire Council and North Lanarkshire Council, all of which raised legitimate concerns. The bill team confirmed that

“That would be part of the normal discussions with local authorities through the annual budgeting process”

and that

“Local authorities would have to demonstrate and quantify what was involved and then go into discussions with the Scottish Government.”—[*Official Report, Finance Committee*, 8 October 2014; c 55.]

As we know, local authorities the length and breadth of Scotland—regardless of their political colour—are currently cutting front-line services.

Kevin Stewart: Will Alex Rowley give way?

Alex Rowley: I will not, at this stage.

I raise that point not to highlight concerns about local government finance, but to argue that if the moneys are not available, the cost and the fear of cost could become a barrier to ensuring that public organisations progress the legislation in the intended spirit.

The Finance Committee and Kevin Stewart’s committee have flagged up those points, and it is important that we flag them up today. The Local Government and Regeneration Committee believes that finance is such a major concern that it draws attention to the issue in the report that is before Parliament today.

Kevin Stewart: The committee was divided on that point, but it would be fair to say that there are some concerns.

The Scottish Community Alliance director, Angus Hardie, said:

“while recognising the validity of the concerns highlighted by the ... Committee with regard to the Financial Memorandum, the Scottish Community Alliance would urge MSPs to support the passage of the Bill to the next Stage.”

Does Mr Rowley agree with that?

Alex Rowley: I have said that the Scottish Labour Party absolutely supports the principle of community empowerment. However, there are serious questions around finance that should be raised in Parliament. That is a fact.

Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab): Alex Rowley referred in his opening comments to poor legislation and the challenges in the bill. Does he agree with the latest statement from the Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society, which asks for section 7 to be removed from the bill and passed as separate legislation?

Alex Rowley: I should probably declare an interest as a very keen allotment grower. There needs to be further discussion with the Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society, which has raised a number of issues that I note—with the greatest respect—the minister did not address in his response to Kevin Stewart's intervention.

Marco Biagi: On the point about discussion with the Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society, I have been out and visited an allotment, and met the society to discuss the five points that it put forward. I also spoke to the society's president on the phone on Friday. There has been continuing dialogue, which will go on. It is important to identify what the society is looking for, because that is the sticking point right now with regard to what the legislation needs to do. My door is open, and my phone is on.

Alex Rowley: I agree with the minister that the five points that the society makes will form the basis of a discussion.

The letter that the society has submitted highlights a missed opportunity to link the bill to the food strategy and to health and wellbeing through the community planning partnerships, and to build its aims into local community plans. We should be able to have those discussions, and I am happy to join the minister in engaging in them. As I said, I am a very keen allotment grower and I would like to see allotments expand.

I will quickly highlight a few other issues. Inclusion Scotland states that

"in absence of genuine and meaningful community capacity building and engagement, the opportunities created by the Bill will not be"

equally distributed. It goes on to state that under part 3 of the bill

"Communities which are the most marginalised, fractured and impoverished are likely to benefit least whilst communities already rich in resources and human assets are likely to benefit most through their acquisition of new assets".

The Local Government and Regeneration Committee highlights the same points, which are genuine and need to be taken on board.

Inclusion Scotland's briefing also highlights the issue of how "community" is defined. I was quite surprised to see that, because I thought that the Government was looking at the definition more widely. However, I discovered from reading the

cabinet secretary's evidence in committee that that was not what was said, so we need to take on board Inclusion Scotland's point.

To go back to the point that I made at the start and that the minister made in his opening speech, if we are serious about tackling inequalities and poverty, we must recognise that empowerment is one part of that and getting community planning right is another. In a previous role, I met the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth and had a discussion about that. I am absolutely committed to community planning, but we must recognise the points that Inclusion Scotland makes, including that it believes

"that the requirement placed on community groups to request participation disempowers rather than empowers communities, as it leaves the power with the public bodies, which should instead have a duty to ... engage with communities."

There are some serious points in that that we must pick up and consider if we are serious about the principles of the bill. They are all highlighted in the evidence to the committee.

This morning, I read another briefing that came from Barnardo's, Oxfam and others. I note that they talk about participatory budgeting. The minister has said that he is interested in that, and some pots of money have been made available.

I am a big believer in the idea that there is in Scotland a fourth tier of government—community councils. As we discussed in the committee, many people criticise them because they often tell us what they are against rather than what they are for. In my constituency, three community councils had elections only a few months ago. The turnout was 22 or 23 per cent, which is not bad when we consider that it was 27 per cent in the by-election in Kirkcaldy, which I thought was good for a by-election. That means that 20-odd per cent of the communities in Kelty, Cardenden and Lumphinnans turned out to elect local community councillors.

If we go back to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee's previous report on empowerment and voting patterns, we see the argument that, if councils are perceived to have more powers, more people are likely to come out and vote. It is likewise with the fourth tier of government in Scotland. It is worth exploring passing budgets down through participatory budgeting to local level to empower communities to take local action.

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

Alex Rowley: I will draw to a close.

We must reconsider the right to request to participate, because we cannot have it without a proper appeals system.

Scottish Labour is absolutely committed to empowering communities. We need a progressive agenda that not only puts far more power into this Parliament from Westminster but ensures that it goes from Parliament to communities. That is the way ahead.

The bill needs a lot more work, and we are certainly up for working with the Government and partners to move things forward.

14:57

Cameron Buchanan (Lothian) (Con): The bill contains some provisions with which I agree and some with which I do not. I welcome the principle of community empowerment, but I am not sure that the bill will truly empower communities in the most appropriate way.

Although there have been areas of broad agreement, I will raise a number of concerns that remain, in the hope that further discussion will help to resolve the issues. It is vital that key terms in the bill be defined properly, which unfortunately does not appear to be the case. In addition, it is a fundamental point that bills must be costed before they are put to Parliament for approval. As yet, that has not happened. I welcome the general provisions regarding allotments, but wish for greater clarity on them as the bill progresses.

Before I elaborate on the aspects of the bill on which some work is needed, I reiterate my agreement with the principle of enabling communities to have a greater say in their areas. However, I am not sure that the bill would empower communities in the most appropriate way.

Furthermore, it is vital that definitions of when a community's right to buy can be enforced be set out very clearly. An absolute right to buy without strict and obvious conditions would set a very damaging precedent that would be neither fair nor in Scotland's best interests. My colleague Alex Fergusson will elaborate on those points.

One of the key aspects of the bill that is to be assessed as it passes through the Parliament is the estimate of the costs that will arise as a result of its provisions. In its report, the committee expresses its concern that best estimates of costs arising from all provisions have not been provided, despite the requirements of standing orders, as Mr Rowley said. I feel the need to reiterate those concerns in the strongest terms, because that omission in particular, regarding asset transfer or participation requests, is a serious matter that must be addressed before the bill goes to stage 2.

Members of Parliament should not be expected to debate accurately the merits of the bill without proper costings; we cannot be expected to sign a blank cheque. We may hear the excuse that there are difficulties in quantifying future costs arising from provisions that will depend on the amount of demand, but that is no excuse, since the committee and Parliament expect estimates within ranges. I am sure that many members share my concerns in that regard; I expect that the concerns will be addressed as soon as possible.

I welcome the bill's aims to make clear provisions regarding allotments. They are valuable to many people and it is important to explore how we can help. Accordingly, I agree with a number of the provisions. However, I would like to raise two particular aspects that I believe should be considered. The first concerns provisions regarding the size of an allotment plot. The committee heard points regarding traditional plot sizes. People were right to highlight the need for plots to be of sufficient size, but it is perhaps unwise to assume that all allotment holders wish to use them for the same reasons and for the same purpose. For example, some people use allotments purely as a hobby, rather than as a means to feed a family.

Furthermore, different areas will have varying local demands and differences regarding available space, as we heard in connection with Fort William. The point that I am trying to underline is that a balance must be struck. Allotment holders deserve a reasonable sized plot, but local authorities need flexibility to adapt to local circumstances and local demand. With that in mind, as we have heard, the Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society suggested that a particular size could be a reference standard that could be halved or quartered, rather than being an obligatory standard. That is worth detailed consideration. However, it remains sensible for local authorities to have the flexibility to offer plot sizes that are most suitable locally.

The second point that I would like to make on allotments is that, in the interests of fairness, no supplier of grown produce should be excluded through legislation from selling the produce locally in markets or shops. It is only fair that new producers are able to establish themselves without undue boundaries, and local consumers should be able to decide for themselves what they want to buy.

Before I conclude my remarks, I would like to return to what I see as being one of the most important points to be made about the bill, which is that it lacks clear and unambiguous definitions in many areas. For example, I welcome the duty that the bill places on local authorities to establish and maintain a register of all property and assets that

are held by them for the common good. That duty will, amongst other things, help to increase transparency. However, the definition of “common good” is not set out clearly, which might result in confusion during the bill’s implementation, as well as opportunities for provisions to be either extended or avoided.

I hope that today’s debate shows a degree of agreement around some aspects of the bill, even though pressing concerns remain over many provisions.

Alex Rowley: Does Cameron Buchanan agree that it is therefore crucial that we have some kind of financial estimates of the costs that could be incurred, if we are serious about taking this bill forward and wanting it to work in communities?

Cameron Buchanan: It is essential that we have estimates of costs, or the bill cannot proceed. We have not had those estimates.

It is important that, in the provisions on allotments, the correct balance be struck between protecting allotment holders’ interests and allowing local authorities the flexibility that they need to operate efficiently. After all, community empowerment should be about allowing decisions to be made locally. Furthermore, it is vital that clear definitions be provided for each aspect that remains ambiguous. If they are not, the interpretation and reach of the bill could be extended beyond its remit, with controversial consequences.

I would like to finish on a positive note, by highlighting my sincere concern about the lack of financial information that has been provided and reiterating my expectation that that omission will be rectified.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We come to the open debate. Speeches should be of six minutes, please.

15:03

Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): The Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee considered part 4 of the bill and reported our views to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee.

Land reform is an on-going and complex process. The provisions in part 4 address some of the issues on that agenda. Once amended, the provisions should resolve the identified shortcomings of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 and extend the community right to buy across Scotland, which we welcome. However, we agreed with some concerns about the drafting of the bill, with regard to what is included and what is to be left needing regulation and guidance later on.

The committee believes that the complexity of aspects within part 4 merits further explanation in the financial and explanatory memoranda. Further consideration of sustainable development and human rights could have facilitated a more constructive dialogue between landowners and communities. We understand that the community right to buy will be demand led, so the costs for communities, landowners and public bodies are unclear. The financial memorandum omits to monitor the cost implications of the part 4 provisions closely and the funding requirements will have to be kept under review—the figure is as long as a piece of a string.

Stakeholders overwhelmingly support extending the community right to buy to the whole of Scotland. The committee agrees, and we welcome the provisions in section 27 to do so. We also welcome the cabinet secretary’s potential amendments at stage 2 to extend the list of eligible community bodies, and we recommend that that includes community benefit societies and community interest companies.

We heard some suggest that the definition of communities should include communities of interest as well as those of geographic place, for example in dispersed rural communities. However, the committee recognises the importance of communities being rooted in place, and we are content with the definition in the bill.

Registration of an interest in land was explored in great detail. As many communities start to take an interest in land acquisition only when land comes on to the market, it is right to have that. Communities benefit from proactive engagement in community development and trying to identify assets that they may need to deliver their objectives. In principle, we are supportive of the requirement to register an interest in land, but re-registration processes must be simplified and should include the option to register for a purpose.

Communities should have a right to register an interest and to be notified when land is coming on to the market or ownership is changing and that should trigger the process of registering a right of pre-emption, which is a new way forward. The process for late registration should reflect the practical reality for communities and should be redesigned to accommodate that.

A presumption in favour of re-registration should be agreed unless there is some material change of circumstances. If the re-registration process is substantially simplified, a requirement to re-register every five years is appropriate.

The committee agrees that mapping requirements for the community right to buy are excessive. Communities need a simplified system to align the eligibility criteria with those for parts 2

and 3A of the amended Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003.

The power to extend the community right to buy where there is no willing seller should be a power of last resort. That power could play a key role to hasten negotiation. We are concerned that this new right, as currently drafted, may be almost impossible to exercise. Too many obstacles and opportunities for avoidance on the part of landowners occur to us.

Why should the definition of eligible land be restricted to that which is considered to be

“wholly or mainly abandoned or neglected”?

The committee believes the draft bill may fail to further sustainable development. Why is a definition needed at all, as the parallel tests for crofting land purchases do not require that? Most committee members support tests of furthering sustainable development and being in the public interest, which meet the requirements.

The majority of the committee recommended that the Scottish Government consider a definition that avoids the wider circumstances that are barriers to sustainable development, and we look forward to the minister providing guidelines before stage 2. If no unambiguous and acceptable definition of abandoned or neglected land appears on the face of the bill, avoiding the existing legal concept of abandoned land, the committee will ask the Scottish Government to remove the term “abandoned or neglected land”. We think it is an urban concept that has little place in rural land use.

The difficulties faced by communities in seeking to exercise their right to buy prompt us to seek assurance that appropriate support and funding is available. Public sector bodies, such as the Forestry Commission, must be proactive, so we welcome the Scottish Government’s proposal to establish a community land unit to provide support and advice. That may help many communities to make progress.

The committee understands that the Scottish Government intends to lodge amendments at stage 2 to include provisions for the crofting community right to buy. We would have preferred the consultation on the crofting community right to buy to have been undertaken alongside the consultation on the existing part 4 provisions, and amendments to the crofting community right to buy to have been included in the bill rather than being introduced at stage 2.

The committee wrote more than 70 pages of report on part 4. That suggests that the bill is a huge bill with huge intent and that community empowerment is central to all our interests. To make it all the more effective, we hope that the

Government will take on board the committee’s views.

15:10

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): There is strong support across the chamber for extending land reform to urban communities. Part of the process has to be about learning from the lessons of the implementation of our historic land reform legislation in the early years of the Parliament. It is important to bear that in mind as we look at the details and the principles of the bill. We have to make sure that the legislation that Parliament passes is capable of working as intended and that communities will be able to use it, and there are key concerns about that.

I thank the committees for their work. I have recently joined the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee. I particularly thank the many stakeholders for the detailed work that they have done on their comments to enable us to process their concerns at stage 1.

I put on the record the fact that Labour wants to work with those who want to be radical on land reform. A couple of years ago, we made it clear that we want to see new community rights to purchase land even when there is no willing seller. We are very pleased to see those ambitions in the bill and we strongly support them in principle.

For us, the key challenge is to make sure that the proposals are workable. We need more than the rhetoric of land reform and of being radical; the detail has to match the rhetoric. That remains a key challenge as we move towards stage 2 of the bill process. The stakeholders who have given us evidence and are listening to the debate today do not believe that the bill’s proposals are sufficiently clear or workable.

The proposals appear to give new rights with one hand but, on the other hand, they might make it impossible to exercise those rights in practice because of the specific wording used in the bill. The committee report makes that clear.

That takes me to the central purpose of the bill and the question of land that is to be eligible for potential purchase even when there is not a willing seller. The policy memorandums for the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 and for this part of the bill make it clear that the policy purpose of the provisions is to further sustainable development and to remove barriers to it. As currently drafted, the bill refers to such impediments to sustainable development on land that is

“wholly or mainly abandoned or neglected”.

That seems to be too narrow a definition that implies that what is under consideration is solely the physical characteristics of the land. To us,

sustainable development is about both physical and environmental matters and social and economic matters. The social and economic development of communities can be neglected as well as their land being environmentally or physically neglected. The bill must be absolutely clear about that.

The Scottish Government appears to be reluctant to do what the committee wants to do by defining abandoned or neglected land in the bill. When the committee debated the issue, it emerged that the Scottish Government was having further consultation on the issue on the very same day. We have not seen the outcome of those discussions. Claudia Beamish and I dissented from that one part of what is an extensive and very strong report to signal how important it is to us that the matter is resolved. We reserve the right to have abandoned or neglected land defined in the bill, even if the committee is tempted to follow the Government's preferred route.

Paragraph 219 of the bill concludes:

"The Committee reserves the right to take evidence on this issue at stage 2."

That is the part we strongly support.

I do not know whether the environment minister is speaking today, although I am glad that she is in the chamber to hear the evidence. Our report shows that the Law Society, Scottish Land & Estates, Community Land Scotland, the Church of Scotland and other respected organisations have looked at the bill and strongly criticised how it might be implemented.

We think that there must be a clear definition. If that is not there, stakeholders have given us fair warning that in any court challenge there will be a real danger that the court may decide, when considering the prescribed matters, that

"the linkage between those concepts was not sufficiently warranted or reasonably envisaged by the statutory provisions, or was stretching the normal interpretation of the primary tests"

—which would be the dictionary meaning of the words "abandoned" or "neglected". We have been clearly warned about the dangers of the current approach and we are in danger of giving a new and powerful right with one hand but removing it in practice with the other because the detailed words in the bill are wrong.

There is another trap in the bill, which is the clause that requires ministers to be satisfied that it would be inconsistent with sustainable development if the current owner of the land was to remain the owner. We have had evidence that that would be impossible to demonstrate and could automatically mean that any community application would be bound to be refused. That is

why the committee wants that provision to be deleted.

The bill is hugely important and we share communities' ambitions for the sustainable use of their land, but we need to ensure that communities can exercise that power. The bill as drafted will not let them do that. As our convener Rob Gibson said, the devil is in the detail.

We do not yet know when ministers will respond to the committee; that will be absolutely crucial. We have a very short timescale. In just a couple of weeks we will take extra evidence on the community right to buy and in a month we are scheduled to look at the bill in detail for stage 2. We very much need detailed information from the Scottish ministers. When the minister sums up, I would like to know when we will get that information, because we will want to look at it in detail with stakeholders as we decide on which amendments—including those that the Scottish Government might lodge—we think are appropriate.

The bill is hugely important and I am concerned about the timescales. If we do not get the detail right, the bill will not do what we all want it to do. That cannot be allowed to happen.

15:16

Michael Russell (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The bill is very welcome. It is useful to state at the outset, as minister did, that this is about mindsets more than minutiae. We cannot empower communities by fiat; communities need to take power to themselves.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Russell, could you check your microphone? I am not hearing you very clearly.

Michael Russell: Sorry, Presiding Officer. I was just hiding away.

The job of legislators is to create the framework to allow that to happen, encourage those who want it to happen, remove the barriers to it happening and ensure that those who do not want it to happen are not successful in their aim. I will touch on all those issues in a moment, but first I will make three other points.

First, although the word "sustainability" is on everybody's lips, there is no practical assistance to communities and others who want to understand what that means to their buyout. It should be possible to give Scottish Natural Heritage, for example, a statutory duty to help those who take on assets and advise them how to manage them sustainably.

I agree with Rob Gibson and Sarah Boyack about the difficulty of the words

“wholly or mainly abandoned or neglected.”

They need to be defined in the bill and all of us regret that that has not happened yet. If it is not done at stage 2, the words will have to be removed, because they present an enormous barrier to the successful operation of the bill.

Consideration is also needed of a requirement in the bill for ministers to have regard to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights when determining an application. Ministers are already bound to have regard to the European convention on human rights. It is important that we recognise the wider human rights considerations that land reform presents.

As we are all born-again diggers, I refer to the allotments issue. There are very clear and simple requests from allotment owners. The Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society wants a definition of standard plot and a public sector duty. Those are reasonable demands that would contribute to the Scottish Government's health, environmental and food policies.

The biggest issue in the bill for me, and for many, is the transfer of assets to local communities. In that regard, the task that I have outlined—to create the framework, stimulate the demand, remove the barriers and ensure that those against do not succeed—is very clear. It needs to be judged against two things: the present legislation on community buyout and the actual practice for those who try to buy properties.

Members in the chamber will not be surprised that I want to use an example from my constituency: the proposed buyout of Castle Toward. Castle Toward is a large, decaying mansion house set in parkland that overlooks the Clyde. It was built in 1820 by Kirkman Finlay, the lord provost of Glasgow and the MP for Glasgow. It was owned by the Coats family, and during the second world war it was commissioned as HMS Brontosaurus—perhaps that is rather appropriate, given the dinosaur-like attitude of Argyll and Bute Council—and was used as a training centre for the D-day landings. It was purchased by the Corporation of Glasgow in 1948 and became a celebrated outdoor centre.

When local government was reorganised, Castle Toward passed to Argyll and Bute Council at no cost. Up until 2013, it had a tenant who had a very poor relationship with the council. The community tried and failed to buy it in 2011, and a commercial bid failed in 2013. A second community purchase bid has been made, which was backed by the overwhelming majority of the community in a ballot. The bid has received the maximum funding from the Scottish land fund and it is supported by Highlands and Islands Enterprise. Just last week, the Scottish

Government made a helpful intervention via the cabinet secretary. Up to 100 jobs could be created. An anchor tenant is in existence. A new valuation that the community had carried out supports the purchase price offer of £850,000.

The community is desperate to get hold of the asset but, for some reason, the council will not sell. A 10,000-signature petition demands that the council sell the property, but it makes no difference. Chimeras such as difficulties with state aid and the business plan have come and gone. There remains an intransigence on the part of the council. Indeed, it is worse than an intransigence—there is a pretence that the council wants to sell. A £1 million loan has been offered to the community, but the business plan shows that that cannot be supported. The council has even said to the community that it should just take the loan, default on it and hand the property back in three years' time. We might describe such action as being more appropriate to the Cosa Nostra than to the Costa Clyde.

The reality is that the building remains in the possession of the council. If it was a private individual who was involved, we would pillory them the length and breadth of Scotland. Such poor landlordism is not unique in Scotland; it is not unique even among local authorities. There is a public mindset—to use the word that the minister used—that property is retained by the public sector and that access to it is very rarely given by anyone else.

That is particularly true in Argyll and Bute. This morning, I spoke to MacLeod Construction, which is a big building firm in Argyll that is desperate to build a factory unit in Lochgilphead. The community wishes to have part of the land for community use, but it is being obstructed by the local authority. There are many examples across my constituency of extraordinarily poor stewardship of public assets, which the community cannot get hold of.

When we apply the tests that I have outlined, we find that the legislation is not doing enough to force the issue. A framework exists, but it is not working well enough. The bill can change that. Demand exists—in many areas, that demand is growing all the time—but there are still too many barriers that local authorities and public agencies can put in the way of communities, and there are still far too many ways in which bodies can obstruct community purchase.

Whether in south Cowal on Mull, where the community council wanted to buy the local toilet from Argyll and Bute Council and was told that it would be no problem—it would cost £30,000 and would take a year to process—in Oban, where Rockfield school is for sale and the community wants to set up an arts centre, or in Lochgilphead,

throughout Argyll and Scotland as a whole communities want to buy and use assets. They would use them in better ways than those of us who stand as stewards of them do, including the councils. We must get the bill right so that that can happen. We will do that through the process of amendment. I hope that the minister will be sympathetic to that aim.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I advise members that we are eating into what little extra time we had.

15:23

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): I welcome the minister to the bill. I hope that he does not spend all his time over the next few years with his lawyers but, on the basis of today's proceedings, it sounds as if that is reasonably likely.

Liberal Democrats support the bill. It would be difficult to be against community empowerment. I believe that many of the remarks that have been made in the debate, not least those that Kevin Stewart made about the principle of trust, have struck a reasonable tone on the best way to achieve what is sought from the bill.

There are a couple of other important principles that have not been touched on, one of which is devolution within Scotland. I know that the minister will not agree, but I want to see a reversal of centralisation within Scotland and a return to decentralisation. We have spent an awful lot of time arguing about the principle of what should flow from one part of the United Kingdom to another. However, it is important in our deliberations that we, at times, reflect on what more could be done around Scotland in our different communities, towns, villages and islands were some of that decentralisation to happen.

Marco Biagi: In the spirit of returning to that decentralised era when the member was a minister, does Tavish Scott support the return of ring-fenced funding in local government?

Tavish Scott: I am just coming on to the ring fencing that the minister still has in place. The idea that he has got rid of all the ring fencing is far from the truth.

I am very grateful to the minister for raising the issue. I will come on to the other centralisations that he has voted for so convincingly over the last number of years. I was hoping to debate in a much broader spirit, but if he wants to play the politics, believe me, I will be all too happy to do that, too.

I return to the laudable objectives in the bill to encourage local people to design, initiate and decide on the services that they want and to use the assets that Mike Russell mentioned briefly. We

should have a role in encouraging local government, too. Mr Russell made a very strenuous and passionate case about the failures of the council in his area on a particular project, and I am sure that he is entirely justified in making that case. However, I worry slightly at times because when we are considering community empowerment, it would occasionally be important to recognise that local government can play a positive role in that. Far from believing that local government is a threat to Holyrood rules, which appears to be the view on some of the nationalist benches, we should take a rather more positive approach.

I see in some of the submissions that we have had that the same approach could be applied to community councils. I was a bit taken aback by reading the minister's remarks about community councils in his evidence to the committee.

The Government minister rightly asked for ideas and proposals. I strongly believe that one way to empower communities is by giving more local government financial responsibility at a local level. That is not just about participative budgeting. Many submissions talked strongly and persuasively not only about that, but about local government finance. The minister is blessed with a majority in the Parliament. He could reform local government finance. He could introduce local income tax. He would have no impediment from my party; indeed, on that issue, he would have our support. More to the point, he has the numbers to get it through. Sadly, the policy is going nowhere; it appears to be utterly lost in the long grass of the Government's thinking.

Marco Biagi: There is an outstanding invitation to the Liberal Democrats to nominate a member to join the commission on local tax reform. Perhaps if you return the letter, we can get on with creating the commission.

Tavish Scott: The minister could just pass legislation to introduce local income tax. That is the policy that I believe in and I thought that you believed in, too, Marco, so why do you not just get on and do it rather than set up yet another commission?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask members to speak through the chair, please.

Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): Why did the Lib Dems not do that earlier?

Tavish Scott: If Mr Brodie wants to intervene, I will happily take that intervention. However, if he does not have anything to say, why does he not just stay where he is?

We must reverse the centralisation. If the bill begins to do that, that would be welcome indeed. Over the past seven years, we have seen many

changes that, far from empowering communities, have taken powers away from them.

I agreed with the minister when, in his opening remarks, he said:

“communities should always be around the table when decisions that affect them are being taken.”

I entirely endorse that sentiment and that principled approach. However, the approach should also have applied to the police and fire services, to the courts closures and to the other closures that we have seen over the past number of years when communities' views on those subjects were very much ignored by this Government. I could mention a number of other examples, but it seems to me that, if we are to move forward, there needs to be a little understanding from the Government that the one-size-fits-all approach that tends to come from Edinburgh does not mean flexible and responsible local services or assets being used in the right way. That needs to change.

I also want to reflect on a series of particularly helpful submissions for the debate from different organisations, not least of which is the submission from the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations. It said:

“Successful community empowerment cannot be driven by a top-down approach, it must be encouraged to develop from the grassroots up.”

I am sure that most of us would agree very strongly with that sentiment.

Scottish Community Alliance has been mentioned. It noted:

“the Bill is a missed opportunity to address at least some of the long standing challenges faced by the country's most localised tier of democracy”—

community councils. I commend that approach to the minister. I hope that he might give that further thought.

Voluntary Action Scotland noted:

“The bill does not go far enough to force this joint working between statutory bodies”.

I hope that the minister accepts that there is a lot to do.

Rob Gibson rightly spoke about the amendments on thecrofting community right to buy that the Government plans to lodge at stage 2. We raised the same concerns in connection with the Aquaculture and Fisheries (Scotland) Bill just a year or so ago. Mr Gibson—quite fairly—made that point, as did Mr Fergusson and Ms Beamish. I hope that the Government will not make the same mistake as it made with that bill, which was to introduce big stage 2 amendments without any consultation. That is a parliamentary point for you, Presiding Officer, as much as for anyone else.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask members to keep within their 6 minutes, please.

15:30

Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): I was a member of the Local Government and Regeneration Committee throughout the stage 1 consideration of the bill, although I left the committee before it drafted its report. Having looked at the weighty tome that was produced, I have a feeling that I may have had a lucky escape at that point. I pay tribute to the committee clerks, who did a fantastic job during the consideration of the bill in supporting the committee's work and ensuring that we were able to hear from a wide range of interested parties, be they local authorities, other public bodies or—most important—community groups and organisations here in Edinburgh and, crucially, out there in the communities.

I have been enthusiastic about the bill's potential for some time and I remain so. However, I will cover only a couple of the areas within it because there are a lot of sections and my colleagues have covered some of the other areas in detail. I will address the areas that I focused on during my consideration of the bill in committee and will flesh out my comments a bit.

Participation requests are extremely important. All too often, I see an approach to service delivery that supports design from the top down rather than from the bottom up, although we are now seeing some improvement in how local authorities consult communities, whether on the design of services, the delivery of services or the formation of their budgets. When I arrived in local government in 2007, the budget process was a closed shop. Back-bench council members received their budget papers a couple of weeks before the budget and communities had very little input into how the budget was formed. In Aberdeen City Council, we took the approach of reforming the process so that the public face of the budgeting process started much earlier, which allowed much more community feed-in and involvement. I see participation requests as an opportunity for that kind of approach to be taken not just in how local authorities set their budgets, but in how they design and deliver services. That will result in the meaningful involvement of communities rather than the tick-box consultation exercises that politicians hear complaints about all too often.

On asset transfers, my colleague Mike Russell made a passionate case on some of the issues that affect his local community. He highlighted the fact that there can, all too often, be blockages. I have seen that in my constituency as well. There are good examples out there of communities and community organisations having taken on assets

or land from local authorities or other bodies and having delivered real opportunities or good work in communities. I am thinking of, for example, the Dyce development and amenities committee, in my constituency, which operates the old Carnegie library—the Carnegie hall, as it is known in Dyce—which a range of community groups is able to use. It also operates the community garden, which has provided some green space and an opportunity for people in the community to enjoy that area.

Yet, just a couple of miles down the road, in the community of Bucksburn, there has been a long-standing and protracted attempt to gain access to green space next to the Cloverleaf hotel. The land, which is known as the Cloverfield park area, was transferred to the local authority in exchange for green space that was taken up during the development of the new secondary school. The land requires work, and there is interest from within the community in developing it as a community garden or community green space; it is recognised that there is a lack of green space for the people of Bucksburn to use. However, it has proved extremely difficult to get the local authority to come to the table and have meaningful discussion and dialogue with the community to advance the issue. As a result of a housing development, there might be an opportunity to develop the land, but what ought to have been a simple process has taken far too long.

Another, recent example is Victoria road school, in Maureen Watt's constituency. The community in Torry wanted to take on the former primary school and operate the building for the benefit of the wider community, but the council has rejected the approach and elected to demolish the building. The council's decision is unfortunate and flies in the face of what we are trying to achieve with the bill, which is to allow communities to have much more say in and ownership over what goes on in their areas.

I recognise the importance of allotments. There are a number of allotment plots in my constituency. I highlight an issue that came up in committee discussions: there is a requirement on local authorities in relation to allotments, but many other public bodies and organisations have land that might be suitable for allotments. Will the minister reflect on that as he considers how the bill might be amended at stage 2?

15:36

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): I am glad that I am following Mark McDonald, because in this important debate I thought for a while that members were speaking in abstract and technical terms and were not making the issues real for the communities that we represent, as I want to do.

A few months ago, I led a debate in the Parliament about helping community-led regeneration in Royston. Royston, or the Garngad, as most locals call it, does not have its challenges to seek. However, it has many inspiring individuals and organisations who daily make a difference to many people's lives. I am thinking of organisations such as Blochairn Housing Association, Spire View Housing Association, Copperworks Housing Co-operative, Royston Youth Action and Rosemount Development Trust, and individuals such as Charlie Lunn, Tilly and Liz McIlroy and Joan Reuston, who champion community empowerment in everything that they do. There are many more groups and individuals who do much in the Garngad, and I am sorry that I cannot mention them all.

I firmly believe that if the bill had become law several years ago, the community in the Garngad could have benefited greatly. The test of the bill is whether it can make a significant difference to that community and others that I represent.

I am privileged to have worked with key community stakeholders, on a cross-party basis, to help to develop a community regeneration strategy and get a forum up and running in that regard. In particular, I thank Rosemount Development Trust and Kevin Murray Associates, who have brought us to a stage at which we have a fully fledged and community designed, consulted on and led regeneration strategy.

Whether we are talking about plans for a sports hub and more sports facilities, better connectivity with other areas, better shopping facilities, particularly around Roystonhill, bringing healthcare into the community, providing local amenities such as improved recreation and meeting space, or better housing provision and mix, everything has to tie together and the community must lead the strategy.

An issue is that in the middle of the community there is a significant piece of land, over which the community has had no control for many years. The land was sold to a group called Focus Urban several years ago, which made a commitment to put affordable housing on it, but—to be frank—that never came to a hill of beans. It could be argued that at the time the local authority did not take a joined-up approach to considering whether that was the best place to build houses anyway.

In recent months, that company went bankrupt and the land was to be disposed of by the Bank of Ireland, which had control over the situation. As political representatives and community stakeholders, we all made strenuous efforts to get in contact with someone to see whether the community could get control over a key piece of land in order to bring about a fully fledged, bigger-picture regeneration of the wider local community,

but I am afraid to say that we had no joy. The land was sold to an offshore company, but it does not matter whether it is such a company, a domestic private concern or, indeed, a local public authority interest that owns the land, because the bottom line is that the community has a plan for Royston, or the Garngad.

We will push forward that plan as best we can, but it would have been much better if we had had control over all the community assets. Much of the talk in the debate this afternoon has been around what terminology such as “abandoned land” and “neglected land” means. I concur with the view that if land is not part of a sustainable community regeneration strategy but is an asset that is lying fallow, it is neglected land. Such land in the Garngad has to fit into the bigger picture of wider public interest and public communication about what people in the Garngad want.

If the minister wants to see for himself what living, breathing, community empowerment legislation will look like in action, he should come to the Garngad and see what we have done and also see the land in our community that we no longer have control of. I urge the minister to take up that invitation.

I say “our community”, but I do not stay in the Garngad. I stay in an area of Glasgow called Summerston, and I will also speak about a community asset in that area. The minister need not worry, because I will not invite him to see the asset. However, I will certainly make him aware of it.

There are very few community facilities in Summerston, which has grown exponentially in recent years—I stay in one of the new-build houses—but without community assets being brought in to support that growth. However, there used to be a community asset facility in Summerston that was a day centre for adults with learning disabilities. I will not rehearse the arguments about whether the centre should have stayed open, although I supported its retention. However, it was a key community asset in a key community location that is now sitting boarded up and empty and which is being vandalised and going to rack and ruin because of the lack of a joined-up strategy. If only the bill had become an act earlier, it would have been possible to marshal the many community views on the building and its site and make them the real heart of community regeneration in Summerston.

To return to the story that I told about Royston, I hope that the minister will come and see the area for himself. Colleagues have spoken about technical aspects in relation to how we can improve the bill, but at the end of the day the bill has to do what it says on the tin for the communities that we represent. Whether it is in

Royston or Summerston, or in urban or rural areas, we must ensure that the bill delivers. I am delighted to support the bill at stage 1, but if it needs to be improved, the Parliament should come together to do that.

15:43

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): I am delighted to speak in this debate on the furtherance of fairer distribution of land and assets throughout urban and rural Scotland. Although ownership is only one way for communities to carve out a positive future, I am clear that land reform must continue to be the robust way forward in Scotland and that the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill makes a significant contribution to that.

I intend to focus on part 4, which was scrutinised by, as our convener Rob Gibson highlighted, the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee, of which I am a member. Like others, I am a born-again digger, so I will also make a quick reference to allotments.

As a member for South Scotland, I am keenly aware that the majority of community purchase in rural Scotland has been in the Highlands and Islands. Some argue that there is no interest in community purchase in the rest of Scotland, including in my region of South Scotland, but I strongly disagree. There are examples of community success across the south, from the Mull of Galloway Trust to Corehead farm, which is owned by the Borders Forest Trust. They have community interest in regeneration and sustainable development—in the true sense of that term—at their heart. There is also interest in community purchase for the future from other groups, such as in the village of Leadhills.

However, it is essential that support is in place to enable communities to identify opportunities, build capacity and understand how to take forward the process. Thus, the Scottish Government's commitment to new bodies such as the community land fund, as highlighted in the land reform review group's report, is fundamental to the way forward. It would also be helpful if the minister could confirm today whether the Scottish Government is considering a review of Scottish Enterprise's remit to enable it to provide the sort of robust support that is offered by Highlands and Islands Enterprise.

With regard specifically to the bill, as a community activist and as a community councillor in the past, I have spent much time pondering the definition of “community” and, to be frank, I have not always come up with very clear definitions. It is a difficult issue, although the committee's support for bencoms—community benefit societies—is an

important step forward. In the context of the bill, I believe that our committee was, on balance, right to rule out communities of interest and to keep the focus on communities of place. However, as Rob Gibson stressed, rurality is an issue, and I continue to seek reassurance on the matter from both the Minister for Local Government and Community Empowerment and the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform. Groups such as the Strathaven choral society have members from as far away as 20 miles, and in the Highlands there must be societies whose members come from even further away. We have moved away from the postcode issue, but we need to be careful and we might need to look at the issue again at stage 2.

Sarah Boyack focused on concerns about the definition of abandoned and neglected land and on sustainable development—I will not rehearse what she said. Rob Gibson mentioned registration issues, and I want to highlight that simplicity is the key. That said, I am convinced that the committee made the correct decision to recommend a re-registration period of five years and not 10, the reason being that so much can change in a community, especially if it is in the process of regeneration and more people are coming in, because things can be fluid. If things are simple, a five-year period should be acceptable.

In this year of food and drink, I want to highlight the issue of allotments, even though it is not in part 4. I know that many members have an interest in ensuring that we have local, accessible, fresh food, and one aspect of that is people having the opportunity to grow their own, especially in these shameful days of food banks. No one can argue against the benefits that people growing their own food can bring.

As an organic gardener, I can vouch for the sense of straightforward delight that the commitment brings, from the first spade cut to the taste of one's own perpetual spinach soup. Of course, the health benefits of digging one's own allotment are widely known, as are the mental health benefits of being outside in the fresh air, even if it is pretty nippy at times.

Allotments also allow a sense of community from people sharing seeds and selling surplus produce together. In principle, I believe that anyone who wants to grow vegetables should have a little patch of earth to do that on, romantic though I may sound. However, we are a long way from that. In the view of SAGS, the identity and unique role of allotments have not been recognised and all the diverse food growing organisations and communities are being amalgamated into a homogeneous unit.

New models of devolved management and community control of local allotments are arising

and they should be part of the dialogue about the food growing strategy. I respect the fact that the minister said today that he will look at the matter again, but I would be concerned if it ended up going into the long grass because of the confusion that has developed. Allotments are only a small aspect of the bill, but it is an important one.

Finally, I turn to human rights, which have already been touched on by our convener, Rob Gibson. Section 48 in part 4 is vital if we are to change the nature of discussions between communities and landowners, and there is a prize to be won. There are credible and tough backstop powers for the times when they are needed, but we all hope that, in their shadow, constructive dialogue and debate that lead towards more voluntary purchase of land can take place.

I hope that, at stage 2, we will be able to take the debate about the human rights aspects further. For too long, human rights have been mentioned only by reference to owners' rights under the ECHR. There are many more human rights obligations than are in the ECHR and they require to be brought to the forefront of our considerations to ensure that they are reflected as fully as possible in the bill. In that regard, I highlight the evidence of Professor Alan Miller, chair of the Scottish Human Rights Commission, which I found compelling.

There are indeed concerns about the process and about how issues have been brought through so far, but I am an optimist and I believe that, if we work together, we will reach a fair conclusion in the bill.

Labour will support the passage of the bill, but a great deal remains to be done on its detail. I look forward to working with my committee colleagues to play our part in ensuring that it is the best bill possible for the communities of Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): I call Chic Brodie.

15:50

Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): I suppose that, as I am an avowed devolutionist and strong supporter of personal, community and country independence, an inevitable expectation is that I will support the bill. Centralism and collectivism have no place in my personal lexicon. In general, I support the bill, but I am not so blinded by it to imagine that our governmental structures are perfect, or else why would I seek a wholly different structure from that of the current national Government of these islands? I continue to subscribe to the view that our local authorities and community groups are an integral part of overall governance, alongside our national Government at Holyrood, but change is inevitable,

and I hold the view that, at the end of the day, political power is a bottom-up process and that we have an obligation to ensure that the bill embraces that objective.

Although the bill's general intent is welcome, some of the objectives and tenets in its current construction may need further review. I believe, of course, that they can be addressed.

The Christie commission recommended that the bill should seek to strengthen communities' voices in shaping the services that affect them. As the bill's policy memorandum states:

"Empowerment is a core pillar of the human rights approach."

In enacting the bill, we have to ensure that we secure greater engagement and greater participation of communities in decisions that affect them so that they can determine what happens in building the community.

Although Christie was right to focus on outcomes, not targets, democratic involvement, decision making and engagement at the community level are currently very poor, despite the laudable election turnout in Fife. In some areas, particularly in relation to decisions that affect wind farms, for example, it is perceived in a few isolated cases that support or objections allegedly come down to a very few elected or, indeed, in some cases, appointed individuals who discuss community benefits and the like.

Alex Rowley: Will the member give way?

Chic Brodie: No. I am sorry.

My contention is that more emphasis must be put on local community democracy and ownership, and that we must avoid what the policy memorandum states. It says that communities might

"have difficulty in understanding the ... draft legislation".

The Local Government and Regeneration Committee stated in its report last February that the current experience of community empowerment in action across Scotland is mixed. Democracy, better understanding of the bill, a focus on outcomes, not targets—I repeat that—and continuous improvement, and, above all, responsibility and accountability for communities are critical.

The vehicle to support the core public service reforms rests with the current community planning process. The partnerships are key conduits of change to full community empowerment.

Yesterday, I met very senior representatives of the police and fire services in Ayrshire. They play a key role not just in managing their services, but in helping to empower communities through

understanding objectives in their areas and beyond through the planning process.

Apart from the role of community partnerships in the development of a local participative hierarchy, the transfer of public assets, land and buildings to communities is paramount. Notwithstanding the challenges—there will be challenges—appropriate fiscal management and recording and the increased responsibility of communities to own public capital assets and improve their utilisation will, if they are done effectively, stimulate productive activity in the communities.

Alex Rowley: The member has mentioned wind farms. Does he agree that, in Germany and other European countries, more than 50 per cent of wind farms are controlled through community or public ownership? Is that not something that we should be striving for in Scotland, working with all communities?

Chic Brodie: Mr Rowley will find that, in any discussions that I have had on that subject, my main tenet has been community ownership.

Protecting or improving local facilities can lead to profitable enterprise. It behoves local authorities to pursue landlords who neglect the care of their properties—some properties are in a deplorable state, as the Presiding Officer will know from the case of the Bobby Jones building in Ayr—and to transfer those properties to communities for the purposes of community enterprise and income.

Let us not be afraid to place an emphasis—a bias, even—to ensure that new allotments are allocated to young people in the community. I support Bruce Crawford's case for grandfather rights, but young people can be encouraged to get involved.

Let us encourage the social enterprise and third sectors to provide services through public procurement, not just to their own communities but to neighbouring communities, if they can.

In my opinion, the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill is one of the most significant bills, if not the most significant bill, to come before the Parliament. I look forward to its successful passage and, once amended, its enactment.

15:56

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (Ind): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests: I currently serve as the chair of a community organisation that is in negotiation with the local authority regarding the asset transfer of a community centre in the village where I live, Glenboig. That has been a lesson in endurance for many people in the community. The first offer for the community centre was made seven years ago, but, because of the hurdles some council

departments put in place, the community had to walk away at the time. Then, more than a year ago, we were re-offered the community centre via an asset transfer.

That case has highlighted many of the problems that are faced not just by the community in Glenboig but by many communities throughout Scotland. In its inquiry, the Local Government and Regeneration Committee found from the evidence that was taken from community representatives in particular that communities were facing obstacles that were not real obstacles.

Michael Russell referred to the situation at Castle Toward, where a community came up with plans and presented them to the local authority. It was keen to take those plans forward, only to find that the local authority was the major stumbling block to doing so.

For the committee, the issue as we examined the bill was to make sure that we get the legislation right. We need to ensure that all the partners in community planning partnerships and other organisations understand what we mean by community empowerment. We do not just mean community engagement; we mean passing real power to communities so that they can participate fully in decision making and the delivery of services.

Too many organisations view communities as an obstacle to delivering what they think should be done to those communities. To them, it is not about what communities require or identify as their real needs.

The committee spent almost three years taking evidence on a number of issues. I pay tribute to the many community organisations that came forward and were candid about the issues that they faced in pursuing what they wanted to happen in their communities. The committee report highlights that

“There should be an explicit requirement on all CPPs to include community capacity building in local plans and to report on progress along with setting out future plans in every annual report.”

We hope that the minister will take that on board and get the message out clearly to community planning partners, including local authorities and other agencies, that we are looking for real engagement with and empowerment of communities.

The issue of community partnership and working with communities reminds me of the work that I did in Castlemilk in 1988, when the new life for urban Scotland programme was introduced in four regions in Scotland. We found that the community partnership was very much a partnership of agencies that did not engage with

communities. I hope that the bill will result in a sea change in the attitude of many officials.

Claudia Beamish and others have referred to Scottish Enterprise. I, too, would like its remit to be adjusted slightly to include the social element, in the same way as Highlands and Islands Enterprise's remit does. HIE has shown clearly what it can do in working with communities in its area. If that was replicated in the central belt, there would be a major benefit for many communities, which could engage in not only social aspects but economic aspects that they want to engage in.

On the registration of community organisations, the minister highlighted the issue of SCIOs. For the many people who might not know what they are, I point out that they are Scottish charitable incorporated organisations. A number has been attached to them. I would like the minister to seriously consider reducing the required number of members from 20 to a lower number or to a number that is appropriate for the organisation. When we talk about community empowerment, we are talking about not just geographical communities but communities of interest, and some communities of interest might be smaller than that requirement in the bill.

I look forward to the response from the Government and to the amendments at stage 2. I hope that we end up with legislation that can take forward Scotland and its communities together.

16:02

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Although I am not a member of the Local Government and Regeneration Committee, I was there to welcome its members when they came to Paisley to see what is happening in communities in the town. It is interesting to see what the varied groups offer and the work that they are trying to do. There are many challenges in our community. It is absolutely no surprise to me that my colleague and friend Derek Mackay was the minister when we first started talking about the bill, because he saw the challenges that communities in towns such as Paisley have, and he knew that a bill could empower local people to make a difference.

One major problem that we have is in dealing with buildings that fall into disuse because of a change in public services. That is a problem throughout the country. Recently, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde changed its services and moved out of the Russell institute in Paisley. As a local MSP, when the Paisley Development Trust came to me looking for a project for the future, I said that the Russell institute was the perfect building to try to get access to and to bring back into use in the community. After a long time, in which the trust has gone through the difficulties

that members have mentioned community groups have when they get involved in such projects, the result is that Skills Development Scotland will be working from the building. That shows what can be achieved. The trust was lucky, because it had support, but other groups are not so lucky. We have to use the bill to ensure that we can make a difference and get assets back online.

We have in Paisley a selection of large places of worship that no longer have sufficient congregations to sustain them. How should we deal with those buildings? Some of them are significant for Paisley and some, such as Paisley abbey, are of national significance. We have to look at how we deal with such buildings when they can no longer be sustained by the organisations that currently run them. They are of importance to the local community.

I welcome the First Minister's announcement in her programme for government of the new £10 million empowering communities fund. The fund will allow community groups to get the finance to develop programmes such as the ones that I have described.

One interesting project in my area is run by a local businessman called Gary Kerr. In short, Gary's view of Paisley is similar to my own. He is committed to and ambitious for the town, and he sees that there are buildings that have been left unused following the end of their previous function, and which the community could be using.

Gary Kerr has set up the Paisley 2021 Community Trust, which is working towards the creation of a community cinema and theatre. The project will fit perfectly with the bill once it is passed, and the bill would give Gary Kerr an opportunity because he has had difficulty in dealing with red tape in local government. Let us not kid ourselves: local government can make it very difficult for community groups—not necessarily or always by design—to get through the process. The Paisley 2021 Community Trust project aims to have a community-based theatre and cinema in the town. There is a demographic of older people who do not want to go to the multiplexes or to other areas, and who would prefer to go to a more traditional venue that accords with what they regard as a cinema.

That brings me to some of the other issues in dealing with historic buildings in the area. The SCVO mentioned in its submission that it

"supports the transfer of assets to communities, provided that the community has an active desire to take ownership of them."

That issue comes up quite often in dealing with authorities. As a former councillor, I can tell members that local authorities' idea of community engagement and involvement often involves trying

to force a community to take a building that the council no longer wishes to use and that it just wants to get off the balance sheet as a small part of the budget.

As the SCVO states, that is not the way to do things. We must ensure that communities are empowered in such a way that they can take on board all the issues and work with the buildings and the services that they want to work with.

During my time as a councillor, I became involved with the Renfrewshire access panel. In all honesty, I think that I was asked mainly because people thought that because my wife is a wheelchair user, I would know what an access panel was. Being the type of person I am, I got involved and started working with the panel. It is important that we acknowledge the work of access panels throughout Scotland in trying to engage with local authorities to give something back to disabled people with all types of disabilities. In my area, the Renfrewshire access panel is working with Glasgow airport to ensure that when people with disabilities go on holiday, there is a process to enable them to get on the plane and go back and forth across the campus with no problems.

The same is true for other areas. In Inverness, the access panel has been working with NHS Highland on improvements to Raigmore hospital. In other areas, access panels are working to ensure that new capital projects, such as a town hall refurbishment or a new school, are fully accessible.

Alex Rowley: Will George Adam give way?

George Adam: I am just finishing—I have only about 20 seconds left.

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

George Adam: Those access issues are extremely important.

In dealing with community empowerment, we should remember that Scotland's people are our greatest asset. Our communities want to make a difference in that respect, and I believe that the bill can empower them. We have to ensure that we make it work.

16:09

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab): I congratulate the Local Government and Regeneration Committee on an outstanding report, and the Finance Committee on emphasising in its report the fact that the lack of financial estimates breaches standing orders, which—as Alex Rowley pointed out—could become an obstacle to implementing the bill.

As Alex Rowley also said, Labour supports the principles of the bill, but we believe that it requires greater clarity and more teeth, and needs more explicitly to abandon the top-down approach for one that is based on co-production and which empowers local communities. In the first instance, those elements should be reflected in part 2 of the bill. I welcome the fact that community planning partnerships will at least have a statutory underpinning. They have been around for a long time; I do not know where they started. I was certainly talking about community planning when I was a UK minister for local government in 1997 and, as it developed, I became worried about the extent to which it was becoming a top-down process, so the committee is right to say that the Government needs

“to be more prescriptive in relation to local involvement”

to

“ensure the necessary ‘paradigm shift’ from a top down approach”.

That is a loose quotation from the committee’s recommendations.

I welcome the fact that the national standards for community engagement will be put into legislation. I am reminded that I launched them 10 years ago, but I think that they have improved since then, although that will not be enough.

My final point on part 2 is that we need to listen to what Voluntary Action Scotland says about further involvement of the third sector.

I agree that part 3, which concerns participation requests, is too prescriptive about participation bodies requiring written constitutions, so I hope that the Government will accept the committee’s recommendation on that.

I am disappointed that, although the definition of participation bodies includes community councils, there is little in the bill that reinforces the importance of community councils.

Later today, I will go to West Pilton and West Granton community council. It is one of several excellent community councils in my constituency, which is probably why I have a particularly positive view of them. I expect that the community councillors will ask me about the bill and how the debate went because they have been interested in its progress. In fact, some of them have been particularly interested in part 5, which is on asset transfer. I think that they contacted and possibly even had a meeting with Marco Biagi about that. I will have a meeting with them and regeneration officials in three or four weeks.

On asset transfers, community groups hope that when such groups wish to acquire public land, the bill will make a difference. However, my

fundamental question is this: what happens if the local authority just says no? The fear is that the bill will make no difference if a public body is determined to realise the highest possible receipt from selling off the land.

There is also no clarity in part 6 about whether or how local authorities could dispose of common good land through asset transfer. In fact, there are many questions about part 6 in general. Although everyone has welcomed the transparency of having registers of common good land, there is still a lack of clarity about the statutory definition.

I apologise to members, but I am trying to get through all the parts in the short time that is available.

Under part 4, the right to buy land will be substantially extended. I am sure that that is widely welcomed, and I particularly welcome the compulsory right to buy, which gives communities the right to acquire land without its being put on the market. However, the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee did some sterling work pointing out some of the problems with the definition of abandoned and neglected land—apart from anything else, it is a bit of a legal quagmire—and I am sure that the Government will look carefully at that committee’s recommendation that it should

“consider a definition that relates to the wider circumstances which can be a barrier to sustainable development”.

Part 7 concerns allotments. As Alex Rowley said, we need further discussion with the Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society. We also need to link the work on allotments with food, in particular, and with health and wellbeing more generally.

Part 8, which is on non-domestic rates relief, is linked to other financial concerns that I mentioned earlier.

I broadly welcome section 1, not least as a member of the Finance Committee, which has been emphasising the importance of outcomes and outcome-based budgeting for a long time.

I conclude with a quotation from the commission on strengthening local democracy. It published “Effective Democracy: Reconnecting with Communities” last year, and it is important for wider devolution arguments as well. It says:

“Scotland cannot deliver on”

improved democratic participation

“without radical new thinking. There now appears to be agreement that Scotland should have substantially more powers. But simply repositioning control nationally in Edinburgh or London will not tackle the complex opportunities and challenges that communities face. The shift needs to be decisive and far-reaching, not a trickle of

power to councils, then to communities, all controlled from above."

In that context, "above" could refer to councils as well as to the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government. We need genuine power to be put into local communities.

16:14

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): The problem with speaking this far into a debate is that we tend to find that most of the bases have been covered by the time we are able to contribute to it. However, so wide ranging was the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee's contribution to the stage 1 report that there are some angles that are either still to be visited or which are worthy of being expanded on. I will focus my speech on those.

As we have heard, the major issue with the bill from that committee's perspective is abandoned and neglected land and the need for an unambiguous definition of those terms. However, several other areas that were covered by our report are, although less significant, nonetheless important.

The first one that I will deal with is human rights—there is a lack of detail in the policy memorandum on human rights. However, in evidence an interesting perspective emerged on the role that human rights play in community purchases of land or property. As Claudia Beamish said, the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee understands that the ECHR does not mean that private ownership must be protected in all circumstances; a landowner can be required to cede ownership when it is in the public interest to do so, and that can be done in a way that ensures that no human rights are breached.

In a thought-provoking piece of evidence, Professor Alan Miller, who is the chair of the Scottish Human Rights Commission, made the point that we need to concentrate on the wider human rights aspects of the legislation, and I have to agree with him. As Professor Miller explained, the community right to buy does not exist in order for the community to purchase a property or land for the sake of it. The purchase needs to be in the public interest; it is therefore a qualified right to buy. Further, as he observed,

"If human rights is seen in the wider context ... there will be a realisation that it drives us not towards courts and lawyers but towards having an environment in which there is more constructive dialogue between landowners and communities."—[*Official Report, Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee*, 3 December 2014; c 46.]

Richard Lochhead, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Food and Environment, acknowledged that

"we must have at the forefront of our mind the rights of communities and the wider public interest as much as the rights of landowners and property owners." —[*Official Report, Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee*, 10 December 2014; c 6.]

Could the minister therefore outline in closing how the Government has reflected on Professor Miller's points, which the cabinet secretary undertook to ensure would be done?

The committee also examined membership numbers and the make-up of a community. We took a good deal of evidence on the registration process, and the requirements for registration. The committee expressed considerable concern over the minimum number of members that is required of Scottish charitable incorporated organisations. If SCIOs are to have no fewer than 20 members, as the bill proposes, the reality is that a number of current SCIOs will not be able to register a community interest in land, because they would not be eligible community bodies. There are large and small communities across Scotland, and there will be times when a well-functioning SCIO has fewer than 20 members. The committee heard of examples in Inverclyde where SCIOs of eight and 10 members are working well. As John Wilson suggested, the requirement seems to be unnecessarily prescriptive.

The requirement to register was another area that the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee covered. Much of the evidence that we heard called for simplification of the registration process. However, there was also much discussion over the requirement to register in relation to communities reacting to land becoming available rather than being pro-active in that registration. Although I can understand that communities are, unless prompted, perhaps more likely to be reactive than proactive in that regard, I think that registration would greatly encourage the latter tendency and therefore lead to possibly more considered decisions to acquire property or land for the community.

However, that is not to say that registration should be conducted as it is outlined currently in the bill. The committee feels that a simplified registration process would not only encourage a proactive approach from communities but would ensure that those communities can empower themselves, rather than being caught up in a lengthy and complex registration process. If we are to entice as many as communities as possible into the process, we need to be mindful that expertise and capacity are likely to be less pronounced among less-affluent communities.

Reregistration was another area that was considered in some detail. As we have heard, the bill outlines a need for reregistration after five years, requiring that the same potentially complex process be gone through again. Many stakeholders had concerns over the timeframe and the need for the same process to be completed for a second time. However, there seems to be a more straightforward answer to all of that, as outlined in the RACCE Committee's report, which is to stick with the five-year timeframe that is proposed in the bill, but with a simplified process that leans toward a presumption in favour of reregistration.

If we retain the provisions relating to abandoned or neglected land—I share other committee members' concerns over that, unless clear and unambiguous definitions are to come forward—we require some clarity on a number of areas. Will the provisions apply only to the parts of a landholding that are considered to be wholly or mainly abandoned or neglected, or to the entire landholding? What happens where it is a tenant rather than the landowner who is responsible for lack of activity or poor management? Will there be an exclusion for land that is being utilised for recognised conservation or environmental purposes, such as natural regeneration for biodiversity or flood prevention?

I think that there is unanimity across the chamber—indeed, across Scotland—in support of the policy intent of the bill. There are differences of opinion on how best, in practical terms, to deliver on that intent, but we are as one with regard to the potential for good that the bill contains, and I think that we are resolved on working towards making the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill—as the minister said in opening—the best that it can be.

16:19

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I thank all those who have contributed to getting the bill to this stage. I would have liked to have seen a braver bill, but there is still time to make it so and there is still much in it that Greens can welcome. We will, of course, be voting in favour of the general principles this afternoon.

People from many different groups and communities had big expectations of the bill. Today, I will concentrate on empowering the community of football fans who want to buy their football clubs. As a first step, we welcome the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee's recommendation that the list of eligible bodies be expanded to include community benefit societies and community interest companies. That is an important foundation for fan

ownership, given the way that so many fans trusts are organised.

However, the bill as it stands brings us no nearer to a proper fans' right to buy. I therefore intend to lodge amendments on that issue. I will address a number of key questions. I urge the minister in closing to agree to look again at what the Scottish Government can do for football fans in this area.

Is there a serious problem with how Scottish football is currently owned and run? I am sure that members would agree that there is, even those who do not support Hearts, Rangers, Dunfermline Athletic, Livingston or Gretna. Of course not all privately owned clubs are operated irresponsibly, but when they are, and when they go into administration or are traded like any other asset, fans are still all too often shut out of the process. We should also have a clear process to ensure that there is a clear exit strategy for responsible owners who decide, for whatever reason, to call time on their period as custodian of a club.

Was there not just a review that decided not to make the case for fan ownership? No. Stephen Morrow is a great expert, but as his report says:

“the desirability or otherwise of supporter ownership was not discussed within the Working Group.”

That is a shame, but that was the remit given to it by ministers.

Can fan ownership really work? The evidence from Scotland and around the world is that it can. Members across the chamber appear to agree. I know that Kenny MacAskill is helping Hibs fans as they try to take control of their club. Ian Murray MP has worked with Hearts and I know that Bruce Crawford played a key role in the efforts of Stirling Albion fans to buy their club. Many other members will know their local fans trusts, which are keen, smart and determined groups that have their clubs' best interests at heart.

Would a right to buy drive out good owners of Scottish clubs? Hardly. If a club is thriving on and off the pitch there will not be an appetite to change that. However, good owners come and go, and when they go, fans should have first right of refusal to take over. Is that too radical? No, it is not.

Chic Brodie: In the case of one particular club that one might say is in trouble, I was asked to submit an idea, which I did, but then found that because there are seven supporters trusts that could not agree with each other, there was no hope of the club becoming a community-based soccer club.

Alison Johnstone: All groups of fans trusts would have to be openly and democratically constituted. Ministers, under advice, would have to

sign them off. If a small group passed that test, it would obviously have to meet with the approval of the larger group of fans.

The idea is not too radical. Parliament has decided that tens of thousands of acres should be available to communities to buy in this way through a brave piece of legislation, which the Pairc case confirmed is within European law. If large areas of Scotland's land should be available to local people, clubs should be available to their fans.

Is legislation necessary? What is stopping fans from just buying their clubs already? As we have seen all too often in recent times, it takes a great deal of time to raise the money. A period such as is set out in the bill in which the fans are automatically the preferred bidder would make the process far more straightforward.

The committee's report quotes the minister as saying:

"The driving force behind the bill is that we can unlock much of Scotland's potential through community empowerment."—[*Official Report, Local Government and Regeneration Committee*, 5 March 2014; c 3167.]

Of course that is true. It is also true that we can unlock much of Scotland's football potential through fan empowerment in exactly the same way. We need to see fans as a community and football clubs as their assets. Before we consider the bill again, I urge members to talk to their local fans and see what they think. If their club is being sold, or worse, would they want the option of first refusal?

My view is that, in 30 years, Scottish football could be entirely transformed. We will wonder why clubs were ever owned by anyone but their fans, and we might be enjoying a much stronger national game by then, too.

I will talk briefly about common good and participatory budgeting. The common good registers will increase consistency across local authorities, but we need more than a bare spreadsheet that lists assets. Perhaps the bill could require councils to demonstrate how they have managed the assets on the register to meet best value and responsible stewardship. I would also like to see a requirement on councils to set out how they have valued the assets, and to publish a periodic plan on long-term management of the common good on behalf of the people. I agree with the committee's recommendation for a timescale for completion of the registers.

Finally, the bill has been described by the Government as the

"biggest transfer of powers since devolution",

but real empowerment and decentralisation can be achieved only if financial power goes alongside

new duties and rights. The minister spoke positively about the impact of participatory budgeting schemes. There was support for PB in the original bill consultation, and it has worked well in Leith, for example, where packed public meetings have reached consensus on local spending priorities. I urge the minister to consider legislative options and I ask what specific support the Government might give to expanding on the report.

Finally, it is exceptionally important that the issues that have been raised about allotments be resolved.

16:26

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Although I did not join the committee until the beginning of December, like many of my colleagues who were serving local councillors for many years, I find the proposals in the bill to be familiar territory.

There are big messages in the bill about outcomes and what success might actually look like, about putting our community planning partnerships on a statutory footing for the first time, and about real empowerment for local people and representative organisations and about being more than simply engaged in a process but helping to define what the future will look like at a local level. If we achieve those aims, we will certainly have taken a great stride towards delivering real community empowerment.

As our committee convener said a few weeks ago during his speech on flexibility and autonomy in local government,

"if communities are to be empowered those powers must be passed down through the tiers of government."—[*Official Report*, 11 December 2014; c 40.]

That is not happening at the moment. The bill gives us that golden opportunity to move forward to the next stage.

What I like about the committee's report is the breadth of different views that were taken during evidence sessions and the plain and simple language that is used in the many recommendations to the Government that will hopefully help to strengthen the bill as it makes its journey to stage 3.

On setting national outcomes, it is correct that there is an obligation on ministers to develop, publish and review a set of national outcomes for Scotland, but it is equally important that local communities have the power to define what those might actually be. Many of those who gave evidence asked for that and offered the view that it would really empower communities from the bottom up. That could be as demanding as it is

rewarding. On the one hand, as Audit Scotland commented, we might wish to set national outcomes to assess national progress on health inequalities, life expectancy or educational attainment, for example, but national indicators can often mask significant local variations in performance. As I mentioned earlier, success might look quite different from one community to another. There is a big challenge there but it is important to work to get the balance right.

The section on community planning certainly got some robust feedback, probably as a result of varying levels of satisfaction with the community planning partnerships over the past decade. Some felt that hitherto, the process has been too top-down: a collection of public bodies coming together to map out a community's future. In some cases, that could hardly pass as engagement. According to the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, if the process is to work, local people must have the opportunity to articulate the societal changes that they wish to see so that the CPPs can take them up on their behalf. That is real empowerment.

We should not shy away from that process.

Margaret McDougall (West Scotland) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Willie Coffey: In a moment.

As Kay Gilmour from East Ayrshire Council said:

"If we have a culture of improvement, we do not get anxious if communities, individuals in the community or community groups make suggestions about how to innovate or do things differently and better."—[*Official Report, Local Government and Regeneration Committee*, 27 October 2014; c 40.]

I give way to Margaret McDougall.

Margaret McDougall: Community empowerment is largely dependent on volunteers. Very often the same volunteers are relied upon in communities for the provision of many community facilities. It is likely that community buyouts will enlist the same volunteers—we are reliant on those volunteers all the time. I ask Willie Coffey and the minister what consideration has been given to the capacity of volunteers and to sustaining the number of volunteers required for community buyouts, given that only 18 per cent of adults volunteer.

Willie Coffey: Margaret McDougall makes a good point. I have certainly seen a passage in the bill on building community capacity to make that kind of process much more possible.

There are signs that the Government's proposals are taking us in the right direction. Section 5 will allow individuals and community bodies who would not normally be part of the formal process to be involved in shaping the local

outcome improvement plans. That process will not exclude community councils, which have a key part to play. However, the committee made clear its view that engagement is not the same as empowerment—John Wilson made that point earlier—and that the Government should be absolutely clear about how it intends to empower local people in that crucial community planning process.

Perhaps one of the more exciting elements of the bill is the proposal that communities will be able to seek to take control of council-owned buildings and land, not as a result of council disposals, but as a proactive and positive move that helps the community to achieve its aims. That will be a fundamental shift in how Scotland's land and building assets are managed and will present communities right across Scotland with the opportunity to lead and drive that process for themselves. Quite a few asset transfer processes are already in place in Scotland, but the difference in the bill is that communities will be able to instigate requests themselves, which is a welcome and positive change from the current situation and is consistent with the Christie commission findings.

The bill offers people across Scotland real powers to shape and develop their local communities and to do that very much from the bottom up. It will not be an easy process for councils, officials or even elected members, but if all of us embrace the principles behind the bill, Scotland will surely be the better place for it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Many thanks. Before we move to closing speeches I will say that several members who spoke in the debate have not been in the chamber for some time. I would remind them that they should be here for the closing speeches.

16:32

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I am tempted to start by saying that if Mike Russell's speech represented him in hiding, as he said, heaven help us all if he ever decides to come out of hiding, but I will resist that temptation.

No one in their right mind could disagree with the overall aims of the bill that we have discussed this afternoon, although some of the detail might be a different matter—members such as Alex Rowley, Rob Gibson and Tavish Scott and others have highlighted that. However, any measure, legislative or otherwise, that seeks to strengthen community participation, unlock enterprising community development and renew our communities must be worthy of support, and we on the Conservative benches will support the general principles of the bill at decision time.

As a member of the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee, my involvement with the bill has been limited to part 4, and I will focus on my reservations about that part shortly. However, it is clear from the many briefings that we have received from outside organisations that I am by no means alone in having some reservations and concerns about various aspects of the bill.

One of those centres on the definition of community: a topic on which the committee spent quite a lot of time. I am drawn towards defining communities by place or location rather than by interest. However, Inclusion Scotland's concerns—which Alex Rowley referred to—which highlight what it calls “a missed opportunity” to give disabled, disadvantaged and marginalised people the ability to participate in community planning, have made me sit up and think. If any groups deserve to be further empowered when it comes to the delivery of local services, it must surely be those groups. I hope that the Government will look seriously at that aspect when it comes to stage 2.

I listened carefully to the minister's comments on equalities. The fact that Inclusion Scotland and others have suggested that the bill as drafted runs the risk of further disempowering disadvantaged and marginalised groups must surely ensure that that concern is taken seriously.

I do not often agree with Joan McAlpine, but I am delighted to say that today's debate is an occasion on which I do. I, too, was interested in the point that the Scottish Woodlot Association made. I strongly support the association, particularly as Scotland's first woodlot was established in my constituency. It has stated that for woodlot licences to reach their full potential in Scotland, they need to be established on state land as well as on private land. I agree with that whole-heartedly, and I hope that the Government will agree with recommendation 347 of the Local Government and Regeneration Committee's report, which seeks a review of the legislation that currently prevents the Forestry Commission from leasing land to communities for forestry purposes. It is surely logical that, just as the commission now plays an important role in bringing new entrants into agriculture through the development of starter farms, it could do the same with foresters.

Planning Aid for Scotland makes the important point that community planning, as a local authority function that sits alongside the planning system, needs to involve more effective engagement with local communities. I strongly agree with that point, because I know that most of the communities that I represent view community planning as the ultimate in talking shops. They see it as something that the council does somewhat remotely without

much local input or impact. Community planning is not understood by communities the length and breadth of the country. Given the heightened role that it is to play in delivering the aims of the bill, that must be corrected.

In the time that remains to me, I want to talk about part 4. Although I did not comment on the first sentence of the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee's report when we discussed it, I am more than a little taken aback by the wording that

“a Bill is required to remedy the defects of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003”.

I might be being a little oversensitive about this, but as the convener of the Rural Development Committee that led on consideration of the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill, I might have preferred wording along the lines of, “a Bill is needed to build on the successes of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003”.

I was interested to hear in the evidence that the committee took that not many community purchases had taken place using the 2003 act, but it was clear that many communities have engaged in the right-to-buy process because of the act's very existence. In other words, the act has acted as a catalyst to empower communities in ways that would almost certainly not have been possible without its existence. I think that that points to the 2003 act being quite a successful piece of legislation, rather than one that is full of defects. Nonetheless, the time is right to extend the 2003 act's provisions, particularly into urban areas, and we very much welcome the principle of doing so.

Where I have dissented from the recommendations of the RACCE committee's report is on the power to extend the community right to buy when there is no willing seller. The Government's position is that that should apply only as a last resort when other measures and negotiations have failed. I could accept that, as the committee does, but the majority of the committee went on to question the need to restrict the definition of eligible land to that which is

“wholly or mainly abandoned or neglected”

and to ask why a definition is needed at all. They believed that the tests of furthering sustainable development and of being in the public interest are capable of testing all requirements. In my view, those criteria also require greater definition if we are really to understand where we are going with the bill.

I find myself endorsing the Government's position on the matter as laid out in the policy memorandum. In my view, the committee's majority recommendation would open the door to a virtual absolute right to buy for communities. The Government has, in effect, ruled that out in relation

to agricultural holdings, and I hope that it will hold fast to its original intentions for the bill.

What has been highlighted, above all, throughout the debate by Mike Russell, Sarah Boyack and many others is the urgent need for the Government to provide clear definitions in the bill as we move forward to stage 2. If the Government does so, I feel certain that the bill, which in many ways bears a welcome resemblance to the Localism Act 2011, which was brought in by the current United Kingdom Government, will eventually receive unanimous cross-party support. I very much hope that that will be possible, because our communities deserve no less from their Parliament.

16:39

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): What an excellent debate this has been, with good will expressed from all parties in support of the bill. Graeme Dey described it as welcome “unanimity”—although I am not sure that we quite had unanimity—and Alison Johnstone said that we should be slightly “braver”. There was friendly criticism, but we definitely welcome the bill and the direction of travel outlined in it. We will be supporting it at decision time.

The bill attempts to build not only on the Christie commission’s recommendations but on the whole devolution agenda and the creation of the Scottish Parliament itself—the idea of subsidiarity and of each of us at a local and personal level exercising as much control and influence as possible over the forces that affect our lives and the services that support us.

Just as I am pleased that the Government has finally introduced the bill—it had a bit of a stuttering start—I am especially grateful for the work of the Local Government and Regeneration Committee and the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee. I thank members of both committees, who have highlighted not only the strengths but the many weaknesses of the bill and the concerns that exist about it.

I am not sure that the minister deserved to have his hard work dismissed as mere “gobbledegook” by the usually assiduously loyal convener of the Local Government and Regeneration Committee. However, there are tensions and even paradoxes around community empowerment that must be addressed if the bill is to be effective. It remains slightly woolly and vague on whether that will be the case.

I particularly welcome Tavish Scott’s thoughtful but quite spiky contribution. Mr Scott warned that, if we are not careful, the bill could be a lawyers’ charter.

There are outstanding questions, such as how to ensure robust and democratic accountability when it comes to utilising public resources, how to reconcile local control and therefore local variation with national demands for equity and fairness and, perhaps most important, how to ensure that, rather than narrowing inequality, the bill does not make it worse. That dilemma was raised repeatedly in evidence as well as in debate. The Local Government and Regeneration Committee, in its report, quoted the Poverty Alliance, which said:

“the most important aspect of this Bill is around empowering Scotland’s most disadvantaged communities, and narrowing inequalities between those communities which are already empowered and those which will require more support.”

It added:

“There is a danger that the Bill, in its current form, will most benefit those communities which are already empowered and able to take advantage of the provisions in the Bill.”

Mark McDonald: I hear what the member is saying, but empowerment does not just naturally follow affluence. Indeed, many of the deprived communities that I represent have flourishing community organisations, with delivery of services in the community by the community. There are good examples in some of the more deprived areas of communities taking charge of what is going on.

Ken Macintosh: There are, indeed, good examples but, as Oxfam pointed out, participation requests run the risk of

“becoming the privilege of already empowered communities”.

I suggest that that is a problem that most MSPs have encountered in our work. At its most basic, the issue is about ensuring that resources are distributed fairly and not according to those who shout the loudest.

At the beginning of the debate, we had a battle of quotes between Kevin Stewart and my colleague, Alex Rowley. Kevin Stewart suggested that we listen to Ernest Hemingway and that we trust each other, whereas Alex Rowley suggested that we would be wiser to listen to Lyndon Johnson and to ask ourselves what harm it would do were the powers to be wrongly administered.

I have no doubt whatever that the minister and most members in the chamber share my intention and that of my Labour colleagues to use the bill to give a voice to the powerless and to enfranchise those who feel marginalised, but we must be careful that, inadvertently or otherwise, the bill does not simply give more power to the middle classes. I look forward to the minister lodging amendments to address that genuine anxiety.

There is a parallel concern that, despite all the new powers for communities to deliver public services or to control public assets, the processes established in the bill could simply reinforce the dominance of the public sector—be that the council, the health board or the enterprise agency—and the hierarchy of power and empowerment. That concern about a top-down approach was flagged up by the SCVO and the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

What emerged strongly from the bill consultation was the need to invest in building community capacity and resilience, a point that Margaret McDougall highlighted near the end of the debate; yet, when we speak to the third sector, it highlights the fact that programmes that support community capacity are the very ones that are under threat in the current financial climate.

That brings me neatly to finance. There are major question marks over the funding of the bill—or, rather, the lack of clear funding. That issue has been flagged up by both the LGR committee and the Finance Committee. For many people, the problem is not just the lack of reasonable estimates but the fact that the bill will not make any funding happen. Rob Gibson, the convener of the RACCE committee, acknowledged that when he said that funding requirements will need to be kept under review. The minister himself spoke of the benefits for communities of participatory budgeting. I suggest that, if it is good enough for local groups, surely it is good enough for the Parliament. I agree entirely with Angus Hardie of the Scottish Community Alliance, who was quoted earlier, that we should not allow the issue to derail the bill. Nevertheless, it would be wrong—indeed, it would be a failing on the Government's part—if the Government did not face up to the issue and offer clarity.

Undoubtedly, the fact that the bill tries to update the legislation on allotments is to be welcomed. Allotments play a more vital role than ever by allowing people access to the natural environment, enabling people to grow their own healthy food and contributing to a more sustainable way of life here in Scotland. The trouble is that the minister does not seem to have won the confidence of the allotment holders themselves. In his opening remarks, Mr Biagi revealed the death of his office aspidistra and bemoaned his predecessor Mr Mackay's lack of green fingers, but I worry that the new minister has inherited that trait. The Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society has been calling for five substantial amendments to the relevant section of the bill; however, since the minister's intervention, meetings and phone call, it is now calling for that section of the bill to be dropped altogether. *[Laughter.]* I am not sure whether to encourage the minister or to ask him to lay off. I echo Claudia Beamish's possibly intentional but

very appropriate metaphor in saying that the minister must avoid kicking the issue into the long grass.

I welcome the points that Alison Johnstone made on fan ownership of football clubs and indicate Labour's sympathy and, I hope, practical support for those proposals when we see the amendments. Supporters Direct has made huge progress in recent years, and several clubs, which Alison Johnstone listed, have made the move. It is impossible to look at Scottish football at the moment and not recognise the problems that are created by the wrong kind of ownership model. Fans and the local community put the interests of their local club first, and there has never been a better time to promote the right to buy for football supporters.

In concluding, I turn to perhaps the most important issue: land reform. I welcome the many contributions to the debate that have been made across the chamber. It was the subject that was most focused on, and those who addressed it included Mark McDonald, Bob Doris and John Wilson. Members have spoken of the move to extend the powers of land reform to urban areas, pointing out the pitfalls and advantages of trying to exercise control over community assets. Rob Gibson and Mike Russell agreed on the weakness of the bill in not defining "abandoned or neglected land". I am grateful to Mike Russell for enlightening me on the fate of my old school, Rockfield primary school, which is possibly to become an art gallery. I assure members that that is not based on any contribution to art that I made when I was at the school.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Draw to a close, please.

Ken Macintosh: Mr Russell was also particularly forceful in describing the enormous barrier that the lack of a definition of "abandoned or neglected land" in the bill would pose. I am, therefore, surprised that the RACCE committee seemed to leave the door open on the issue, with only Sarah Boyack and Claudia Beamish following the logic of the evidence that was heard and insisting that the phrase either has to be defined or has to go.

John Wilson and several Labour colleagues highlighted the need for social and economic development, not just environmental issues, to be taken into consideration, and Sarah Boyack reminded us of the need to learn from past experience. I will conclude on that point.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I would be grateful if you would.

Ken Macintosh: Sorry, Presiding Officer. I thought that I had an extra minute, but I will conclude now.

The Neilston Development Trust, in my area of East Renfrewshire, is one of the best examples that I know of a community using the existing land reform legislation to take control of an asset—the former Clydesdale bank, in our case. However, the legislation did not enable the trust; it was almost a hurdle, because of poor definitions and there being too many obstacles in the way, despite the good intentions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must close, please.

Ken Macintosh: I urge the minister not to make the same mistake with this bill but to empower Scotland's communities to take control.

16:49

Marco Biagi: I am tempted to join in the exchange of quotations. The one that comes to mind is:

"Laws, like sausages, cease to inspire respect in proportion as we know how they are made."

The quotation is sometimes attributed to Bismarck, but apparently it was John Godfrey Saxe who said it.

This has been an experience in seeing laws made. This afternoon we heard a lot of examples of areas in which members have considered the same evidence, approaches, opinions and situations but responded slightly differently, depending on our political perspective and personal experience. That is to be expected—it is why the Parliament exists and why everything is not simply put through without debate. However, ultimately there is unity on the bill's general principles.

I gently suggest that, if there is an ability to look at the same evidence and come to different conclusions, the flipside invites the question whether, if the Government had come to a different conclusion on some matters, the Opposition would have been just as strong in highlighting alternative approaches.

An issue on which we continue to have a difference of view, which Alex Rowley raised first but other members mentioned, is the finances in relation to the bill. As we have said, we think that the financial information that has been provided to the Parliament is the best estimate of the administrative, compliance and other costs to which the bill could give rise. It is also the best estimate of the timescales over which costs would arise.

We have been up front throughout the bill process in saying that elements that the bill provides for—participation requests, the community right to buy, asset transfer requests and allotments—will be driven by the demand from

communities, and we cannot predict with any degree of certainty what that demand will be. We know that from the consultation. To have plucked a figure from the air could have produced something that was misleading, confusing and false and would have led to just as much criticism. Let us simply accept that we have put forward the best estimates that we can put forward.

Another area that has generated a lot of debate is the approach to allotments. The Government comes to the issue with a principle on which I hope that we all agree: allotments are a good thing and there should be more of them. We share and are working with that principle.

On the Scottish Allotments and Gardens Society's five-point proposition, the first proposal is that a standard plot be defined as being normally 250m². We intend to have powers to deal with the size of plots. At the moment there is no restriction on a local authority, so plot sizes vary. I visited allotments and found some plots that were described as full plots and others that were described as half plots. The bill would increase powers to set a minimum size, and I have made the offer to SAGS to initiate such powers straight after the bill is enacted.

SAGS expressed concern about fair rent, which I think led to Bruce Crawford's suggestion. The current fair rent provision is undefined, and the substantial rent increases that have given rise to controversy in Edinburgh are happening under the current legislation. I think that we can agree that kicking the issue into the long grass will help no one. We want additional protections in the law now, such as the requirement to create a waiting list, which would generate nearly 1,000 new allotments. It is important that that is implemented. I would rather fix the issue at stage 2 and continue our dialogue than remove the provisions on allotments entirely.

I note the interesting issues that were raised about the common good. For example, members asked why the common good has not been defined. The common good is a particular and interesting aspect of the Scottish public policy, legal and historical landscape, which will be addressed in forthcoming land reform work. The bill presents an opportunity to take steps pretty quickly on which people can agree, such as ensuring that a common good register comes into effect within five years and ensuring that communities, including community councils, are consulted on the disposal of common good land.

The wider issue will be dealt with in future legislation. I suggest to Alison Johnstone that, if she wants to tell councils what to do about common good land rather than take the Scottish Government's approach of ensuring that communities are consulted, that creates a

tension—if we had taken her route, we would have been criticised as centralists.

On the wider issue of land reform, Sarah Boyack asked whether I could state in my closing speech when the further information that the committee requested is coming. I can do that by referring to what I said in my opening speech, which was that the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform will provide draft regulations in advance of stage 2 that will detail the matters that must be considered when determining whether land is neglected or abandoned.

Sarah Boyack: The information is critical because, although the committee will start to take evidence in a month's time, we have the community right to buy to consider. We would therefore like to see the ministerial response to the whole committee report and not just to one issue.

Marco Biagi: Reports will come, but the commitment on providing the draft regulations is already there. Instead of jumping to the conclusion that everybody will get it wrong, let us have faith that the regulations may well turn out to be right.

Claudia Beamish: I highlight to the minister that it is not a case of jumping to conclusions but of having taken a substantial amount of evidence and not being convinced.

Marco Biagi: I am sure that the Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform will reflect on the matter and come to members in advance of stage 2 on it.

Another issue that Claudia Beamish raised earlier was locality. There has been debate on that issue, and I can shed some light on it. Essentially, we have two similar but rather different mechanisms in asset transfer and land reform. The approach that was developed in 2003 and which has been taken to land reform buyouts is area based, whereas under asset transfer—which involves a transfer from the public sector to the community sector rather than a transfer from the private sector to the community sector—there is a difference in the thresholds of justification and the ways of doing it, so it is appropriate to open that up to communities of interest.

We are not being prescriptive so, when it comes to participation requests, community councils will be able to join in as much as anybody else through asset transfer. There are many examples of community councils that have set up community development trusts, which help to insure them against financial risks and allow them to play a greater role. I intend to return to that, because I recognise a lot of the concerns that have been raised. However, I draw people's attention to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee's

view that a great deal of devolved decision making can happen already.

Community planning is going to need greater engagement. We must differentiate between the community planning partnership that covers an entire local authority area and where a third sector interface is the best way in which to participate, and what we might call genuine community planning partnerships, which are the groups that councils convene at local levels that can make decisions at those levels and really involve local neighbourhood associations and residents associations in making decisions. We want that to be improved.

When I looked up the national standards for community engagement on appointment to my role, I saw Malcolm Chisholm's face smiling out at me. They were passed in 2005, when there was no such thing as social media. The ways in which we have to engage with communities and allow them to participate have changed massively. The committee was right to note the difference between empowerment and engagement, but I draw attention, too, to the difference between participation and consultation.

Alex Fergusson: Will the minister take an intervention?

Marco Biagi: I am afraid that I do not have time and must conclude.

My final message is that we must remember that we came into this to empower communities, which is what the bill's general principles are for. I said in my opening speech that communities need a bit more help and fewer obstacles.

Let us imagine what the bill's principles will do. We will have a Scotland where neglected and abandoned buildings that are a blight on streets and towns can be bought out by the community and renovated; where councils are empowered to help businesses to regenerate town centres; where everybody knows what the common good assets are and is guaranteed involvement in decisions about what is held in their name; where every part of Scotland has a partnership between all the bodies delivering for people, with participation and tackling inequality at the heart of that; and where the country as a whole, which we hardly mentioned in the debate, will have a clear mission for the kind of nation that we want to create and will not be afraid of letting public assets be owned and managed by the communities that they serve.

That would be a Scotland where participation by the authentic voices of community know-how and experience was welcomed and where they were invited to participate whenever any decision was being taken. Those are the general principles of

the bill and I hope that we will endorse them in just a moment.

Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill: Financial Resolution

16:59

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of motion S4M-12113, in the name of John Swinney, on the financial resolution on the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3(b) of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.—[*John Swinney.*]

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

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S4M-12220, in the name of Marco Biagi, on the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-12113, in the name of John Swinney, on the financial resolution on the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Allard, Christian (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Buchanan, Cameron (Lothian) (Con)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)

MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (Ind)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

Against

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Hilton, Cara (Dunfermline) (Lab)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McMahon, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMahon, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Rowley, Alex (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 76, Against 31, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3(b) of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.

Langside Library

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S4M-12078, in the name of James Dornan, on 100 years of Langside library. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament congratulates Langside Library on its centenary celebrations; understands that Langside Library was the last library in Scotland built with funds from Andrew Carnegie and the first in the city to let people take their own books from the shelves instead of requesting them from the counter; notes that the library is host to the famous Maurice Greiffenhagen picture of Mary Queen of Scots at the Battle of Langside, depicting her viewing the scene of the battle from the top of the hill where the Langside monument now sits; notes that the library now has drop-in services for Citizens Advice, Macmillan Cancer, and provides bounce and rhyme sessions, storytime sessions and a weekly coffee morning, and considers the changes that Langside Library has undertaken over the last decades to become a cultural and learning hub in the community represent a particularly fine example of the changes being made to the library sector across Scotland.

17:03

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): I

thank the members who signed my motion and those who will take part in the debate, and I welcome to the Parliament Lauren McNaught, cultural services officer, and Markie DeLeavey from Langside library, who travelled through this afternoon after an incredibly busy day to listen to the debate.

I have been privileged to lead a number of members' business debates since my election in 2011, but I can honestly say that I do not think that there has been another that has given me the personal satisfaction that this one does. I have a secret obsession, although it is not that secret from those who know me well: I am obsessed with libraries. I am sure that I share that with my colleague the acting Minister for Children and Young People, who is a former librarian.

Ever since I was a child, reading has been my pleasure. I read anything that was in the house. My mum was an avid reader, so there was always something—usually an Agatha Christie. When I was old enough—seven or eight, maybe—I went to the library for the first time. Wow. There were all these rules—“Don't speak”, “Stop shuffling”, “Stop coughing and sneezing”—yet it was like Ali Baba's cave of treasure, and I never looked back. I was fortunate to live close to a number of libraries—Couper institute, Govanhill, King's Park and of course Langside, which was my favourite.

Langside library was the last to be built with funds from Andrew Carnegie. Nearly all

Carnegie's 2,509 libraries, which were built between 1883 and 1929, were built according to the Carnegie formula. In determining where to build a library, the town or area needed to fulfil four key requirements. It had to demonstrate the need for a public library; provide the building site; provide annually 10 per cent of the cost of the library's construction to support its operation; and provide a free service to all.

Like me, Carnegie was greatly influenced by his local library and the opportunity that it gave working boys, who some believed should not even be entitled to books, to better themselves. As an immigrant in America who came by his wealth with the assistance of others, Carnegie's personal experience led him to believe that society should be based on merit and that those who worked hard could become successful. That philosophical tenet ran through all his charitable work, but his libraries are the best known expression of that philosophy.

Langside was able to meet the requirements, and after George Simpson won the competition to design the library, work commenced on building it in 1913. It opened in 1915.

Although we now take for granted whiling hours away browsing the shelves of our local library for our latest book, it was not always that way. Langside library was the first library in Glasgow to allow folk to pick their own books instead of having to request them from the staff. That was an enormous innovation and gave ownership to members of the public; it also gave them the freedom to select whatever they saw that took their fancy. I suspect that, if people still had to order books, "Fifty Shades of Grey" would probably be slightly less popular than it appears to be.

Langside is famous for being the site of the battle of Langside, which was the last battle that was fought by Mary, Queen of Scots. Defeat in that battle led to her fleeing to her cousin Elizabeth I in England for sanctuary—we all know how well that turned out. The battle is commemorated in a large painting inside the library, which was designed by Maurice Greiffenhagen and painted with students at Glasgow School of Art. It was exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 1919 and presented to the library in 1920. That stunning painting is now being assessed for restoration.

I want libraries to continue to inspire people—young and old—as much as they inspired me when I was younger. Langside library is just one example of a library that has had a stellar history, but is modernising to ensure that it has a strong future ahead of it. One of the ways in which the library is doing that is by making itself a social hub and a place where the community can go to get

help and advice on a number of different issues. Citizens Advice Scotland and Macmillan Cancer Support have drop-in services there, which help people in different ways and utilise the library's space. The library also hosts a weekly coffee morning, storytelling sessions and bounce-and-rhyme sessions for parents with toddlers. The library service appreciates that, by getting people involved in their local libraries, they will continue to use them for generations to come.

This morning, I attended an event in Langside library to celebrate 100 years since it opened, on 3 February 1915. Local resident and actor Gary Lewis was among the people who spoke. He told us that he used to work in Easterhouse library and that, when it got requests for books that it did not stock, it sent to Langside for them. Honestly, libraries are just like Google come to life.

I am one of those saddos who would get excited when they came across a library that they had never been in and who could not walk past a library on the off-chance that it had new books in it since the last time that they were there. In my case, that would probably have been less than a week beforehand.

Libraries have changed. They are no longer the austere, serious, studious places that they used to be. Everything goes on in libraries now, from toddlers singing to the more mature discussing old memories when the reminiscence box comes out. I have also noticed that the staff seem to be much younger now—maybe that is just me getting the young policeman syndrome. However, the most important thing about libraries remains the same: they are places of wonder, of hidden treasures for people of all ages and of incredible knowledge just waiting for people to turn a page and find it. They are also places of fun that are exhilarating and hugely rewarding.

When the lord provost opened the library back in the day, he said that it was as important to the working man as lighting or sanitation. Where else could the ordinary working man get access to what was there? He also said that the library was about more than just books and lending, and that it could and should be the centre of the community. I talked today to a number of high rankers from Glasgow Life, and it was interesting that they remarked that, 100 years later, their purpose is exactly the same. I know that Glasgow Life is in the process of a review to strengthen further those links with the community.

I said in the motion that the changes to Langside library have made it more accessible, utilised the space and offered more than just the opportunity to borrow books—as vital as that service is. I look forward to hearing from colleagues from across the country about the great examples of other local libraries that are

working in their communities. If their libraries are half as beautiful or half as welcoming as Langside library is, the debate will be very enjoyable.

17:09

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I commend James Dornan for bringing the debate to the chamber. I apologise on two counts: first, I was given extremely short notice that I was taking part in the debate; and, secondly, I have another engagement in about half an hour, so I am afraid that I will have to leave before the end of the debate.

I do not think that I can say that I am obsessed with libraries, although I value them hugely. Libraries are perhaps one of the greatest assets in any community, for a variety of reasons. Celebrating their work is an important duty of any elected member, not least because the majority of our constituents regard them so precious.

As the motion says, Langside library was one of the last to be built with funds from Andrew Carnegie. The first Carnegie library in the United Kingdom was built in the region that I represent, in Carnegie's home town of Dunfermline, in 1883. His legacy of philanthropy can be felt in more than 2,500 locations across the world, from Langside to Louisiana and from New York to New Zealand. He was a Scot who conquered the business world and then used that undoubted success to bring community learning to those who needed it most. It is a legacy of which Scotland can be immensely proud.

The revolution that Carnegie created has clearly changed over time, but it is just as important as ever, as libraries have transformed from silent spaces for reading to bustling hubs of activity covering all aspects of community living. As James Dornan pointed out, that activity is incredibly important for local communities, with libraries now hosting free classes and events for local people, some of which would not have been available when they were first built.

James Dornan referred to the four criteria according to which the libraries received their funding. That is a vital point. Perhaps the two most important were the requirement for free access and the need to demonstrate that the community was greatly in need of the facility. That was probably a little easier to do in 19th century Scotland than it might be now.

Revolutionary though he was, not even Carnegie could have predicted the seismic shift that has been brought about by the internet. The proliferation of digital communication has been embraced whole-heartedly across Scotland and by the Scottish library system, with many people's

first interaction with the internet taking place in a library.

Today, the majority of us carry the entirety of human knowledge in our pockets and bags. Smartphones and tablets mean that we have instant access to information. The increasing role that libraries have to play is therefore a difficult one, as they are competing with those changes, but I must compliment libraries—at least the ones that I know anything about—which I think have been absolutely outstanding in their approach. The nature of our interactions and our need for libraries are ever changing, but libraries have responded to that, as have communities, which have a vital role when it comes to developing facilities.

The Parliament is right to congratulate Langside library today. One hundred years is truly a milestone worth marking. For a century, the people of Langside have been extremely well served. I wish the library's staff and visitors the very best as they embark on the coming week of celebratory events.

17:13

Drew Smith (Glasgow) (Lab): I declare my interest as a card-carrying member of Glasgow's library services. Like Liz Smith, I thank James Dornan for securing the debate and I congratulate the staff and regular readers at Langside library from over the years as we mark its centenary.

I was pleased to support Mr Dornan's motion when it was lodged, and I read with interest some of the information that was contained in it. He mentioned the battle of Langside, which was such an important event, although not that many people know that much about the detail of the battle. We know much more about the flight to Dumbarton and the exile that followed Langside. It seems fitting, given that connection, to be marking the centenary of the library here at Holyrood.

I have no doubt that generations of schoolchildren in Langside will have learned about the connection of that part of Glasgow with Mary, Queen of Scots through the local library, and they will have learned many other things besides. Importantly, they will have gained—like Mr Dornan—a love of learning for its own sake through their reading and indeed thanks to the work of the library staff over many years. It is important not just that we thank the staff who currently work in the library, but that we remember the generations of staff who have worked in the library and who no doubt loved it very much.

I was interested to read that Langside was the first library in the city that allowed readers to take their books off the shelf; Mr Dornan highlighted that point. I am intrigued by that, because there must have been many interesting discussions

about allowing that to happen for the first time. Again, there is something fitting about that, given the history of learning in Glasgow and in particular of self-taught people. Generations of people have used the city's library services to understand more about the world, their place in the world and, particularly in Glasgow, how to change the world. Our municipal libraries have played an absolutely crucial role in that.

As Liz Smith mentioned, libraries have undergone significant change. Some have been lost altogether as a result of technology, cheaper books and other forms of entertainment, but we must acknowledge that another driver of that negative change has been pressure on local government budgets. I understand that, since 2008, 22 public libraries across Scotland have closed. We need to reflect on the modern libraries that are succeeding and that have reinvented themselves as demand and expectations on them have changed.

The motion makes a number of points about the services that are offered at Langside. The one that I know most about is the partnership between the city's library service and Macmillan Cancer Support, which provides a one-stop shop for advice and information for those who are affected by cancer, in a community setting rather than a health one.

Like Mr Dornan, when I reflect on my learning as a child, I see that, possibly along with the BBC, my local library was pretty much my primary source of exposure to new information. The regular visits that both my parents encouraged me to make from a young age led to a lifelong love of learning and a wide interest in local and Scottish history and, inevitably, politics. One of my fondest memories of my local library is being taken as a child by my grandfather, who was an ex-miner, to visit the wonderful model there of the local colliery. It had intricate details of the pit workings, with buttons that could be pressed to light up different parts of the pit and the underground railway. That was quite a contrast with the decline of the real mine, which was behind my school and which had fallen into disrepair following its closure after the miners strike.

In that same library, I read a copy of Margaret Thatcher's memoir, "The Downing Street Years", which was certainly priced beyond my means and was unlikely to be a welcome addition in my house, if any of us had sought to buy it. However, I read it with interest. I also read Robert Tressell's "The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists". I have lodged a motion marking the centenary of that book's publication. No doubt, it is one of the books that will have been regularly taken off the shelves in Langside library over the years. At my local library, there was much lighter material, too, such

as the back catalogue of Enid Blyton, "The Three Investigators"—a detective series for boys, which I worked my way through—and many other things besides.

I am one of those people that Liz Smith referred to who first used the internet in their local library. At one time, we were able to withdraw VHS films and even CDs in the local library, which was a boon for those in a small town without a record shop. People could take the CDs home and tape them, although I would never encourage that now—as a supporter of the right of artists to be paid, I certainly deprecate that crime now. However, the library was a huge part of my life.

Libraries are precious things. Although they face real challenges, it is right that we mark the success of libraries such as Langside, which continue to provide a real hub for local communities and, crucially, a gateway to local learning, local history, culture and even health improvement. I am grateful to Mr Dornan for ensuring that his important motion is debated in Parliament.

17:19

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I congratulate my colleague on securing the debate and I congratulate Langside library on its centenary. I preface my remarks by confessing that I have not visited the library, but I recognise the diverse services that it provides for the community, which reflect those that are provided in my constituency.

Early visits to libraries in my youth involved crossing the threshold of quite forbidding places. They had the silence of a sanctuary, where one felt that even a sneeze was heretical. As a working class girl, I had no idea where to look or what to look for and I was too inhibited to ask. Can members remember me being inhibited? It was there that I first stumbled across critiques of Shakespeare plays. I had no idea that such things existed until then, but I passed my higher English with an A, self-taught by those library books.

As an English teacher, my experience of the Woodmill high school library in Dunfermline under the formidable oversight of librarian Dorothy Devlin was eye-opening. It was the 1960s, and she ensured that her library, although it was respected, was a place of interest where conversations—albeit sotto voce—could take place. We even shared lessons in teaching children how to use the library, which was something that I had never known how to do before. In particular, we taught those who were not academically inclined and who felt like a fish out of water.

I have had regard for librarians ever since, particularly as I recall that Dorothy Devlin fought for so-called unsuitable books to be available. Freedom of expression and thought was her mantra, and she will not be the first or the last librarian to take on that fight.

Today, I hold surgeries at Newtongrange and Gorebridge libraries, and there are approachable and enthusiastic staff working in both of them. I say that not just because I am greeted with a cup of coffee and a biscuit, but because of all that they do to make the libraries inviting and diverse. There is a computer room and a kiddies' corner, and there are seasonal displays of books and pictures. The libraries both go to town at Halloween and Christmas, and there are charity events, competitions and newspapers to read, along with flowers on the counter and even an appearance from me. It is all go.

There is the surprise parcel enticement, in which batches of books are bundled up in brown paper and string, and labelled with a category such as "Romance" or "Thrillers". Readers pick their parcel, and off they go to unwrap it at home, where they perhaps find inside a book or two that they would never have thought of choosing.

Last time I was at Gorebridge, waiting for customers, I was perched among the autobiographies. To pass the time, I—being a fan of "Only Fools and Horses" and "A Touch of Frost"—picked up David Jason's autobiography. It was a laugh a page—and I mean an out-loud laugh a page. Unfortunately, I did not get the chance to finish it, but after telling a few friends, I managed to get a copy for Christmas. I recommend reading it on a dreich day by the fire, possibly with a malt to hand.

I thank James Dornan for highlighting the work of Langside library and recognising that it has—like many other libraries—evolved over the centuries into an exciting place that is amenable and approachable. Libraries make a diverse contribution to their communities, and the librarians are the personalities who make them so worth while to visit.

I should just say, Presiding Officer, that I like the touch and feel of a book. You will never get me reading an e-book.

17:22

Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank James Dornan for bringing the debate to the chamber, and I congratulate Langside library on its 100th anniversary.

I thank James Dornan especially because he has grasped the essence of the whole concept of libraries. I would never have imagined him going

into libraries as regularly as he suggests he does. That is wonderful, and very positive.

When I was a child, my family took me overseas, and I did not experience libraries because there were none there. When I came back to Glasgow, I first experienced a library because I was taken along by my local school. I said to myself, "My God. Look at all these books. I can get them for free, and take them home." I could not believe my eyes or my mind. I took some books home and began to read them. It amazes me to think of the value that libraries have even today for youngsters and for others in our communities. When I went to the library in the early days, I thought that everybody there was elderly. Of course I was young, so everybody looked elderly to me.

As time went on, I felt that the value of libraries grew greater and greater, particularly when I went to university. I was unemployed before then, so I was not particularly wealthy, and I needed to buy books for my course. I said to myself, "I am never going to be able to afford these books." I was told by one of the lecturers that I could go to the university library and get some books there, and I did. What was amazing was that, when I wanted to do research, it was the libraries in my local area that came to my rescue. The amount of information that is available in libraries is amazing; people cannot even fathom it.

My grandson thinks that a computer is better than a dictionary. I tried to explain to him that he needs to learn how to use a dictionary just in case he goes somewhere in the world where there is no Google. He said to me, "Grandad, if they don't have Google, they won't have a dictionary either."

There are challenges that face libraries today. One thing that I have noticed is that populations are moving around and some libraries find themselves out of place—there is a gap between where the community lives and where the library is. That is a challenge for the libraries and for us in the community because there is a danger that we will lose some libraries. I hope that the cabinet secretary will comment on encouraging schools to house libraries so that we do not lose them and so that they work hand in glove in the sense that the schoolchildren, as well as the local communities, would be able to use them.

James Dornan: It is interesting that Hanzala Malik says that, because Mount Florida primary school told me today that it is installing—or, I suppose, reinstalling—a library with the help of Langside library.

Hanzala Malik: That is a fantastic example; that is exactly what I am trying to suggest. When I became the chair of lifelong learning in Glasgow City Council, I wanted to introduce computers in

libraries. I started off with a small pilot project in five libraries in Glasgow and everybody told me that I was wasting my time because everybody had a personal computer in their house, but the computers were a phenomenal hit. It brought home the message that people want to use the technology and the libraries' facilities if they have the opportunity. Therefore, we rolled out the programme. Glasgow City Council has been good at supporting such innovation, but I would like more libraries to be placed closer to the communities that can use them.

I am running out of time. There was a lot that I wanted to say about libraries because I genuinely believe that they provide a service that we cannot do without. We need to reflect on the times and the challenges that libraries face.

Once again, I thank James Dornan for bringing the debate to Parliament. I hope that it will encourage the cabinet secretary to take on some of the ideas that have been suggested and encourage us to continue building on the heritage that we have in Scotland.

17:27

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): I congratulate James Dornan on securing the debate. The motion highlights the long history of libraries in Scotland and the almost immeasurable impact that they have on our lives as an opportunity to see wonderful buildings, as an opportunity to experience works of art and, perhaps most importantly, in providing access for all to a timeless treasury of great literature. For those reasons and many more, it is important to debate the issue in the Parliament.

As the MSP for Langside, James Dornan referred to the battle of Langside—the last battle of Mary, Queen of Scots. I reply as the cabinet secretary, but I am the MSP for Linlithgow, where she was born, so I bookend the debate rather suitably.

I wish Langside library a happy 100th birthday. It is wonderful that, after a centenary, the library is still going strong and bringing new services and sessions to its community that range from practical support from Macmillan Cancer Support and Citizens Advice Scotland, through local political engagements via surgeries with councillors and MSPs, to more leisurely pursuits such as storytelling sessions, coffee mornings and a knitting group.

The ethos of libraries has always been equality of opportunity, and that is as relevant today as it was 100 years ago. Libraries offer crucial support to help people to help themselves. They support literacy, digital participation, learning,

employability, health, culture and leisure. They improve the quality of people's lives and support them to engage in the democratic process.

Only yesterday, at the sports, arts and culture working group that I co-chair with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, councillors from throughout Scotland—Glasgow City Council is not currently participating, so there were no councillors from there—talked with passion about not only their belief in libraries and their transformational role but the transformation that libraries are undertaking for the 21st century to maintain their role at the heart of the community. We discussed how local and national Government can best work together to support libraries. I caution members that, as easy as it is to reminisce about libraries, it is really important that we refer to libraries of the 21st century.

The Scottish Government supports the Scottish Library and Information Council to offer leadership to the sector. We recognise that libraries have a role in providing wider services, but the responsibility for them lies with local authorities. We have supported SLIC as it works with partners to develop a strategy for public libraries in Scotland. The strategy group is chaired by the chief executive officer of the Carnegie UK Trust, Martyn Evans, and is an opportunity for local authorities and other partners to agree a clear vision for the future of public library services. That is what we were discussing only yesterday.

Libraries play a key role in supporting Scottish Government policy in many areas; I would like to highlight two of those.

On the digital agenda, we are committed to increasing digital participation. Libraries play an important role in that, providing equipment and internet access for those who do not have it and supporting training to ensure that those who need to get online can get online.

The Scottish Government has provided SLIC with £300,000, which is supporting 138 libraries to install or improve wi-fi in their building. That is in addition to the £500,000 annual public library improvement fund that we provide to SLIC to support various projects in public libraries across Scotland, ranging from world war 1 projects to Lego reading clubs for young readers.

The second area where libraries make a significant impact is in the development of good literacy skills. The Scottish Government recognises that we need those skills. Our literacy action plan highlights the importance of reading as a valued activity from an early age and the benefits of reading in the home. A lot of the associated issues concern the issues of equality and opportunity that have been a theme of many of the speeches today. We aim to tackle the areas

with the lowest levels of literacy and break the well-evidenced link between poverty and deprivation and poor literacy skills. The plan's delivery and impact are being overseen by the standing literacy commission, which met for the final time in December and will produce a final report on the literacy action plan in the spring.

Libraries will have a key role to play in the new literacy and numeracy campaign for primaries 1 to 3—read, write, count—which will build on the success of the play, talk, read campaign and, of course, bookbug, in the early years.

Book week Scotland also promotes reading to all ages across Scotland, and libraries deliver much of the activity during the week. In 2014, book week Scotland saw approximately 481 events in libraries across all local authority areas, which were attended by 17,000 people. There is a real vibrancy to the activity in libraries, and we must recognise that.

During book week Scotland, the Scottish Book Trust invited everyone to send a love letter to their library, and the message was one of love and appreciation. As one young reader put it:

"Thank you for helping my brain to grow; for opening up my imagination and giving me dreams; helping me to learn to read and find out new things."

Where better to encourage reading than in public libraries, which remain one of the free universal services that operate at the heart of communities across Scotland? Some 30 per cent of adults in Scotland use their library, and libraries remain the most frequently attended cultural venue, with almost seven out of 10 people visiting their library more than once a month.

Perhaps one thing that libraries could do better is to market themselves and remind people of all that they have to offer and do for people all over the country. Saturday 7 February is national libraries day across the country, and I think that we should all look for opportunities on that day to promote the work of libraries and to demonstrate how much those services are valued within our communities.

As James Dornan's motion recognises, our libraries are part of our history and remain a vital part of our communities. Their offer is universal and democratic. Free access to books, reading, internet, public space, information and cultural, historical and learning opportunities are all vital in building a fairer, smarter, healthier and wealthier Scotland.

I will bring my remarks to a close by quoting Andrew Carnegie, who said:

"There is not such a cradle of democracy upon the earth as the Free Public Library, this republic of letters, where neither rank, office, nor wealth receives the slightest consideration."

As a child, my local library was my personal republic, where I first felt empowered and independent as an individual, and I see the light of liberation in my 10-year-old son's eyes when he talks about his experience of a library.

Libraries are not just about history. They are about the present, and they are certainly about the future. Although libraries are about physical buildings and books, they are also, to a great degree, about the people who continue to serve in them. I salute all the people who have worked in Langside library over the past 100 years, and those who still work there.

Meeting closed at 17:34.

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e-format first available
ISBN 978-1-78534-858-7

Revised e-format available
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