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Official Report

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Thursday 30 April 2015

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 30 April 2015

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

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Good morning and welcome to general questions. Question 1 is in the name of Richard Simpson, who I note is not here. I have had no explanation for why he has not turned up; I expect to receive an explanation very soon.

National Museums Scotland (Industrial Dispute)

2. Drew Smith (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to resolve the industrial dispute at National Museums Scotland. (S4O-04265)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): Although pay negotiations are a matter for the board of National Museums Scotland, I as the employer have met the chair and the director of NMS and representatives of the unions, and I strongly encouraged both sides to develop a more productive working relationship to resolve the dispute.

Drew Smith: The cabinet secretary blames NMS, and NMS seems to blame the Scottish Government. The dispute is not complicated: people are working side by side, doing the same job, and earning different rates of pay.

It has been 18 months, so why is the dispute still going on? What action will the cabinet secretary take from today to get some resolution to the situation? Will she indicate how much money it would cost simply to equalise the rates of pay so that staff employed after 2011 receive the same weekend allowance as the staff who have been employed at NMS for longer?

Fiona Hyslop: The changes do not affect staff who already received the allowance; they relate to new staff employed after 2011. It took longer than 18 months for the concern to be raised.

On the rates of pay, the information from National Museums Scotland is that the cost would be almost £400,000 a year, which would amount to £1.2 million over the spending review period. As Drew Smith is aware, both the Labour Party and the Conservatives have indicated that further public sector cuts will come after the Westminster elections. Unless the member can tell me

otherwise, it would certainly be a challenge to identify £1.2 million over that period.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): This is the cabinet secretary's responsibility. What has she personally done to bring the dispute to an end? It has been going on for 18 months. Every time she is asked questions about it, she blames someone else. She blames Westminster, the management of the museum—

The Presiding Officer: Do you have a question, Mr Findlay?

Neil Findlay: Will the cabinet secretary take responsibility and bring the dispute to an end?

Fiona Hyslop: As the member knows, and as I just indicated, I have met the unions on a number of occasions. I have facilitated better working relationships with NMS and we have achieved progress on a number of issues. However, the weekend allowance is still under dispute.

I encourage all sides to engage. That is not possible if the trade unions say that they will talk to management only if the full weekend allowance is reintroduced immediately, as that is not possible. We need both sides to talk. I have personally spoken to both sides and encouraged them. I hope that they can continue a dialogue, as they have done over recent months, to get some resolution.

I take the matter seriously. I have given as much information as possible to all members who have contacted me.

Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (Public Services Impact)

3. Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what measures it is taking to protect public services from the impact of the transatlantic trade and investment partnership. (S4O-04266)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy (John Swinney): Since March last year, the Scottish Government has been raising concerns with the United Kingdom Government and the European Commission about the impact of the transatlantic trade and investment partnership negotiations on the national health service and other public services. We are continuing to press the case for an explicit exemption from TTIP for the NHS and other vital public services. As the First Minister has said, there are no ifs, no buts—there must be explicit protection for the NHS in the agreement.

Christina McKelvie: Last week, at the Scottish Trades Union Congress, the following text was adopted:

"The UK reserves the right to adopt or maintain any measure with regard to the organization, the funding and the provision of the National Health Service in the UK as well as with regard to the public and/or the non-for-profit character of the National Health Service in the UK, where services may be provided by different companies and/or public or private entities involving competitive elements which are thus not services carried out exclusively in the exercise of governmental authority."

Will the cabinet secretary reassure members and the many people who are interested in the TTIP agreement that he will take that text to the next intergovernmental meeting?

John Swinney: The wording that Christina McKelvie read out is a welcome contribution from the Scottish Trades Union Congress. It represents work that has been undertaken to define the legal terms that would provide necessary exemption and ensure that the national health service and other public services are exempt from TTIP.

As the Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs made clear in the debate yesterday, and as I made clear in the Government's written response to the European and External Relations Committee on its helpful and informative report on the subject, the Government is determined to ensure that we have wording that is sufficiently tight that it will address our and the public's concerns and put it beyond doubt that TTIP will have no effect on the Government's ability to determine how and by whom the national health service and other public services are provided.

Assault Injury Surveillance (NHS Lanarkshire)

4. Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what the findings were from its pilot project to monitor assault injury surveillance in NHS Lanarkshire. (S4O-04267)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Michael Matheson): As part of building safer communities, we are continuing to work with partners at national and local levels to reduce violence. The pilot project helped to improve our understanding of violence in our communities. The views of key individuals involved in the pilot project were sought, and recommendations were identified to improve the project's structure and governance, staff involvement and the collation of data. All that has helped to inform further developments in our overall approach to violence reduction initiatives.

The Scottish public health network report entitled "Violence prevention: a public health priority", which was published in December last year, outlined recommendations to roll out injury surveillance across all health board areas. At present, three health boards—NHS Fife, NHS Lanarkshire and NHS Lothian—are capturing injury surveillance data.

Stewart Maxwell: The cabinet secretary may be aware that I have been pursuing the issue since 2006. I hope to see progress soon to implement a policy that I believe will help to reduce knife crime across Scotland.

I have a letter dated May 2013 from the cabinet secretary's predecessor, Kenny MacAskill, in which Mr MacAskill stated:

"I agree that injury surveillance can be very useful to both the police and the NHS and my officials are continuing to work with partners in NHS Lanarkshire, Police Scotland and the Violence Reduction Unit to learn from their experiences in piloting this approach in Lanarkshire ... Once we have a picture of what work is taking place across Scotland we will look to see what assistance we can give in rolling this out further."

In light of that response, can the cabinet secretary tell me when an injury surveillance system is likely to be rolled out across the country?

Michael Matheson: I am aware of the member's long-standing interest in the matter, which I believe he first raised back in 2006. A key recommendation of the public health report that I referred to was that each of our boards should identify a public health lead, who will be responsible for taking forward the work.

Alongside that, the report makes recommendations on the priorities that those lead officials should take forward in their board areas to capture the information and ensure that they have the right system in place. The report also recommends that each lead should establish an emergency department violence surveillance programme in their board area by January 2016.

We will continue to work with boards on the matter, along with the violence reduction unit and Police Scotland, to ensure that we make progress.

The Presiding Officer: Question 5, in the name of Richard Baker, has not been lodged. The explanation is less than satisfactory.

As for Richard Simpson, who just missed question 1, he made the best effort that he could to get here. I hope that he is recovering.

Housing and Commercial Developments (Infrastructure Upgrades)

6. Colin Keir (Edinburgh Western) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what help is available to local authorities to upgrade infrastructure to support new housing and commercial developments. (S4O-04269)

The Minister for Local Government and Community Empowerment (Marco Biagi): Between 2014 and 2016, the Scottish Government expects to secure infrastructure investment of more than £8 billion, which will help to support economic activity and the delivery of public

services in communities across Scotland. Through the use of innovative financial models such as tax increment financing and the growth accelerator model, the Scottish Government, together with the Scottish Futures Trust, is working closely with a number of local authorities and other partners to deliver local investment that supports regeneration and growth.

Colin Keir: Exactly who is responsible for infrastructure upgrades to accommodate any new development?

Marco Biagi: A key principle of the planning system is that the impact of new development on existing infrastructure should be mitigated. When there is an impact, a planning obligation can be used under section 75 of the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997. That sets out what the developer is legally required to provide and may include the requirement for a financial contribution. That is one of many sources of financial contributions, and it is important for members to know that this year the Scottish Government is providing £856 million of capital funding to local authorities, which has maintained their total share of the capital budget.

We have recently commissioned a significant research project that is focusing particularly on cumulative contributions to strategic investment. The work is led by Ryden, which will report in June. By the end of the year, we intend to publish planning advice based on that.

Cameron Buchanan (Lothian) (Con): Does the Scottish Government consider that investment in infrastructure should be made in anticipation of population growth, rather than in reaction to it?

Marco Biagi: There is space for both approaches. The important process to mitigate the effect of population changes is the development planning process. It is important that that process is effective and not only takes into account the current situation but anticipates future demand and delivers as appropriate to the timescales for that.

Public Transport (Air Pollution)

7. John Wilson (Central Scotland) (Ind): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to encourage individuals to use public transportation in order to reduce air pollution. (S4O-04270)

The Minister for Transport and Islands (Derek Mackay): The Scottish Government has a range of policies and programmes to make public transport better, more accessible and more affordable, and to encourage people to use it. For example, we are investing £5 billion to 2019 to continue improving our rail network and services and up to £246 million for the modernisation of the

Glasgow subway, and £250 million a year supports the bus network across Scotland and provides free bus travel to around 1.3 million elderly and disabled concession card holders.

We support Traveline Scotland to help people plan their journeys and are working with transport operators to deliver smart, cashless ticketing across modes, which will help to make public transport simpler and more attractive to use. Through initiatives such as our greener Scotland campaign and smarter choices, smarter places, we encourage individuals to make more sustainable travel choices.

John Wilson: I thank the minister for his detailed response. Yesterday, the United Kingdom Supreme Court ruled that the current plans to reduce levels of air pollution were insufficient and that the UK Government—and, I presume, the Scottish Government—must take immediate action to reduce air pollution in cities that are found to have illegal levels of air pollution. It is not just cities that have high levels of air pollution; we have high pollution levels in certain villages in North Lanarkshire, such as Chapelhall. What steps will the Scottish Government take to reduce air pollution in light of the Supreme Court's ruling yesterday?

Derek Mackay: In addition to the climate change policies that have been set out—we have the most ambitious climate change targets in the world—we have a low-emissions strategy consultation. The public consultation on the draft strategy closed on 10 April and we received 67 responses, which are being reviewed. We will finalise and publish the strategy at the end of 2015 and it will include proposals on things such as low-emissions zones. I am sure that John Wilson will welcome that news.

Educational Attainment (North Ayrshire)

8. Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to raise educational attainment in North Ayrshire. (S4O-04271)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Angela Constance): Ensuring that every child reaches their full potential, whatever their background, is at the heart of our ambition for education, which is why we launched the Scottish attainment challenge, backed up by the £100 million Scottish attainment fund. North Ayrshire is one of the seven local authority areas that have been identified as the first beneficiaries of the fund, which will allow for substantial financial support to put in place effective interventions.

North Ayrshire also benefits from the universal support that is provided to all authorities through a

range of existing and new national programmes that are focused on raising attainment and reducing the equity gap. They include the raising attainment for all programme; attainment advisers in every authority; the read, write, count campaign and the £3 million access to education fund.

Kenneth Gibson: I understand that North Ayrshire Council intends to focus on classroom practice, teaching and assisting parents in providing learning support for their children. What impact will that have on educational outcomes throughout North Ayrshire?

Angela Constance: Mr Gibson will be pleased to know that on Monday I met representatives of North Ayrshire Council and other local authorities that are among the first to benefit from the Scottish attainment challenge and the Scottish attainment fund. All those local authorities are working hard to develop and implement the plans to take forward that ambitious programme. As Mr Gibson knows, tackling inequality is at the heart of the Government's agenda, so that every child can succeed in school and gain the skills that they need for life. All the evidence shows that good-quality teachers and teaching are crucial to making a difference, as are programmes that help parents to support their children's learning at home. I believe that, if North Ayrshire and the other local authorities pursue such evidence-based approaches, they will make a big difference to improving educational outcomes and reducing the attainment gap for children living in the most deprived communities. Given Mr Gibson's interest in those efforts on behalf of his constituents, I would be happy to share with him the details of the fund and the programme as it develops.

On-road Cycle Training

9. Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what progress it is making toward ensuring that every child has the opportunity to undertake on-road cycle training. (S4O-04272)

The Minister for Transport and Islands (Derek Mackay): With grant funding of £800,000 from Transport Scotland, Cycling Scotland offers all local authorities access to training resources and an instructor training pathway. In 2013-14, 37.4 per cent of primary schools in participating local authorities were providing bikeability Scotland level 2 on-road training, up from 31.5 per cent in 2010-11. During 2014-15, 1,095 candidates trained as bikeability Scotland instructors and an additional 178 schools delivered on-road training. Updated figures for 2014-15 will be reported by local authorities to Cycling Scotland and will be available in September 2015.

Alison Johnstone: There are obviously huge variations in investment and outcomes across the

country, but I welcome the progress that has been made. It is a waste if that training cannot be put into practice by our young people because our roads are still too unsafe, too busy, too polluted and too congested. Given the damning verdict of the Supreme Court regarding dangerous levels of air pollution, is it not time for the Scottish Government to take the advice of the Association of Directors of Public Health and invest a tenth of the transport budget in walking and cycling?

Derek Mackay: On Alison Johnstone's first point, a range of local authorities are taking up the offer that the Scottish Government has made to them. I particularly commend the councils in East Renfrewshire, where 100 per cent of primary schools are included, and Midlothian, where 87 per cent of primary schools are included. We will continue to support education and a range of other policies to encourage people to get involved in active travel.

On the financial commitments for active travel, we have kept and delivered our manifesto commitment. What is more, as Alison Johnstone is well aware, at the pedal on Parliament event at the weekend, I committed to increase the record amount spent in 2014-15 in the current financial year, 2015-16. That shows that the Government is putting its money where its mouth is when it comes to active transport.

Heavy Goods Vehicles (Speed Limit)

10. Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it plans to raise the speed limit on A roads for heavy goods vehicles over 7.5 tonnes. (S4O-04273)

The Minister for Transport and Islands (Derek Mackay): There are no current plans to raise the speed limits for HGVs over 7.5 tonnes on single-carriageway or dual-carriageway roads across Scotland.

Murdo Fraser: The minister will know that the United Kingdom Government has increased the speed limit for HGVs on A roads to 50mph. It is estimated that the move will deliver not just economic benefit but a reduction in carbon emissions and improved road safety. The Institute of Advanced Motorists has warned that the Scottish economy could be at an economic disadvantage if we do not follow suit. Clearly, confusion will also be caused for cross-border traffic such as heavy goods vehicles using the A75 Euro route heading for Stranraer. Given all that evidence, why will the Scottish Government not make that sensible move?

Derek Mackay: The Scottish Government will take an evidence-based approach. Mr Fraser will be well aware that the change was implemented only on 6 April, so it is premature to make any

judgments about the impacts. In terms of consistency, we will continue to work with the Road Haulage Association, the Freight Transport Association and others to ensure that the difference between Scotland and England is highlighted. HGV drivers are professional, and they understand the difference.

Road speed limits are often determined by the characteristics of the road. The reason why the Scottish Government does not support the wholesale, blanket change that is happening south of the border is that a careful judgment has to be made. For the Scottish Government, safety is paramount. Although there might be some economic gain, the same Department for Transport assessment that Murdo Fraser mentions said quite clearly that there is a probability of increased fatalities and incidents in the road network south of the border. Understanding that, it is entirely right that we take an evidence-based approach that puts reliability, safety and the economy at the forefront of our minds, but we will not take a gamble with the lives of the people of Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: Before we move to the next item of business, members will wish to join me in welcoming to the gallery His Excellency Hamzah Thayeb, the ambassador of the Republic of Indonesia.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Engagements

1. Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what engagements she has planned for the rest of the day. (S4F-02752)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I am sure that I speak on behalf of the whole chamber when I say that we stand with the international community in our support for the people of Nepal, following the devastating earthquake on Saturday. As I announced earlier this week, the Scottish Government will donate £250,000 to the Disasters Emergency Committee's Nepal earthquake appeal, and I take this opportunity to urge people across Scotland to donate to the appeal, if they are able to do so, so that we can all help people in Nepal to rebuild their homes and their lives.

Later today, I will have engagements to take forward the Government's programme for Scotland.

Kezia Dugdale: Obviously, members on these benches offer the First Minister our full support for those remarks and that action.

What normally happens at First Minister's questions is that I ask a question, the First Minister avoids it and then we go back and forth for 10 minutes. I would like to do things a little differently this week.

I had planned to ask the First Minister if she would rule out another referendum, but she will say that that is for the people to decide. I then planned to ask her the question again, but she would just say that there will be another referendum only if there is a material change of circumstances. So, let us cut to the chase and save a lot of time during this busy election period. Can the First Minister simply repeat the exact words that she used on 25 August last year, when she said that the referendum was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity?

The First Minister: If the people of Scotland want a referendum to be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, that is exactly what it will be. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Order.

The First Minister: This is desperate, last-throw-of-the-dice stuff from Scottish Labour. Talk about a party in its death throes.

The desperate scaremongering over full fiscal autonomy clearly has not made any impact on the polls—no, actually, that is not true; it has made an impact on the polls: the Scottish National Party's

poll rating has gone up. However, given that it has not helped Scottish Labour, the party is now resorting to desperate scaremongering about a referendum that nobody is proposing.

Let me make this very clear—for the benefit of Scottish Labour and Kezia Dugdale, I will put it in simple terms. The election one week today is not about independence and it is not about a referendum. No matter how many seats the SNP wins—and we are working hard to win as many as possible—that is not a mandate for a referendum. This election is about making sure that Scotland's voice is heard much more loudly than ever before. We have experienced Scottish Labour MPs who go to Westminster and are never heard of again, and it is time for Scotland's voice to be heard.

Kezia Dugdale: I do not know about you, Presiding Officer, but I do not think that that was quite repeating the promise that was made by the SNP to the people of Scotland. The promise was that the referendum was a once-in-a-lifetime event and that, no matter how we voted as a nation, we would get back to dealing with the really important issues, such as the fact that the reading levels of kids of all ages in Scotland have declined in the past two years and the fact that next to no progress has been made to close the gap between those from the poorest backgrounds and those from the wealthiest backgrounds in our schools. The First Minister has all this power at her disposal, but what is it for if not to transform the lives of working-class kids?

If I ask the First Minister about her 2016 manifesto, she will say that she has not started writing it yet, but we know that that is not true because her conference speech contained 2016 manifesto promises on the small business bonus scheme, childcare and the national health service. Will the First Minister today rule out a referendum in her 2016 manifesto?

The First Minister: For just a fleeting second, I thought that Kezia Dugdale was going to ask a serious question when she started talking about Scottish education. There is much to celebrate in Scottish education but the results that were published yesterday are not good enough. I am determined to improve them and this Government is determined to improve them.

On the question of a referendum, I have made the SNP's position very clear. Ultimately, in the 2016 election—indeed, in any election—it is for the Scottish people to decide whom to vote for and whom not to vote for. The Scottish people are in charge at every single step of the way.

I was going to ask Kezia Dugdale what the problem is that Scottish Labour seems to have developed with democracy, but then I looked at the opinion polls and I think that I know the

problem that Scottish Labour has with democracy. I offer Kezia Dugdale a little bit of friendly advice. Over the next six days, Scottish Labour might want to look at the polls, desist from the negativity and scaremongering and instead try to muster a single positive reason—if it can possibly find one—for voting Labour.

Kezia Dugdale: I look at the polls—we see them and talk about them all the time in the television studios. Do you know what? If those polls are realised next week, there will be pink champagne for everyone. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Kezia Dugdale: Rupert Murdoch will be buying it, Alex Salmond will be pouring it and David Cameron will be drinking it. That is the reality of the polls.

Just a second ago, the First Minister said that no one is proposing a second referendum, but that is not true. In the past half hour, Jim Sillars, the former deputy leader of her party, has said that there is no question but that another referendum will be in her manifesto next year and that her party members will demand that it be in the first line of that manifesto. Last night, her candidate in Glasgow East said that we should wait to see the result of next week's election before the SNP decides about another referendum. Her candidates in West Dunbartonshire, Glasgow North, Paisley, Inverness, Caithness and Livingston all see the general election as another step on the march to another referendum. When the SNP candidate in Midlothian said that it was not a no vote, just a "not yet", was that respecting the result of the referendum?

The First Minister: Desperate does not quite cover it. I know that I am in opposition to Labour, but even I find it quite sad to watch the demise of a once proud party.

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: The great heroes of the labour movement must be turning in their graves right now. We are given not a single positive reason for voting Labour, just the same old negativity and scaremongering that it indulged in, arm in arm with the Tories, during the referendum campaign.

Let me make this quite clear: I have the greatest respect for Jim Sillars, but the clue is in the title "former deputy leader of the SNP". I am the current leader of the SNP, so let me say this clearly once again. This election is not about independence or a referendum; it is about making Scotland's voice heard and then using that strong voice at Westminster to stand up for progressive politics and to argue for an end to austerity, protection for our public services and the

investment in our economy that we need to get people into jobs. That is what a vote for the SNP is about next Thursday, and I hope that people across the country seize the opportunity.

Kezia Dugdale: The First Minister asked for one good reason to vote Labour. I will give her one: let us reintroduce the 50p tax rate and use the money that that generates to close the inequality gaps in our schools.

Just yesterday, new figures were published which showed that working-class kids are getting left behind by this SNP Government. Even now—in 2015—a child's ability to read and write is directly linked to how much their parents earn or where they live. That is a moral outrage—it is a scandal. However, all that the SNP candidates can talk about is another referendum. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. Order! Mr FitzPatrick—enough.

Kezia Dugdale: To any Government with the right priorities, the three Rs would mean reading, writing and arithmetic. Is it not the case that, under the SNP, the three Rs simply mean referendum, referendum, referendum?

The First Minister: This is totally and utterly farcical from Scottish Labour. The only people in Scotland right now who are talking about a second referendum are members of Scottish Labour. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: About an hour ago, a party in Scotland launched a billboard poster about a second referendum. Do you know what? It was not the SNP—it was Scottish Labour. That is who is talking about it. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: I know that Labour's campaign is in dire straits, but I do not want to miss the opportunity to thank Kezia Dugdale for her email on Tuesday, which came from her direct to the First Minister's official email inbox. It asked me if I would be part of Labour's volunteer effort on election day. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. *[Interruption.]* Come on—behave.

The First Minister: I do not want to pile more misery on to Scottish Labour right now, so let me break this gently to Kezia Dugdale: I think that I am busy that day.

Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)

2. Ruth Davidson (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the First Minister when she will next meet the Secretary of State for Scotland. (S4F-02754)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I have no current plans.

Ruth Davidson: We have just seen the First Minister gloating over the Scottish National Party's numbers going up in the polls. What concerns me more is, as she identified, a serious question about the numbers showing literacy standards going down in our schools.

On the campaign trail, each party is rightly talking about opportunities for our young people. The best way to increase opportunity is through a good education. However, we found out yesterday that literacy skills in our schools are getting worse, not better. At primary 4 and 7 and at secondary 2, standards in reading and writing have fallen over the past two years. Those who are being failed most are the children from the poorest backgrounds. That has happened entirely on the Scottish Government's watch. It is a scandal.

I know that, yesterday, the Scottish Government hastily put together a press release filled with action plans and improvement frameworks. Does the First Minister think that that is adequate to tackle what is becoming a crisis in school standards?

The First Minister: First, I genuinely thank Ruth Davidson for asking a serious question, because this is a serious matter. Just a few moments ago, I said in response to Kezia Dugdale that there is much to celebrate in Scottish education. I will always ensure that we take the opportunity to do that.

Let me make it absolutely and totally blunt that the results that were published yesterday are not good enough. As First Minister, I am determined that we improve them. We are determined not only to improve standards in our schools overall but to close the attainment gap between young people living in our least deprived areas and those living in our most deprived areas. That is one of the most sacred responsibilities of any Government and, as First Minister, it is one that I am personally passionate about.

Ruth Davidson was slightly unfair to describe yesterday's announcements by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning as "hastily" drawn up, because she will recall that a couple of months ago I announced the establishment of the Scottish attainment challenge, which is backed by extra funding of £100 million.

I personally know, as many of us do, the value of a good education. I am determined that my Government meets our responsibility to ensure that every single young person in our schools gets the best education.

Ruth Davidson: I hear what the First Minister is saying, but the problem is that I have heard it all before. This time last year, the Scottish survey's numeracy figures were published. They, too, showed that numeracy standards were going down and, guess what, the Scottish Government's response was—just like yesterday—to stick out a press release, promise a new action plan and hope that the story would go away. Those are sticking plaster solutions that are designed to get through a news cycle but, all the while, our classroom standards are declining.

In her press release yesterday, the First Minister pledged to study the best international practice. I can tell her what that international practice shows. It shows that, if parents and teachers are given more control over their schools, standards will rise. We need to cast off the one-size-fits-all, town-hall-knows-best approach and allow true diversity in the way that we teach our children.

I do not doubt the First Minister's intentions, but does she have the resolve to ditch the dogma and government by press release and undertake the genuine reforms that are needed?

The First Minister: I will say a number of things to Ruth Davidson.

The Government introduced the surveys so that we know what is happening in our schools and have the information that we need to improve it.

As Ruth Davidson knows, we have established the Scottish attainment challenge. We have also established the read, write, count campaign and the raising attainment for all campaign, which now covers 23 local authorities and 180 schools throughout our country. Although I agree with the premise of Ruth Davidson's question, she is being unfair to say that the Government has not been taking action to address the issue.

I say this with no defensiveness because the education of our young people is the most important responsibility of a Government: I am determined to ensure that we have the best standards in our schools for all our children. If improvements require to be made, we will seek to make them. As we seek to make those improvements—let me be very clear—no dogma, ideology or political considerations will get in the way of us doing what needs to be done on behalf of the children of Scotland.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Presiding Officer, you will know that a number of the workforce of Tullis Russell in your constituency reside in my constituency. Will the First Minister update the Parliament on what action the Scottish Government is taking to support the people who are affected by Tullis Russell's move into administration?

The First Minister: Presiding Officer, I know that you will be particularly interested in the answer to that question.

The announcement by Tullis Russell earlier this week that the company had gone into administration is a devastating blow for Fife, particularly for the company's employees. Our thoughts are with them and their families at this very difficult time.

The same day, the Scottish Government announced the establishment of a task force that will be jointly convened by the Deputy First Minister and the leader of Fife Council. The Deputy First Minister visited the site on Tuesday to meet managers and staff and to underline the Scottish Government's commitment to assisting all those who are affected.

That task force will consider all options and possibilities for finding a buyer. We do not underestimate the challenges that lie ahead, but the Government will make every effort to provide all assistance to those who are affected. That is a cast-iron commitment that I give to the chamber.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S4F-02753)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Matters of importance to the people of Scotland.

Willie Rennie: I thank the First Minister for the efforts that she and John Swinney are making on Tullis Russell. My wife was made redundant from the company on Monday, and I know that the workers at the plant are appreciative of the Government's efforts.

The First Minister might think that she has answered the question on a second referendum, but it is clear that she could make a statement here and now that, in the next session of the Scottish Parliament, there will not be another referendum. Why can she not simply say that?

The First Minister: I think that I have made it absolutely crystal clear.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): No, you have not.

The Presiding Officer: Order.

The First Minister: Unless there is some change to the circumstances that prevailed during the previous referendum, when the people of Scotland debated and decided the issue, there will be no proposal for another referendum. That is the first point.

The second point is a fundamental, democratic point that I would have thought the leader of the party with the word “Democrat” in its name would be able to grasp. If the Scottish National Party ever proposes in a manifesto a second referendum, that, in and of itself, will not bring about a referendum. People in Scotland will first have to vote for that manifesto and give the SNP sufficient numbers to get the legislation through the Parliament. That is democracy. The decision ultimately lies with the people of Scotland. What is this problem with democracy that the other parties appear to have developed?

Willie Rennie: The problem with that answer is that, in the biggest democratic experience of our life, last September, we quite clearly heard the First Minister saying that there would not be another referendum for a lifetime. This is the neverendum that we warned about. We saw the consequences of the whole machinery of government being focused on the referendum for the last three years. The national health service and the police bear witness to that problem. *[Interruption.]*

We have seen the long period of political uncertainty in Quebec and the economic consequences of that, too. That is why people are concerned about the issue—they are concerned about it on the doorsteps.

Members: No, they are not.

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Willie Rennie: The First Minister could make it quite clear today. It is very simple. We are not even asking her to rule it out for a lifetime—just rule it out for the next session. That is what we are asking for. Why can she not do that?

The First Minister: Willie Rennie talks about Quebec and neverendums. What he does not tell people is that, although there have indeed been two referendums in Quebec, they were 15 years apart, and the last one was 20 years ago. That is not really the picture that he paints.

If the people of Scotland want a referendum to be ruled out for a generation, a lifetime or 10 lifetimes, that is exactly what will happen, because the people of Scotland are in charge. That is the fundamental principle. I do not know how many doors Willie Rennie has knocked on during this campaign—

Willie Rennie: Quite a lot.

The First Minister: I am sure that it is quite a lot. What people are talking to me about on the doorsteps and on the streets of Scotland is not another referendum. The concerns that they are raising are about the cuts that Willie Rennie's party, hand-in-hand with the Tories, has imposed over the past five years. What they want in this

election is a party that will stand firmly and squarely against austerity. That party is the SNP.

Dungavel Detention Centre (Inspection)

4. Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what recent communications there have been between the Scottish Government and the Home Office regarding an independent inspection of Dungavel detention centre. (S4F-02756)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The Scottish Trades Union Congress, the Church of Scotland, the Catholic Church, the Muslim Council of Britain and the Scottish Refugee Council have all requested an urgent collective meeting with detainees at Dungavel, which the Home Office has thus far refused.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners' Rights wrote to the Home Secretary about the situation at Dungavel on 26 March, urging her to grant permission for the visit requested. As of this morning, we have not yet received a response to the cabinet secretary's letter.

Christine Grahame: The denial of access to those groups and the delayed publication of the report by HM inspectorate of prisons following an inspection in February is of great concern, with disturbing reports of hunger strikes, lengthy detentions with no notice of when they will end and transfer at a moment's notice. Those are surely matters of urgency.

Does the First Minister consider that denial of access and delay has something to do with awkward truths during a general election campaign, when convicted criminals in our prisons have the protection of human rights while people whose only crime is to seek asylum in the United Kingdom have next to none?

The First Minister: I very much share Christine Grahame's concerns. We can only imagine the desperation of people who are detained, often far from home, with no time limit on their detention and no idea of when they might be released.

It is important to say that to seek asylum is a right—it is not a crime. That is why the Scottish Government supports the recommendations of the all-party groups on refugees and on migration in their recent joint “Report of the Inquiry into the Use of Immigration Detention in the United Kingdom”, that

“There should be a time limit of 28 days on the length of time anyone can be held in immigration detention”

and that

“The presumption ... should be in favour of community-based resolutions.”

That is also why the social justice secretary has urged the Home Secretary to allow the STUC and the churches access to Dungavel to meet detainees and hear their concerns.

The fact that we are in the run-up to a general election should not make any difference to the exercising of anybody's human rights, particularly when we are talking about the human rights of some of the most vulnerable people in the country.

Public Expenditure

5. Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what level of public expenditure the Scottish Government considers necessary in order to end austerity. (S4F-02757)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Austerity will end when Westminster stops making cuts—when it stops targeting the most vulnerable in our society and when it stops holding back economic growth for the sake of political dogma. That is exactly what the Scottish National Party proposes in this election. We propose an end to cuts and modest spending increases in each year of the next Parliament, which will see the deficit reduce and also free up at least an additional £140 billion to invest in skills, infrastructure, our national health service and measures to protect the vulnerable and lift people out of poverty.

Malcolm Chisholm: I am sure that the First Minister would like to end austerity, although I advise her to dump full fiscal autonomy in that case. However, is not her whole strategy based on distorting and misrepresenting Labour's fair plan to end austerity, which the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said will deliver more spending at the end of the next Parliament than her proposals? Is she not ashamed of the nauseating rubbish that we have heard from her MSPs for months about Labour and Tory spending plans being the same?

The First Minister: The slight problem that Malcolm Chisholm has in citing the IFS is that Ed Miliband said last week after the IFS report was published that it was wrong. He said that he disagreed with it for three different reasons. He said that it underestimated the scale of the cuts that Labour wanted to make.

It is not just me who has caused the problems for Scottish Labour's attempts to pretend that it is anti-austerity; it was Ed Miliband and Ed Balls who slapped down Jim Murphy and said that, regardless of what he says, he will not be writing the budget and yes there will be cuts under Labour.

The choice for people in Scotland is clear. If they want continued austerity, they have a choice of three parties: Labour, the Tories or the Liberals. If they want an end to austerity and spending

increases to help the most vulnerable and protect our public services, the only choice is the SNP.

Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Is the First Minister aware of the recent study by the centre for macroeconomics, which found that two thirds of economists who were surveyed disagreed that the coalition policies had had a positive effect on the economy? Given that the Labour Party, despite Malcolm Chisholm's protestations, is also wedded to a cuts agenda, does the First Minister agree that we need a strong team of SNP MPs who will end the austerity obsession at Westminster?

The First Minister: Yes, I agree with that. However respected the economists might be—we all heard Paul Krugman, who is a very respected economist, criticise Labour yesterday for being so weak when it comes to austerity—we know from the experience of speaking to our constituents how damaging the austerity agenda has been. It has pushed children into poverty; it is undermining our public services; and it is holding back the growth in our economy.

We need an end to cuts and an alternative to austerity. If people in Scotland want to ensure that they have MPs in the House of Commons arguing for that, they need to vote SNP and send a massive team of SNP MPs to Westminster.

Gavin Brown (Lothian) (Con): Approximately how much additional public expenditure is the Scottish Government calling for in 2015-16?

The First Minister: As Gavin Brown will be aware, our own budget is going up by, I think, £600 million in this financial year. We have said very clearly that, over the lifetime of the next Parliament, our alternative to austerity will free up £140 billion to invest in the NHS, lift people out of poverty and get growth in our economy. That is the choice that people have. If they want continued austerity, they can choose between Labour, its pals the Tories and their pals the Liberal Democrats; if they want an end to austerity, they need to vote SNP.

Single Application Form System

6. Alex Fergusson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's position is on reports of issues relating to the new single application form information technology system. (S4F-02762)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): This is the first year of the new payment system for the more complex common agricultural policy. Although the core of the new system is working well, with 17,000 farm businesses having successfully registered on it, we are aware that some users have experienced issues in the application process. Indeed, other European

Union countries have experienced similar problems.

Information technology staff are monitoring the system constantly and working hard to fix issues to ensure that the new system works well. The Government's processing team is also happy to support applicants who encounter difficulties, and we have extended the deadline for the submission of single application forms by one month, to 15 June, to allow more time for people to get used to the system and the rules of the new CAP programme.

In addition, we recognise that online applications do not suit everyone, so paper applications are still welcome.

Alex Fergusson: I appreciate the First Minister's response, but I genuinely worry about the information that she is being given, because the fact is that the online system has already cost more than £130 million, which is more than twice the original estimate, and it just is not working. Frankly, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Food and Environment has admitted defeat by extending the application deadline by a month. Agents have given up on the system and are now having to photocopy paper application forms because the Government has run out of new ones. Just last weekend, we learned that around 200 Government employees who were working on the new system had been sacked and replaced by inexperienced agency staff, many of whom are on tier 2 visas. This shambles—that is what it is—is happening on her cabinet secretary's watch, but Scotland's farmers will pay the price. Quite simply, what will the First Minister do to get a grip on the situation?

The First Minister: I do not accept that characterisation of the issues that are involved, although I accept that there are issues, and we are working to address them.

On the issues around visas, the member should be aware that there has been extensive engagement with the Home Office on that and its investigations have found no evidence to support the allegations that have been made.

On the wider issues that Alex Fergusson raises, 17,000 farm businesses have registered successfully on the system, although we understand that some users are experiencing issues in the application process. That is not unique to Scotland. Other European Union countries, including England and Wales, are experiencing similar problems. We are working to address the issues and we will continue to do so. I know that the cabinet secretary would be happy to meet Alex Fergusson, if he wants to take me up on that offer, to sit down and discuss the issues and the feedback that he is getting from his

constituents. We are determined to resolve the issues, and Richard Lochhead is working hard to do so.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I, too, welcome the fact that farmers and crofters have been given extra time to fill in what are incredibly complex forms and that, to date, there is a commitment that the payments will be made on time. Everybody in the industry welcomes that, I think. However, will the First Minister commit to personally investigate and to ask for a high-level inquiry into why repeated warnings that the process was botched and was going to fail were not acted on, which has led to huge stress and uncertainty among our farming and crofting communities? Will she also investigate why the cost has more than doubled? That is just for the administration of the system, never mind the extra resource that will have to go in to ensure that the payments are made on time.

The First Minister: I thank Sarah Boyack for her question and for the way in which she asked it. She is right to point to the sensible move that has been made to extend the timescale, and she is absolutely right to point to the fact that the commitment has been given that payments will be made on time. If there are particular issues that Sarah Boyack or any member from across the chamber wants me and the cabinet secretary to look into in more detail, we are happy to do that. We are determined to address and resolve the issues that are being raised, and we will continue to take all appropriate action to do so.

Living Wage

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-12938, in the name of Neil Findlay, on expanding coverage of the living wage. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament understands that 427,000 Scots earn less than the living wage, which is currently set at £7.85 per hour, including 18% of workers across the Lothian region; considers that low pay and job insecurity are major factors contributing to in-work poverty, and notes calls for the Scottish Government to provide guidance to public sector organisations advising them that they can ensure that the living wage is paid by giving due consideration to pay rates while assessing a company's general approach to recruitment and staff engagement at the selection stage of any contract.

12:34

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): More than 414,000 Scots, many of them working in this city and 16,000 of them in my county of West Lothian, are paid below the living wage of £7.85 an hour. That represents 20 per cent of our workforce. For those workers, low pay and job insecurity act like a cancer, eating away at them and impacting on every aspect of their lives, including their health, diet, housing, relationships and general wellbeing, as well as the wellbeing of their family and their community.

When low pay is coupled with zero-hours job insecurity, the situation is made dramatically worse. If someone does not know how many hours they will be working and how much pay they will receive, how on earth can they plan their life and their budget, pay their bills and provide for their family? The combination of low pay, job insecurity and the attack on the benefits safety net has resulted in the growth in payday lenders, food banks and in-work poverty.

Low pay and job insecurity are bad not just for our people but for our economy and the cohesion of wider society. The huge concentration of wealth in so few hands across Scotland and the United Kingdom is even more galling. Only last week, *The Sunday Times* rich list showed how the very wealthiest in our country have doubled their wealth in the past 10 years while the rest of the people have experienced a real-terms cut in income. As policy makers, the challenge for us is what we do about those things, because at all levels of government there are things that can and should be done. Yes, there are European Union rules, and yes, employment law is reserved, but we in this Parliament are not powerless to act, and we have a duty to act.

The Scottish Government said that it would produce statutory guidance on the living wage when the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Bill was passed in 2014, yet here we are a year later and no statutory guidance has been produced. The Scottish Government continues to hide behind EU advice and new EU directives as a reason to delay issuing that guidance. However, as with any EU advice, it is what we ask and how we ask it that determines what advice is given. If we ask whether we can force companies to pay the living wage in publicly procured contracts, we are likely to get a negative response, but if we ask how we can use public procurement to ensure that the living wage is paid in publicly procured contracts, we are likely to get a very different response. I think that that gets to the nub of the issue.

After eight years, it is my view that, rather than being inventive, enthusiastic and evangelical about extending the living wage, the Scottish Government has had to be forced to act on the issue at every stage.

The Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities (Keith Brown): Is Neil Findlay aware that Labour's manifesto no longer talks about making the living wage mandatory or about insisting that it is paid, even in procurement contracts? Instead, it says that Labour will try to promote the living wage. Is Labour also cowed by EU advice?

Neil Findlay: I can assure the minister that there is lots in the Labour manifesto to ensure that the living wage is extended. I will come on to that.

The Scottish Government's delay—its failure—has affected 39,000 Scots. The Scottish Parliament information centre estimates that 147,000 Scottish jobs are created through Government procurement and that 39,000 of them pay less than the living wage. If the Scottish Government had issued statutory guidance, those 39,000 workers could have been £2,600 a year better off. What a difference that would have made to families struggling to pay their bills.

In February, the Scottish Government issued not statutory guidance but a policy note in which it finally conceded that fair pay can be a consideration in contract weighting. Will the Government now apply that weighting to all its contracts to ensure that fair pay and fair employment practices are given significant weighting in all contract tendering? I hope that the minister will answer that question when he replies to the debate.

Will the Government now fund councils properly to ensure that that weighting can be rolled out across the public sector? Will the Government go back to the EU to ask a different question to see how we can expand the coverage of the living

wage? Will the Government make it clear to its agencies that they have to end situations such as that at TerraQuest, a contractor for Disclosure Scotland, which is paying just £7.10 an hour to workers who are held for years on temporary contracts? Will the Government end the use of the so-called “fiddle clause” by management at VisitScotland and National Museums Scotland, which prevents the payment of the full living wage to staff in those organisations?

I have no doubt that the minister will mention the Scottish living wage accreditation scheme, which has accredited 186 employers. I congratulate each and every one of those employers, but there are 335,000 private sector businesses in Scotland, so the accredited employers that are signed up at the moment represent 0.05 per cent of Scottish private sector businesses, which is hardly a revolution in the workplace. Indeed, maybe the minister could boost the total by one by signing up himself.

In its first year, a Labour Government will, through make work pay contracts, give tax rebates to businesses that have signed up to pay the living wage. It will also require publicly listed companies to report on whether they pay the living wage.

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (Ind): In relation to the demand for the Scottish Government to introduce the living wage, what would raising the national minimum wage to £8 an hour in 2020 do for many low-paid workers? Surely the Labour Party would be more honest to say that the national minimum wage should become the living wage.

Neil Findlay: I think that Mr Wilson and I absolutely share that ambition.

Alongside many other policies in our manifesto, our proposals will change the lives of working people. For example, we propose an end to zero-hours exploitation; an end to tribunal fees; the establishment of a Scottish hazards centre; the creation of a future fund for young people; the introduction of new legislation on corporate homicide and fatal accident inquiries; an end to agency exploitation; action on umbrella companies; an inquiry into blacklisting; and a commitment to build a fairer deal for the care sector. Alongside the living wage proposals, that is a major package of measures to improve the rights of workers across Scotland. I look forward to support from Mr Wilson and others when the Labour Government introduces all those measures after 7 May.

12:41

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I thank Neil Findlay for again raising this very important issue.

I welcome any moves to reduce in-work poverty. Clearly, every employer has a moral duty to pay employees enough for them to live on. I think that we can be encouraged that many more employers are now accredited living wage employers, and I am sure that there are others who are paying the living wage but who have not sought accreditation—that probably includes me.

We can also be encouraged that the public in Scotland seem very aware of the concept of the living wage, with nearly 90 per cent saying that they have heard of it. By comparison, the figure for the United Kingdom is 80 per cent.

I fully support rolling out the living wage as far as we possibly can. There has been significant progress with public contracts. I gather that both the new ScotRail franchise and the Scottish Government’s catering contract ensure that all staff get the living wage, as they should.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Will the member join me in congratulating Labour-led Stirling Council, which this month introduced an £8 minimum wage for all its workers?

John Mason: I am delighted that councils are taking the lead. Glasgow City Council has certainly taken the lead, too, which is great. However, my main argument is that we need to worry a bit more about the private sector, because it is falling behind.

The motion talks about ensuring that the living wage is paid, and that is where we hit problems. My understanding is that we cannot make payment of the living wage a mandatory requirement in procurement, although in their procurement strategies public bodies will have to make a statement of their general policy on the payment of the living wage.

The living wage is a good concept and I certainly support it, but I wonder whether the motion somewhat overstates its importance, as if it was the only or best answer to the problem of low pay. The reality is that the key piece of legislation on unacceptably low pay is not legislation on the living wage; it is legislation on the statutory minimum wage.

At the end of the day, the living wage will always be a voluntary device, and we have to think of imaginative ways of making this less voluntary and more of a requirement. That is why I lodged my amendment to Mr Findlay’s motion. The motion really deals only with public sector contracts and with who has the power to insist on conditions.

Neil Findlay: Will the member take an intervention?

John Mason: I am sorry, but I have taken an intervention already.

Mr Findlay mentioned 335,000 private sector employers, but what about all the employers who do not have public sector contracts and who may never have any interest in them? Is it okay for them to keep on paying less than the living wage? No, it is not.

I am happy to give credit to the Labour Government at Westminster that introduced the statutory minimum wage, but I suspect that Mr Findlay might be somewhat embarrassed that Labour Governments thereafter left it at such a low level. It is in relation to topics such as this one that SNP members of Parliament at Westminster could give a minority Labour Government a bit more backbone. We know that Mr Findlay and many of his colleagues are not happy with how far to the right Labour has moved under Tony Blair and others, and I very much hope that, after next Thursday, we will see a more progressive grouping in London than Labour on its own seems able to offer.

I accept that some smaller employers such as pubs might struggle to pay all staff a living wage, but I think that the answer to that is to target support at those employers—as has been done with the small business bonus scheme—rather than allowing all businesses to pay low wages.

Whether or not Westminster increases the statutory minimum wage, let us have that power transferred here. It seems that there is a greater appetite in the two main parties here to seriously tackle low pay.

I very much support the roll-out of the payment of the living wage on a voluntary basis, but that will always be second best when compared with a decent statutory minimum wage.

12:45

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this short but important debate. I will focus mainly on women and in-work poverty. I hope that there is a broad consensus across Parliament in support of the living wage.

I begin by recognising the progress that has already been made. I am glad that the Scottish Government has reaffirmed its commitment to supporting the living wage in principle through its aim to encourage all public sector bodies to pay their employees at least the living wage.

I welcome the inclusion of a question on workforce matters when procurement contracts for catering on Scottish Government premises are being considered, especially as the majority of those employed in the catering industry are women. That is an encouraging sign and I hope that the Scottish Government will continue to

encourage more employers to adopt that approach wherever possible.

I was particularly interested to see the findings of the working together review, which recommended that the Scottish Government work closely with trade unions to achieve fairer employment practices. I hope that the fair work commission will consider that at its first meeting.

However, a lot of work still needs to be done. As my colleague Neil Findlay said, nearly half a million Scots are paid less than the living wage. In Renfrewshire, almost one in five working-age adults are paid less than the living wage. The Scottish Government's latest report on poverty, which was published last month, showed that 22 per cent of children were in relative poverty in 2012-13. That was the first increase in child poverty after decades of progress in reducing it. There has also been a marked increase in the number of Scots experiencing in-work poverty. We should all be ashamed of those things. If we are serious about attempting to alleviate poverty, promoting the adoption of the living wage will be essential.

Scottish Government research into poverty has also revealed that although relative poverty has decreased, the poverty that remains has become deeper and more entrenched. Young mothers and single parents, of whom a disproportionate number are women, are more likely to be in poverty than the average person in Scotland.

We know that poverty is not caused simply by unemployment. Almost 60 per cent of children in poverty in Scotland live in working households, and 50 per cent live in households where at least one adult is in full-time employment.

The hourly rate of pay, the number of hours worked, the income gained or lost through taxation and welfare reforms have been identified as key factors in influencing in-work poverty. Also important is the ability of families to balance work and caring responsibilities—again, women are disproportionately affected—as families across Scotland struggle to meet the cost of childcare, which continues to rise much faster than take-home pay.

In Scotland, 22.4 per cent of women earn less than the living wage compared with 13.9 per cent of men. The figure rises to as high as 72 per cent in the hospitality sector, and is 43 per cent in the retail sector and 33 per cent in administrative roles—sectors in which, again, there is a disproportionate concentration of women.

Across all sectors in Renfrewshire, a woman working full time can expect to earn on average only 79 per cent of the median full-time earnings for a man. That is simply not fair. Introducing a

living wage across all industries in Scotland would go some way to address that gender divide.

To summarise, the scandal of low pay has a direct and measurable impact on the prevalence of child poverty and in-work poverty, which—again—disproportionately affects women. Women are less likely than men to be paid the living wage, and the sectors that are least likely to pay the living wage are those in which the greatest number of working women are concentrated.

The widespread adoption of the living wage is the first step that we need to take in addressing those problems. I hope that the Scottish Government will lead by example, by giving serious consideration to the payment of the living wage when choosing suppliers in public procurement and by encouraging private sector employers to always pay the living wage where possible.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Due to the number of members who have indicated that they would like to speak in the debate, I am minded to accept a motion from Neil Findlay, under rule 8.14.3, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*Neil Findlay.*]

Motion agreed to.

12:50

Gavin Brown (Lothian) (Con): I congratulate Neil Findlay on bringing this debate to the chamber. We have debated the living wage in the chamber a number of times, and I am sure that we will do so again, but today's debate is slightly different in that Mr Findlay has chosen to focus specifically on the Scottish Government's procurement guidance to public sector organisations. I will therefore concentrate my remarks on that guidance and address my comments in the main to the cabinet secretary, Keith Brown, who I know has a bit of a reputation for listening to Opposition members. I will attempt to be as constructive as possible with regard to the guidance that has been published and the statutory guidance that I understand will come out later this year.

At present, there is a policy note from February that outlines as best it can to public sector organisations the routes that they ought to follow as and when they include questions on workforce matters and when they intend to use workforce matters as one of the criteria on which to base their procurement contracts. The guidance is fine as far as it goes, but if the statutory guidance is going to work and is to achieve the Scottish Government's policy objective of increasing the

number of contracts that include the living wage, some pretty substantial changes will be needed in future. I understand that a consultation is ongoing, and that might well tease out some of those issues.

The guidance is not as clear as it needs to be if it is to bring about specific action. One paragraph in particular jumped out at me. Paragraph 18 states:

"Public bodies are asked to note the advice ... wherever it is legally possible to do so"—

without giving too much of a definition of what is "legally possible"—and then goes on to say:

"If you are in any doubt as to whether adopting the measures proposed are legally possible you should take appropriate legal advice."

Of course, there is nothing wrong with saying that, but it raises a policy issue. If the risk and the obligation to seek legal advice are passed down the way to other public sector organisations, some of them will not do that and, instead, will either take the risk-free option of not including a question on workforce matters in their procurement exercise or take a very cautious attitude towards the matter. After all, no public sector organisation wants to get this wrong. The bottom line is that, if an organisation gets it wrong, it will probably be sued and end up paying out for legal bills as well as paying compensation and damages, none of which helps with paying the living wage.

Some leadership from the Scottish Government is needed on this matter, partly because it is the central Government but, more important, because it has more experience of contracting than many public sector bodies, and it can pass that experience on to those bodies. In addition, because the Scottish Government has a greater legal resource and greater budgets for seeking legal advice, it is in a stronger position to get as much legal advice as possible compared with one of the smaller councils or public sector bodies, which will want to follow the guidance but might fear the consequences of doing so.

The statutory guidance that is to be published must be as clear as possible. It is good that the example in relation to the catering contract is set out in annex A of the policy note, but we need to see not just one example of a Scottish Government contract, but as many as possible, because those examples will enable public sector organisations to have a clear focus on the sorts of questions that they are entitled to ask—the ones that are completely legally safe—so that they can have a simple idea of how workforce matters can be weighted. We know that, for catering contracts, the weighting is 10 per cent, but that is just one example, and a greater spread of advice in that respect would be helpful to public sector

organisations. It would also be helpful if the Scottish Government could provide a definition of the phrase

“wherever it can be deemed relevant”

through an illustrative—if not exhaustive—list of examples. We need a list of as many definitions as possible, including what is meant by “proportionate” and “place of ... performance”.

As my time is up, I will end my comments there. I hope that the Government will take what I have said on board to ensure that the policy objective is more likely to be achieved when the statutory guidance is published.

12:55

Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): The living wage is about dignity and security—on that I agree with Neil Findlay. I thank him for bringing this debate to the chamber, because it gives us another opportunity to expose Labour’s position on the living wage. I will follow that up in a minute.

Only action that is both promised and delivered will make the difference. The number of accredited living wage employers now stands at more than 180, with a target of 500. In fact, I am one of those employers.

Given all the commitments that we have heard from Labour today, I have to ask why the Labour Party did not support the devolution of all employment laws and rights in the Smith commission. It did not do that—and that baffles me. Time after time, it comes back to the Scottish Parliament to have the same debate and make the same commitments, but when the chance comes up to make a real commitment, the Labour Party does not take it.

The previous Executive did nothing in eight years to encourage or implement the living wage, whereas the current Scottish Government has implemented the living wage in all of its departments and agencies and is working hard with public contractors and employers through the living wage accreditation scheme, which is something that Neil Findlay would rather talk down than talk up. The Scottish Government is also establishing a fair work convention, and is working with the Scottish Trades Union Congress to realise its aspiration of decent work and dignified lives. The Government will issue the statutory guidance that is being called for, which is something that the Labour Executive never did. At this point, I must thank Alex Thomson from “Channel 4 News” for exposing the rank hypocrisy of a party that promises everything in campaigns, but delivers nothing in government.

What the people of Scotland have to decide now is whom they trust. Do they trust those who do not take the opportunity provided by the Smith commission to devolve employment rights and laws to Scotland? Do they trust a party that promises everything on zero-hours contracts but does not deliver?

That brings me back to Alex Thomson of “Channel 4 News”, who interviewed Ed Balls and Jim Murphy last week. Both were surrounded by young people with placards behind them saying “Ban ... zero hour contracts”. I agree with that, but those young people—the technicians involved in the event in question—were on zero-hours contracts themselves. They were working on the Labour Party’s campaign on zero-hours contracts, but it seemed that the two leaders—Ed Balls and Jim Murphy—had absolutely no idea.

Let us deal with the facts: Labour is a party that says one thing in a campaign but does not deliver and then has the audacity to do interviews while surrounded by young people on exploitative zero-hours contracts. If there are zero-hours contracts, are they exploitative or not exploitative? Which zero-hours contracts are good and which are bad? Labour is absolutely confused on this issue.

I come back to the issue of trust and the question of whom we trust. Who will the Scottish people trust when they go to the polls next week? Do they trust talk or obfuscation? Do they trust Ed Balls, who can stand there surrounded by young people on zero-hours contracts, or do they trust the SNP to deliver their voice to Westminster and, in turn, bring these rights to the Scottish Parliament and ensure that we do the right thing for the people of Scotland?

Neil Findlay and I agree that Scotland should have the power over such matters. He just does not agree that Scotland has the ability to take that power.

13:00

Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab): Just a few moments ago, we heard the First Minister criticise the Labour Party for a lack of positive ideas, but the speech that we have just heard might count as one of the most negative ever made in a members’ business debate.

I congratulate Neil Findlay on bringing this motion for debate and especially for doing so at such a critical time. Next week, voters in Scotland will decide what kind of Government they want for the wider United Kingdom, and it is on issues such as the living wage that there are choices to be made. It is easy to forget that it is only 20 years since the very idea of putting general wage levels into statute was novel and controversial. Indeed, it

was opposed by some and not supported by others.

Over the years, progressive Governments had imposed wage regulation in sectors such as agriculture, where too many employers paid poverty wages and blocked trade union efforts to represent working people, but the wider attacks on trade union organisation and free collective bargaining by Conservative Governments in the 1980s showed that that limited form of intervention was no longer enough. Labour recognised the need for a national minimum wage. In fact, it was one of our first priorities—one of the first things that we did—after we turfed out the Conservative Government in 1997.

John Wilson: Does Lewis Macdonald accept that the national minimum wage was not a new concept in Europe and that several European countries had adopted the national minimum wage at higher rates than the Labour Party introduced in 1999?

Lewis Macdonald: We have just heard a speech from a Scottish National Party member saying that Labour does nothing when it has the chance. The national minimum wage is absolute proof that the opposite is true and that it is Labour that does not talk but actually does. It was a Labour Government that was the first in Britain to introduce the national minimum wage, and it is right that a top priority for Labour if it wins next week's election will be to build on that policy.

Although the national minimum wage has not ended poverty, it has made a huge difference to the lives of millions of people. Along with tax credits for the low-paid, it has helped many working people escape the poverty trap. Wage regulation can do so again, if that is what people vote for next week. We have rightly gone beyond the national minimum wage to make the case for a living wage and to seek to roll that out as widely as possible. Again, it will not solve every problem, but it makes ending poverty and the need for food banks that much easier to achieve.

I am delighted that, in 2012, Aberdeen City Council in my region adopted the living wage as a minimum hourly rate not just for hundreds of permanent staff who had previously been paid less but for those employed on an occasional basis. Sport Aberdeen and Bon Accord Care have followed that good example, and Aberdeenshire Council decided to bring in the living wage in 2013, backdating it to 1 April 2012, which gave a very welcome lump sum to the lowest paid. The difference for the lowest-paid staff in Aberdeen City Council as a result of the introduction of the living wage three years ago is equivalent to an additional £1,400 a year for a full-time employee.

However, introducing a living wage for public sector workers alone misses part of the point of wage intervention, which is to support those most in need of legal protection, because of the jobs they do or the lack of trade union organisation in their sectors. Enlightened employers in the third sector also pay the living wage. For example, Aberdeen YMCA does so, because it is ethically the right thing to do, and so, too, do highly competitive commercial concerns such as BrewDog and Aberdeen Asset Management. They, too, know that well-paid staff are ultimately good for the bottom line.

Imposing the living wage as a condition of public sector contracts is not an add-on to a policy for public sector workers; it brings the living wage to bear where it can help the most. If it is good enough for public services and the best employers in the private sector, it should be good enough right across the economy. That is why Neil Findlay is right to press the Scottish Government to do more to ensure that private firms that seek public money meet the test of fair employment and fair pay—and to do that more quickly. I hope that the cabinet secretary will respond positively to the case that has been made for that today.

13:04

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I, too, thank Neil Findlay for giving us the opportunity to debate this important topic.

There is general agreement that the minimum wage has been a progressive step, despite the dire predictions that were made when it was introduced. However, it is set at too low a level. Surely a minimum wage should not be below the level of a wage that someone can live on. Often people on the minimum wage require help from the state to meet living costs and subsidies to help meet housing rents, and in effect, we make up the difference by subsidising high rents when pay is too low.

The Greens want the minimum wage to be raised to the level of the living wage, which is £7.85 an hour at present, and then raised to £10 per hour over a five-year period—although that might need to be revised, depending on what happens to average wages and living costs. According to the minimum income standards that have been calculated by Loughborough University, £9.20 an hour is the current figure for a socially acceptable standard of living in the UK.

A living wage will benefit those on low incomes and reduce dependence on loan sharks and payday lenders. After all, we need to bear in mind that the poorest people typically pay the highest interest charges, even though they are least able to afford them. Most of that increase in pay will be

spent back into the economy, because, as we know, people on low pay spend a higher proportion of their income. Sadly, they have little choice, as saving seems a distant dream.

State funding would be freed up for other uses when it was no longer required to subsidise employers who pay poor wages. Does it really make sense for shareholders to benefit from profits, when the companies' employees, who are so often responsible for making those profits, have not been paid a living wage? As well as practical action, we need a cultural shift, and I suggest that those shareholders who share our concerns should not accept their dividend if they do not know whether employees have been paid a living wage.

How many people now seriously oppose the minimum wage? When it was introduced, concerns were expressed that businesses would close down, employment would fall and so on, but it is now recognised that there are many advantages to having a better-paid workforce. Employers retain more staff, who feel motivated and valued, and productivity, which is a serious issue for this country, improves. We harm positive working relationships when people feel undervalued.

If we still believe that a particular sector needs or should benefit from public subsidy, we should look at that and perhaps provide direct financial assistance. In any case, I do not believe that Amazon needs public subsidy, and I would like to see that cash transferred into hundreds of thousands of small businesses, which could then take on an apprentice or pay their staff more. We need Amazon's taxes—and we need them in full—to contribute to a living wage. I suggest that, if the survival of a business depends on paying poverty wages, that business is not sustainable.

We need to examine whether there are companies in receipt of Government grants that do not pay a living wage and whether there are companies declaring big profits and sharing them out among a few shareholders when their staff are not being paid a living wage. Taxpayers in this country want to contribute to the good of society, not top up private profits, and all employees deserve the dignity of a living wage.

13:08

James Kelly (Rutherglen) (Lab): As other members have done, I thank Neil Findlay for his motion and for giving members the opportunity to take part in a debate that not only promotes the living wage but explores how it can be extended by Government and private companies.

As Neil Findlay said, 414,000 Scots are not being paid the living wage and there is no doubt

that people in many communities, including my constituency, are struggling with the cost-of-living crisis. That struggle is even greater if people are not being paid a proper wage. As Mary Fee outlined, unfortunately many women—more than 60 per cent of women—are not being paid the living wage. They have been hit harder.

There is an onus on us all—on Government, councils and businesses—to promote and try to extend the living wage. There is no doubt that there are twin advantages to that: it has advantages for individuals and businesses. People who are paid the living wage are taken up to a more adequate level of household income. Many people who are not in receipt of the living wage work in the retail sector, and are also living in some of our poorest accommodation. It becomes more difficult to bring up children and to ensure that they have a sound and solid education when there is not enough money coming into the house and people are not able to feed their family properly or heat their homes. We need to tackle those issues, so there is a need for leadership from businesses.

There are advantages to businesses that pay employees properly. Those employees will be more loyal to the company and more motivated, which brings reward in the shape of a more stable workforce. That, in turn, benefits the business by enabling it to operate more effectively. That is why, even in the football sphere, we have seen Heart of Midlothian Football Club taking the lead in Scotland by ensuring that all its employees will be paid the living wage. It is to be congratulated on that.

The Scottish Government could do more. Clearly, everyone who is covered by the public sector pay policy is paid the living wage, and that is welcome, but there are people working in Scottish Government locations including prisons who are not being paid the living wage. The cabinet secretary should commit to a review of all Scottish Government employees to explore where they are not being paid the living wage and to ensure that the living wage is extended.

The Procurement Reform (Scotland) Act 2014 was passed, but it is regrettable that more than a year down the line we still do not have statutory guidance. The Government has to show more political will; it is not good enough simply to hide behind European Union legal advice. We should look at what has been done in London; the living wage can be paid and there is a way of doing it by linking it to the performance of contracts.

Keith Brown: Does James Kelly acknowledge, as seems now to be acknowledged in the Labour Party manifesto, that the living wage cannot be mandated and that the London boroughs to which I think he is referring have also admitted, when

questioned, that they cannot insist on the living wage under EU law? Does he accept that position?

James Kelly: Every time the issue has been debated, the minister and his predecessors have hidden behind the legal advice. What I would like you to do, minister, is explore how you can take that legal position to the limit—because there is legal advice that shows you how to do it—and try to explore how to link the living wage to contracts. Even leaving aside the legal issue, you have not done enough, in my opinion, to make the contracts more robust: you have not implemented the statutory guidance.

I shall finish on this point, Presiding Officer. I genuinely believe that the Government needs to do more to promote the living wage and that it needs to look not just at the statutory guidance but at the contracts that are issued, so that we can get more of those 414,000 people on to the living wage and a decent standard of living.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members to speak through the chair and also to speak into their microphones, or the official reporters will be unable to pick up their remarks.

13:13

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (Ind): I congratulate Neil Findlay on securing the debate. It is always a timely reminder to have a debate on the living wage or on the national minimum wage because, as I said in my earlier intervention, the national minimum wage should be the living wage and not a false ceiling on what we intend to pay employees, no matter where they are employed. As James Kelly said, the 414,000 workers in Scotland who are not on the living wage also deserve that.

I thank Gavin Brown for his speech, which was one of the most positive Conservative Party contributions that I have heard in my time in Parliament. I hope that it is a welcome sign that the Conservative Party is moving towards accepting that the living wage should be advanced and supported. Employers sometimes cry out through the Confederation of British Industry against interventions such as the living wage, so I hope that his contribution will tell the CBI that it is a good and positive move to promote the living wage.

I am not sure whether Lewis Macdonald will consider this to be a negative contribution, but I have to remind members that the living wage is only part of an overall scheme of measures that can benefit people and raise them out of in-work poverty. While we talk about raising the living wage, there has been no mention of the tax credits and other benefits that workers rely on to

survive—and they are only surviving. To raise their pay to the living wage now might result in many of those workers being penalised at the end of the year by removal of the tax credits and benefits that they receive. When we talk about a living income, we have to bear in mind the other benefits that employees receive in relation to their survival.

Lewis Macdonald: John Wilson will recall that I mentioned precisely that point in my speech. The combination of the minimum wage, the living wage and tax credit support is critical. A Government that actually wants to achieve the desired objectives will make all the difference.

John Wilson: I accept that Lewis Macdonald agrees with my analysis.

While we talk about tax credits and other benefits, we must also consider the hours that employees are being offered. At present, when we talk about zero-hours contracts or short-term working contracts, we must remember that there are many workers in Scotland who are on five-hours-a-week contracts, 12-hours-a-week contracts and 16-hours-a-week contracts. The introduction of the living wage would not significantly raise weekly income levels for many of those employees. We also have to ensure that there is security of employment and that there is work for people to do.

On Government and local government contracts, I welcome the opportunity to consider what local authorities are doing throughout Scotland—especially the ones that have set up arm's-length external organisations. We should examine what those ALEOs are doing in relation to the living wage—whether they are encompassing the ideals that Neil Findlay has espoused today and ensuring that workers who want them are on full-time contracts and are being paid the living wage, as other council employees are. ALEOs should not be seen as a shorthand way to reduce the income levels of staff who are transferred to them.

I welcome the debate. I hope that we can move the overall debate forward and get to a situation in which the living wage is the national minimum wage and we can introduce a living wage that benefits everyone in society and takes people out of poverty, including in-work poverty.

13:18

The Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities (Keith Brown): I, too, congratulate Neil Findlay on securing the debate, which seeks to tackle low pay and job insecurity. Dealing with those issues is crucial to securing the Scottish Government's vision of a successful Scotland.

To that end, this morning, the Cabinet Secretary for Fair Work, Skills and Training attended the first meeting of the fair work convention, which is an independent body that will develop a blueprint for fair work best practices in Scotland, and will publish a fair work framework early next year.

We are already leading the way by doing all that we can, within the powers that we have, to ensure that as many people as possible benefit from the living wage.

James Kelly made a number of good points, especially in relation to why paying a living wage is in the interests of the employer in terms of recruitment, retention and productivity. An employer who pays a wage that people can live on will get more out of those people.

However, James Kelly also alleged that the Government has “hidden behind” the EU legislation. Let us look at who else has “hidden behind” the EU legislation. Glasgow City Council said:

“EU regulations do not allow the living wage as a mandatory requirement within our contracts”.

In response to freedom of information requests, Renfrewshire Council, West Lothian Council and Inverclyde Council all said that their contracts do not include a mandatory requirement that suppliers pay the living wage.

The London boroughs, which James Kelly mentioned,

“claim to ‘mandate’ the ... living wage”,

but they also say that

“procurement could potentially be of cross border interest [i.e. where either the EU procurement directives or EU Treaty principles apply] ... the requirement for LLW [London Living Wage] should not be made a pre-condition at the tender stage”.

There is a lot of such evidence, the most compelling of which is the fact that, despite many Labour spokespeople having been saying for quite some time that the EU legislation is a fig leaf to cover the fact that we do not want to pay the living wage—I suppose that that is the allegation—Labour’s own manifesto talks about promoting and not about mandating the living wage. Labour members should reconcile some of the rhetoric that we have heard today with that position, which we agree with and are doing a great deal to try to achieve.

Despite the imposition by London of pretty sharp reductions in the Scottish budget, we have taken steps to protect the pay of our lowest-earning public sector workers, which has included a commitment to support the living wage through our pay policy for the duration of this session of Parliament. Somebody mentioned the Abellio contract, which is the biggest contract that the

Scottish Government lets, involving £8 billion of public money. Not just everybody who is directly employed under that contract but every employee who is subcontracted for cleaning, catering or whatever is guaranteed to be paid the living wage.

We have provided further funding to the Poverty Alliance to promote take-up of the living wage accreditation initiative in every sector. Last month, the First Minister announced a new target for the Poverty Alliance of 500 accredited living wage employers by the end of March 2016. That follows the achievement of the target of 150 such employers eight months ahead of schedule. I understand that there are now more than 180 Scotland-based living wage accredited employers. That is a sign that employers are recognising the benefits that the living wage can bring to their staff and businesses. Consultants KPMG published a report on Monday that showed that Scotland is the most living wage aware region of the UK, with nine out of 10 people here having heard of the living wage. The report also confirms that Scotland has one of the highest proportions in the UK of earners who are paid above the living wage.

I agree with John Wilson that Gavin Brown made a very constructive point, which I undertake to look into. However, I do not think that we can give guidance on all eventualities in respect of the myriad of contracts that are let by public authorities, especially local authorities. Local authorities have legal teams, although I accept that they will not be as extensive as the Scottish Government’s legal resources. Councils are autonomous bodies and will, in certain circumstances, have to take legal advice to ensure that they are observing legal requirements. Nevertheless, I undertake to look into the matter.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Minister, when you turn away from your microphone it is difficult for the chamber to hear you.

Keith Brown: I apologise, Presiding Officer.

Members mentioned public procurement. In my view, promoting the living wage through public procurement is a weak alternative to having the powers over employment law that we asked the Smith commission to deliver—a plea that was not supported by other parties and which was vehemently and specifically opposed by the Labour Party. Nonetheless, it is right for us to expect that delivery of services to be of the highest quality, and that the people who deliver those services should offer their employees fair and equitable employment terms. As I said in an intervention on James Kelly’s speech, I believe that employees who are treated fairly will, in turn, deliver higher-quality service. As we implement the Procurement Reform (Scotland) Act 2014 and the EU procurement directives, we are focusing on using procurement as a lever for economic growth

by supporting a fairer Scotland, streamlining the public sector's dealings with business and adopting more efficient practices to secure best value for the public purse.

Neil Findlay: Will it now be standard practice for the Scottish Government to use contract weighting in every applicable contract in order to drive up fair pay?

I will address two other points, since I have the opportunity to do so. Will the minister look into the issue of TerraQuest, which is operating at Disclosure Scotland, paying poverty pay, and will he look at the "fiddle clause" that is being used by National Museums Scotland and VisitScotland?

Keith Brown: I ask Neil Findlay to write to me on those last two points, and I will respond specifically on them.

On his first point, as a number of members have asked us to do, we are pursuing every avenue that we can to achieve that. We have already had some success in our current contracts—I mentioned Abellio. We are looking at ways to say to people that we see workforce wellbeing as a very important part of the sustainability of a contract and that they should address that. We can do that in a number of ways. We do not want to be too prescriptive, but if it achieves the result that we want—which is not just payment of the living wage, as John Wilson said, but other aspects of employee wellbeing—we will take that opportunity.

Since February, we have been consulting on changes to the public procurement rules. The deadline for responses is today. As part of the process, we have sought views on the content of the statutory guidance that has been mentioned. In advance of that, we have published guidance on workforce matters in procurement, which shares the lessons from an approach that we piloted to encourage the living wage in our own contract for catering services. That offers practical guidance to purchasers on how and when workforce matters, including—to return to Neil Findlay's point—payment of the living wage, should be considered in the course of a public procurement exercise. That will inform the development of statutory guidance, which will—to respond to Gavin Brown's point—give as much surety, certainty and assurance as possible to other public procurers when they seek to do the same thing.

We have engaged key stakeholders on the published guidance note. I have spoken to the STUC, and we will engage further with it and others as we work to fast-track the guidance, so that we have it in place by the autumn.

I agree with the many other members who said that we must tackle low pay and job insecurity in Scotland as a key priority.

Council funding was raised by, I think, Neil Findlay. I did not see any amendment to our proposed budget or to the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2014 on how much more we should pay local government. Had we seen such an amendment, perhaps we would have attached more importance to the point that was made. I do not see a Labour manifesto commitment mandating a living wage, although I think that everyone expected that to come, given the rhetoric.

I do not think that we should forget that the change is due to the people. It is not just because of the SNP Government, but because times have changed and people are much more aware of how damaging low pay can be.

We could deal with the situation now, were the UK willing to give us not just the responsibility, but the power to take action. If it is willing to give us the power over the minimum wage, that would be the sole quickest way to deal with the scourge of low pay. That has been refused up until now. Despite that, I encourage public and private sector organisations to follow our lead, pay the living wage to their staff and consider how they can maximise the opportunities in their procurement exercises to promote fair employment practices and workforce matters, including the living wage in all relevant contracts.

13:26

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Contribution of Veterans

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):

Good afternoon, everyone. The first item of business this afternoon is a debate on motion S4M-13045, in the name of Keith Brown, on making the most of the contribution of veterans to Scotland. I call the Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities, Keith Brown, to speak to and move the motion. You have a generous 14 minutes, cabinet secretary.

The Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities (Keith Brown): Thank you, Presiding Officer.

In August last year, I appointed Eric Fraser as the first Scottish veterans commissioner—indeed, it was the first such post in the United Kingdom. With some reservations, which have subsequently receded, members across the chamber welcomed his appointment and adopted a non-partisan position on it that was in keeping with the real, genuine and tangible cross-party accord to provide the highest possible support and opportunities for our armed forces and our veterans and their families who choose to make Scotland their home.

Members recognised that the way in which public services and support for veterans were provided in Scotland was good but was developing and improving. However, I acknowledged, as others did, that more could, should and would be done to ensure that the services and support were as coherent and as good as they could be. We agreed that a commissioner could bring a holistic perspective to our and our partner organisations' policy development, challenging perceptions and bringing experience and independent views to bear on issues of importance to veterans, and holding those responsible to account in order to drive further improvements.

At the same time, the commissioner has a major part to play in promoting and highlighting the undoubted talents and skills of our strong and robust veterans community. That cohort of veterans is often an untapped resource that can and should offer so much to our communities, to employers and to Scottish society as a whole. When the commissioner, Eric Fraser, began his work he spent a considerable length of time engaging with a wide range of interests: policy teams in local government and the Scottish Government; providers of services that are accessed by veterans; veterans organisations; and, vitally, employers of veterans.

Crucially and rightly, in my opinion, Eric Fraser invested a lot of time in speaking to individual veterans and hearing about their real-life experiences and their opinions. Who better to articulate how veterans are treated on leaving the military and returning to civilian life? Who better to spell out the difficulties that they have faced in finding a home, establishing a business, getting a job, developing skills and ensuring that their families are settled? Who better, as well, to tell us what actually works in the real world, what needs to be improved and what needs to change?

As a result of those discussions and of a full and thorough examination of what is already in place, the commissioner published his first report, "Transition in Scotland", on 27 March 2015. He provided a copy of the report to Alex Fergusson as convener of the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on armed forces veterans, and members can find a copy of the report in the Scottish Parliament information centre. I congratulate the commissioner on the tremendous progress that he has made to date and I welcome his recommendations and findings, because they can help us further improve the support that we provide to veterans.

I was delighted that, to help the commissioner promote and publicise the report, Alex Fergusson very kindly hosted a reception here in Parliament on 1 April. Alex Fergusson, Eric Fraser and I—and, indeed, many of the MSPs who are here today—had the opportunity to meet key stakeholders, veterans and employers with a wide variety of experiences to share. I hope that, like me, all those who attended found the evening informative, inspiring and incredibly worth while. I can think of two particular suggestions that were mentioned to me and which we have taken up since then.

The reception focused on two main areas: employment and housing. I was delighted that Eric Fraser and Alex Fergusson spoke so warmly about the steps that the Scottish Government has taken to date in those areas and felt able to echo my very strong belief that veterans and their families are a considerable and sometimes underutilised asset to the country.

The vast majority of veterans make a seamless transition from the military into employment, into business and into civilian life. They have a considerable, formidable and enviable skill set, of which they are sometimes not as aware as they might be. They are leaders, they work well under pressure, they are adaptable and they are strategic problem solvers. They bring a range of real, tangible skills as drivers, doctors, nurses, clerks, information technology and communications experts, engineers and tradespeople—exactly what we are looking for in

modern Scotland. The skills that they have developed have been forged and tested in some of the most demanding situations imaginable and have not been found wanting.

During the reception, I met veterans who had established businesses and built successful careers in the public and private sectors and who gave their time freely in support of the third sector and their communities. They are, as we all are, fathers, mothers, friends and neighbours; they are an integral part of civic society. They live in our cities, our towns, our Scotland.

I met small and large employers with specific recruitment policies in place to maximise the use of the undoubted skills of veterans. I also met veterans who had found the whole experience of leaving the military daunting and difficult. It is vital that for the small number who require it, appropriate, effective and comprehensive support is readily available.

In my opinion, the commissioner's report captures all those views, experiences and opportunities. He has made recommendations on where we can work with a range of partners, such as local authorities and the Ministry of Defence, in order to further improve the support that is available to those leaving the armed forces who choose to make Scotland their home.

As I said a few moments ago, in broad terms I welcome all those recommendations and officials in the Scottish Government are looking in detail at what we can do to take them forward. In the meantime, I make the following specific observations about some of the main areas on which Eric Fraser focused. The first relates to housing. I agree entirely with the commissioner that service leavers who wish to settle in Scotland should be made aware of how housing legislation and systems work here. I should say, as I have said for a number of years, that I believe that the Ministry of Defence and the UK Government should ensure that, when somebody joins the armed forces, a plan should be started on day 1 for their employment, housing and health provision when they leave the service. We will continue to work closely with the UK Government to ensure that advice and briefings on housing and homelessness accurately reflect the position here in Scotland, so that service leavers who choose to settle here are aware of the differences in policy and approach and of where to go for assistance.

We have produced a tailored housing options leaflet entitled, "A Scottish housing guide for people leaving the armed forces and ex-service personnel", which provides information on housing options and where to go for further advice and support. The guide was widely distributed to the Ministry of Defence, including military bases in the

UK and abroad, as well as to advice and support agencies and social housing providers.

For our part, Scottish Government officials will continue to monitor and update any information available to ensure that it is accurate, informative and relevant. They will play their part in ensuring that the information gets to those who need it most.

Housing is and will remain a priority for this Government. Access to good-quality housing is a vital part of the Government's drive to secure economic growth, as well as to promote social justice, strengthen communities and tackle inequality. We recognise that some service leavers and ex-service personnel can face particular challenges in finding housing. We are committed to working with the commissioner and others to ensure that they are not disadvantaged by their service or the circumstances in which they find themselves because of that.

We wish to help social landlords understand their requirements and the flexibility that they have in allocating their houses. We published, "Social Housing Allocations: A Practice Guide", which includes guidance on housing issues for ex-service personnel and encourages social landlords to give fair and sympathetic consideration to applicants leaving the armed forces. The guide provides practical examples of approaches being used by landlords to manage allocations, including in relation to ex-service personnel.

In relation to employment, the "Transition in Scotland" report identifies a range of ways in which we and others—it also refers to the UK Government and the MOD—can help those who are leaving the armed forces to find a job, which is clearly one of the most crucial aspects of making a successful transition. My officials will explore further how best we might promote modern apprenticeships, placements and employer recruitment of service leavers and, crucially, refine, develop and improve the mechanisms for getting the right information and advice to the service leaver. Think for a moment about the advice available and the number of organisations that stand ready to help veterans. There are at least 400 charities, and provision on that scale can blind the person coming out to finding the right place for the best possible support.

I agree that the wealth of youth employment initiatives and opportunities that the Government supports and delivers through partners such as Skills Development Scotland should be clearly signposted to early service leavers and veterans. It is important that that group is aware of the range of offers and opportunities for them to make a successful transition to civilian life.

It is not clear that the support available via third sector organisations and charities is sufficiently well publicised, co-ordinated and aligned with the mainstream offers that are already available in Scotland via Skills Development Scotland and colleges, particularly for veterans under 25 years of age.

I agree that there are opportunities to better align, publicise and link to the network of veteran support services offered across Scotland, through my world of work and other partners' websites. My officials have discussed that with SDS, which has advised that it would be happy to work with partner organisations to fulfil that recommendation.

One thing that has struck me as very important over the years for which I have been responsible for veterans in the Government is that, very often, the transition to civilian life can be the most daunting thing that veterans have experienced, even including those very dangerous experiences that they may have had while in the armed forces. The prospect of having to be responsible for, first of all, getting a job, then sometimes getting a house, budgeting in that house and holding down a tenancy can be quite daunting for people who very often have had their accommodation, their food, their wage and their travel options provided—or at least organised—for them. That in itself can be a very worrying experience.

For those reasons, I think that the commissioner's recommendations are both timely and welcome. He identifies, quite rightly, the importance of getting the preparatory work done correctly before, and in the run-up to, leaving the armed forces. We do not have responsibility for that and, if I am honest, it has not always been easy to influence the MOD on that. It is not just me saying that; similar comments are being made in Wales and elsewhere. However, Eric Fraser has a lot of experience—I think that he was twice defence attaché in Washington and he has worked with the MOD. We hope very much that those links will help us to establish a more productive relationship in that regard.

Eric Fraser has identified a number of ways in which the Scottish Government, local authorities and the public, private and third sectors can and should play their part to ensure that the information and support that are provided at that crucial stage fully reflect the distinctive nature of devolved services in Scotland. I want to push forward that agenda. I will look to all strategic partners to play their full part and I have no doubt that they will. We may not get it completely right immediately and I do not pretend that we have it right just now. That is one of the reasons why I appointed the commissioner. It will take time and substantial effort will be required.

I congratulate Eric Fraser on his excellent report. It has struck the right balance between showcasing what is working well, what needs wider adoption and where gaps need to be filled. Crucially, it holds up veterans and their families as assets to business, to society and to Scotland. That key message, which was a central part of the reception that we held, must be recognised, endorsed and promoted. That is a challenge for me; for the Scottish Government; for the public and private sector, including large and small businesses; and for Scotland's ex-service charities.

The Labour Party amendment is well intentioned. The Scottish Government supports Poppyscotland and Legion Scotland's insult to injury campaign. Unlike other parties, we have included a specific pledge in our Westminster manifesto. We believe that those who have been injured in the service of our country should get the full value of war disablement pensions and we will work to ensure that that is not treated as income in the assessment of entitlement to other benefits.

However, I believe that the right way to address that situation is for the UK Government to align the war pensions scheme with the armed forces compensation scheme so that there is a fair and consistent approach. If we think for a second or two about somebody—perhaps a veteran in a care home in Scotland—who, for very legitimate reasons, was moved to somewhere in the rest of the UK and found that the entitlement that they had in Scotland did not transfer, that would be a real shock to the system. That is why I think that the situation is best dealt with by a joint approach.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): Does the minister recognise that Poppyscotland and the legion are calling not on the UK Government to realign pensions but specifically for the devolved Administrations, including the Scottish Government, to realign their policies on care charges? It is entirely a matter for devolved competence; it has nothing to do with pensions—it is all to do with whether we charge those pensions.

Keith Brown: I think that Ken Macintosh could not be more wrong. If he was aware of how the campaign started in the first place and the nature of the subsequent involvement of Legion Scotland and Poppyscotland in a campaign that started in London, he would know more about that.

I spoke to Poppyscotland this morning and it was very surprised by the amendment. There had been no approach or discussion by the Labour Party in advance of it.

The point that I was going to make is that we are willing to explore this. We want to take a fair and consistent approach. We are exploring with

the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities the options to create a fairer system for charging for social care. To accept Labour's amendment would mean passing on that cost to local authorities.

I think that we are trying to achieve the same thing and we have managed to get consensus in similar debates in the past. I know that that consensus was really valued by the veterans community so I appeal to the Labour Party—not right away, but during the course of the debate—to think about this.

I am happy to meet to discuss the issue further so that we can develop a joint approach, as I think that we can get to the right place where we all want to be. I do not, however, think that such an amendment to the motion would be useful, and I ask the Labour Party to consider—even at this late stage—not moving the amendment.

In conclusion, the issue is a challenge for me; for the Scottish Government; for the public and private sector, including large and small businesses; and for Scotland's ex-service charities, but we can and will rise to that challenge. It is the right thing to do for veterans and their families.

We should think of the vast majority of veterans not as posing a problem with regard to housing, coming back into society, health, education or employment, but as huge assets to our society who can offer a great deal. They themselves may sometimes not appreciate all the different skills and assets that they can bring to society, and it is down to us to ensure that that can be remedied. Veterans and their families, in light of what they have given, deserve nothing less, and I am happy to move the motion in my name.

I move,

That the Parliament commends the contribution that the armed forces and veterans make to life in Scotland; welcomes publication of the report, *Transition in Scotland*, by the Scottish Veterans Commissioner; recognises the challenges facing veterans transitioning to civilian life but believes that their training, skills, sense of duty and discipline mean that employers and companies benefit greatly from employing veterans, and seeks a coordinated approach, bringing together public and private sector stakeholders, in removing barriers to Scotland's veterans realising their full potential.

14:45

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): The care and treatment of our veterans are the manifestation of our humanity, and the way in which we treat those who gave all for their fellow countrymen and women, and the survivors and their families, declares the intent of our passion in society.

The United Kingdom armed forces covenant places a duty on all of us to care for the survivors,

the families and the bereaved. The veterans commissioner's "Transition in Scotland" report shows that, although there are issues to be identified and work to be done, our health services, housing agencies, the third sector and voluntary organisations play a crucial role in enabling people to make the transition from military personnel to civilians. We are rightly grateful for the dedication that they show to making that transition as smooth as possible.

Scottish Labour will support the Scottish Government's motion at decision time tonight. The motion, in the name of the cabinet secretary, Keith Brown, is welcoming and non-partisan, and it commits the Scottish Government and Parliament to tackling the barriers that are faced by ex-servicemen and women in integrating into life after serving our country.

The Labour amendment raises concerns of which many MSPs will be aware. We do not believe that injured veterans should be forced to face the costs of social care from compensation awarded, and that is the reason why we lodged the amendment. We support the insult to injury campaign that is run by Poppyscotland and Royal British Legion Scotland, and Ken Macintosh will address the issue further.

I am pleased that the cabinet secretary mentioned our amendment. I stress that it is not intended to be mischievous or obstructive, but we believe that it would be remiss to debate the transition of veterans without discussing such an important topic of such concern to many thousands of people throughout the country.

Scottish Labour welcomes the commissioner's report, and we support the findings and recommendations that it contains. The four main themes of the report are all devolved issues and, where there is scope for members in the chamber to work together, that must be our mission: for the dignity of our ex-servicemen and women, and for our democracy.

As Eric Fraser points out, the transition for many can be smooth, and the earlier that support is offered, the easier the transition can be. However, for those who are unable to cope with the demands of civilian life, the transition can be a very daunting personal experience.

One group that is identified as finding the transition more difficult is early service leavers. They are classified as serving less than four years, and they often have the fewest formal qualifications and the least adult life experience. Leaving school and finding a role with the army, navy or air force is an act of bravery for many of our young men and women.

The commissioner highlights his concerns for early service leavers, who are

“recognised as especially vulnerable when they depart the Armed Forces”.

Homelessness is said to be “widespread” among early service leavers, with

“increasing numbers relying on friends and family to provide informal shelter and a temporary address”,

which is known as sofa-surfing. That presents further problems in the transition process and can cause problems for people in finding employment.

On employment, the report notes that there are little differences between the experiences of early service leavers and those who are making their own transition from school to training or employment. The commissioner warns that there must be further promotion of the youth employment scheme to target early service leavers before and after they leave service.

With regard to the fourth recommendation, we fully support the commissioner in calling for the opportunities for all age range to be extended. That could have the desired effect of easing young early service leavers into civilian life. Furthermore, the commissioner calls on the Scottish Government to consider including early service leavers as a targeted group.

When reading the report, I queried whether there were any disparities between the experiences of service leavers, including early service leavers, in each of the armed services—army, navy and air force. In his summing up, I would be keen to hear from the cabinet secretary whether any work has been undertaken to identify any issues, so that those involved in planning for transitioning can target greater support where greater problems arise. If he is unable to inform the chamber, would the cabinet secretary be prepared to discuss the issue further in the near future? I appreciate that it crosses over into a reserved issue—or is indeed something for the armed forces themselves to identify. I will also write to the veterans commissioner to seek further clarity on the issue of disparity between services.

Going back to the main themes of the report, I note that housing is a substantial issue. Both recommendations that were offered regarding housing stress the importance of sharing information and co-operation among the UK and Scottish Governments, local authorities and the armed forces.

We also join the commissioner in paying tribute to organisations such as Scottish Veterans Residences, Houses for Heroes, Haig Housing and—in particular for me—Erskine. Having visited Erskine a few times, I am proud to support it and the wonderful staff who carry out their duties in an exemplary manner. I am sure that the same goes for all the other organisations that I mentioned. Without those organisations, Scotland would be a

poorer place, and long may the commendable functions of those long-standing organisations exist. Housing Options Scotland, which provides information and advice to veterans as well as to disabled and elderly people, is another example of the organisations that work in Scotland to better the lives of our ex-servicemen and women and which deserve our full support.

Our health and wellbeing are important to each and every one of us. However, for veterans who have experienced trauma in serving our country, it is crucial that support is in place throughout their duties, transition and life as a civilian.

This Parliament is familiar with the importance of mental health issues, which are widely recognised to affect one in four of us in our lifetimes. In his report, the commissioner states that

“reviewing the quality and availability”

of mental health services

“is well beyond the scope of this report but is likely to be the subject of further work next year.”

We fully support the commissioner ahead of that future review, and we look forward to hearing how we can advance mental health services for service leavers.

Again, the commissioner rightly praises the role of third sector and voluntary organisations in their efforts to support veterans and mental health in Scotland.

Alcohol dependency and isolation can affect any person at any time, regardless of background and age. Following his dialogue with veterans, clinicians and support agencies, the commissioner warns that both need

“closer scrutiny and wider awareness”.

It appears that problems are hidden behind closed doors, but hidden problems can have disastrous consequences for a veteran’s transition and family and may be exacerbated by the transition process.

“The Transition Mapping Study” by the Forces in Mind Trust in 2013 estimated that the cost of poor transitioning in the UK totals around £110 million a year, with alcohol misuse having

“the largest single effect ... followed by mental health issues”.

No matter the economic cost, nothing compares to the costs to the lives of the ex-personnel and their families and communities. If we as a Parliament work with other external stakeholders to make the transition process easier and seamless for more veterans, the economic cost will decrease. Having a healthier and more active veteran community is greatly beneficial to all, and that must be our ultimate goal.

The commissioner's finding on alcohol dependence and isolation is an issue on which we will wait to see what develops as he takes forward next year's programme.

Finally, although the issue must never be used as a political football—I doubt that any member would seek to use it as such—I fully support the veterans proposals that Labour has made in its manifesto. The Scottish National Party and the Conservatives also pledge support to veterans in their manifestos, and anything that brings further benefits to our ex-servicemen and women should be welcomed by all.

In our manifesto ahead of next week's general election, Labour has pledged to strengthen the covenant between our nation and our armed forces, veterans and their families; to create a veterans register to make certain that our veterans receive proper support; to continue to roll out Labour's veterans interview programme, in which companies voluntarily guarantee to give an interview to job-seeking ex-forces personnel; and to introduce legislation to make discrimination against members of our armed forces illegal.

The role of the military in the United Kingdom has long been the envy of many, if not all, countries around the world. For the role that they played in world war one to the one that they play in modern-day combat and peace missions, our armed forces deserve our full gratitude and respect for keeping Scotland and the UK safe. It can never be overstated how much we recognise and appreciate the sacrifices that many women and men have made over the years in securing peace at home and abroad, and I hope that today's debate will be consensual and constructive.

I move amendment S4M-13045.1, to insert at end:

“; further believes that injured veterans awarded compensation should not have most of their payments taken to cover the costs of social care; supports the Insult to Injury campaign run by Poppyscotland and the Royal British Legion, and believes that, as part of the commitment to the armed forces covenant, the Scottish Government should revise existing charging guidelines so that war disablement pensions are fully disregarded from means tests for social care”.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Jackson Carlaw, who has a generous six minutes.

14:56

Jackson Carlaw (West Scotland) (Con): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I begin by applauding the motion. I thank the cabinet secretary not just for the manner in which he addressed the motion but for the manner in which he has discharged his duties with respect to the veterans community. I also thank Stewart Maxwell

and Alex Neil for the way in which they discharged those duties as ministers during the past eight years. As a member of the cross-party group on armed forces veterans, which was founded in 2007, I recall that ministers have always been genuinely concerned about promoting the issues that have been raised in relation to the veterans community.

As the cabinet secretary said, the debate has at its root an all-party and consensual approach, which has been important to members of the veterans community. Of all issues, this is one on which none of us ought to allow ourselves to divide on political grounds.

When the cross-party group was founded in 2007, it initially met some resistance and suspicion, because the Ministry of Defence regarded such issues as being almost reserved to Westminster. It took gentle persuasion and work to allow the Scottish Parliament to become more directly involved. In the early days, MSPs were not always welcome in military establishments, and it was quite a job to move to a point at which they are. As a consequence, there is a broad recognition that, in its discharging of its obligations to veterans, Scotland is now a model in the UK for providing the best level of support possible.

I concur with what the cabinet secretary said about the veterans commissioner and commend what is very much an interim report on where we are with transition in Scotland. It is interesting that the three issues that the cross-party group identified when it was set up in 2007—housing, health and employment—remain core issues. That is not to say that considerable progress has not been made on them, but they remain the three issues around which the great debate takes place.

It is sometimes difficult for members of the public to understand the underlying dynamic. They have become used to seeing parades of very brave people on their return from areas of conflict and to watching those individuals discharge their duties. In some respects, I do not think that the public fully appreciate the enormous challenge that service personnel face, whether they have been in the services for a lifetime or for only a short period, which might be the case for a variety of reasons.

As a teenager, I remember seeing a film called “The Shawshank Redemption”, which is nothing to do with the armed forces. Most members have probably seen it. It was turned into a successful stage play on the Edinburgh fringe a couple of years ago. The film was very good at showing the challenges that can arise as a result of being in a slightly institutionalised environment where there is discipline and comradeship but there is also a reliance on the infrastructure that underpins the community, which can cause difficulties thereafter.

At school, I was in the Royal Air Force cadet corps. I have to say that the armed forces looked like quite a seductive career option at one point. Sadly, as members will know, I am as blind as a bat and, although I was good at hitting targets, they were never my own, which rather ruled out that option.

I visited RAF camps around western Europe at that time, which was at the height of the cold war, and I could see that the RAF was an inclusive community. Someone who was at school could see that it would offer many people who came from a slightly chaotic or complicated background a tremendous opportunity—and it does. However, for those coming out of the armed forces, the memory of what went before represents a huge challenge. As we can see from the work of the cross-party group and the Government, that challenge is considerable.

There has been a huge change in public perception. In the 1970s we used to go backwards and forwards to school in our cadet uniforms. Then, during the Irish difficulties, all that stopped. There are difficulties now again, but in recent years we have returned to seeing members of the armed forces in communities, sporting their uniforms. That has led to huge public support for the armed forces, irrespective of the political judgments of Governments, on which the public are hugely and sharply divided. That is a contrast with the atmosphere in the 1960s, which I recall from when I was growing up, when veterans going back to the United States from Vietnam were pilloried by the public. We have avoided that.

That brings us to the challenges in the report. I will save quite a lot of what I want to say for summing up, Presiding Officer, in case you were wondering whether I would ever get to the point. There are three concerns, and the first is housing. We know that there are still challenges. Last night, the cross-party group heard from the Scottish Veterans Garden City Association that it has an enormous waiting list of people who are looking for housing.

Another issue is health. When the group first met, many veterans who had come back with physical conditions for which they had received excellent treatment in the armed services were finding themselves at the wrong end of a national health service approach. They had to be introduced to the idea that they should ask for treatment—many were too modest to insist that they should get any preference for that. Issues that have arisen since include mental health, alcoholism, employment opportunities and the sustainability of the many charities that have underpinned armed services support in recent years. I will return to those issues when summing up.

The key in all this has been information, co-ordination, collaboration and partnership between all the agencies and, I hope, all the political parties.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is quite a bit of time in hand, so seven minutes will be available to those who wish it—perhaps more, depending on how the debate progresses.

15:03

Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP): I very much welcome the tone of the first three speeches, which have been excellent in setting the scene for the debate. I thank Jackson Carlaw for his comments about me, Alex Neil and Keith Brown, which were welcome and for which I am grateful. However, Jackson Carlaw should not be too modest about his time in the air cadets, because I understand that it must have been difficult to fly those old biplanes. *[Laughter.]* He rather opened himself up to that.

For some time—it is still the case—veterans have often been seen as elderly and recognised only for service during long-ago wars. However, a veteran can be someone who is young and who has served in recent conflicts, such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan. A veteran can even be someone who has not been deployed overseas at all, such as people who may well have suffered terrible trauma in the 1970s, during the troubles here in the UK. Although their experiences in the armed forces may differ, our veterans share a claim to a debt of gratitude from all of us for their courage and sacrifice in defending the democratic freedoms that we value so much.

We know that, for most veterans, integrating back into civilian life after completing their service is relatively straightforward. For others, though, that is not the case. Some ex-service personnel face challenges in adjusting to civilian life following their discharge from service. It is important that they have all the support and assistance that they need to participate fully in our society. The valuable skills and experience that our military veterans gain during their service make them an asset to Scotland, and I am grateful to have the opportunity to recognise that in today's debate.

I strongly support the Scottish Government's commitment to improving the lives of armed forces veterans and their families through the Parliament's powers. The cabinet secretary highlighted the progress made since Eric Fraser was appointed last June as Scotland's first veterans commissioner. The commissioner has outlined an ambitious plan to deliver better outcomes for those who have served in our armed forces, and I look forward to further progress in addressing challenges that our veterans face,

especially concerning housing, health and employability opportunities, which other members have mentioned.

I was delighted that the cabinet secretary chose to launch the commissioner's report "Transition in Scotland" at the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service college in Cambuslang. Before I became an MSP, I worked for Strathclyde fire brigade for 10 years, and I am pleased that the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service continues to employ veterans in a number of different roles.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service is one of many bodies to sign up in support of the armed forces corporate covenant, which involves a commitment to support the armed forces community as well as recognising their contribution to society. At the launch of the commissioner's report last month, the cabinet secretary highlighted the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service as

"an excellent model of an employer that is actively supportive of veterans".

I echo the words of Alasdair Hay, the chief officer of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, who said that former armed forces personnel

"bring outstanding benefits to their employers"

and display qualities of integrity, professionalism and leadership. As an employee of Strathclyde fire brigade, I met a number of veterans who had moved into working for the fire brigade, and all of them were extremely professional and an asset to the organisation.

It is therefore with regret that I note that, despite benefiting from valuable skills, a number of veterans continue to experience barriers to finding employment after their service ends. Employability among service leavers is a key concern that is raised in the veterans commissioner's recent report. His report highlights research by Poppyscotland that suggests that unemployment levels among the ex-service community in Scotland are worryingly high. That is particularly evident for early service leavers, as Mary Fee highlighted; figures suggest that only 52 per cent of early service leavers find employment within six months of leaving, compared with 85 per cent of those who have served longer.

Research commissioned by the Royal British Legion in 2011 found that an inability to secure alternative employment is one of the key reasons why some veterans cannot successfully adjust to civilian life. The study also highlighted the importance of a range of other factors, including mental health issues, limited social networks, financial difficulties and a lack of awareness of available support.

A 2012 report by Citizens Advice Scotland entitled "Civvy Street: The New Frontline" looked at evidence that suggests that some veterans are restricted by a lack of awareness of available support services. Furthermore, the report suggested that, despite the availability of an array of support organisations, a number of service leavers do not seek help because of a sense of pride and a desire to remain independent.

It is estimated that upwards of 400,000 ex-servicemen and women live in Scotland, and more than 50 veterans organisations and charities are dedicated to supporting them. I have seen at first hand some of the excellent work that is taking place all over the country in support of Scotland's veterans. Like other members, I have visited Erskine hospital on a number of occasions. It is an excellent organisation that does first-class work.

I should declare an interest, as I am an honorary patron of armed forces legal action. The group was founded in 2013 by East Renfrewshire-based solicitor and RAF officer Allan Steele to offer discounted legal services to serving and former members of the armed forces.

The AFLA has cross-party support and is backed by a number of MSPs who are honorary patrons, including Willie Rennie, who is not here today, and Ken Macintosh and Jackson Carlaw, who are. Its founder, Allan Steele, is known to many in the chamber. He and his wife, Linzie, have worked tirelessly to grow the AFLA and to build a network of law firms in Scotland and across the UK to deliver better services for the armed forces community.

I understand that more than 100 partner law firms are now signed up to the AFLA, with ambitious plans for further expansion abroad to a number of countries in the Commonwealth. Although the initiative is relatively new, the AFLA's success so far is testament to the high esteem in which our servicemen and women are held, and I look forward to it going from strength to strength in the years ahead.

One of the curious things about the establishment of the initiative is that, although there cannot be a year that passes without new veterans initiatives being established, we always think that everything is covered. There is always room for more support in new areas. I am delighted that that new initiative is doing so well. Although it is clear that a wide range of support is available to ex-servicemen and women, a key challenge is removing the barriers that prevent veterans and their dependants from accessing those services.

The Scottish Government has made significant progress in addressing the issues. However, it is clear from the commissioner's report that we can

do even more to help people leaving the military. I am encouraged by the cabinet secretary's undertaking to work with key stakeholders to take the recommendations forward. Our armed forces personnel sacrifice so much for us; it is only right that we honour their service by supporting veterans.

15:10

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

A little more than five short years ago, I opened a members' business debate to raise concerns about the possible closure of RAF Kinloss. The campaign was a cross-party one, and was supported by all the then party leaders: Alex Salmond, Annabel Goldie, Tavish Scott and Iain Gray. I argued then that armed forces personnel have a social covenant with our country at times of peace and of war.

During times of conflict, I remember the famous lines from John Maxwell Edmonds, which are repeated every remembrance Sunday across Scotland:

"When you go home, tell them of us and say
For their tomorrow, we gave our today."

The social covenant was best illustrated to me 23 years ago when the American naval base in Dunoon closed, with a loss of 1,500 American personnel. The local community rallied round and set up a dynamic economic committee that received European Union and Government funding support to diversify the economy and provide new jobs. The armed forces covenant was set up in May 2011 by the UK Government, which put its full financial muscle behind that philosophical principle.

Like probably most members present, my interest in the debate about veterans is personal. My father did his national service with the Royal Air Force at Kinloss as a fresh-faced 18-year-old, nearly 70 years ago. During my last year of school in the Highlands, I, like Jackson Carlaw, seriously thought about joining the RAF, but the plan never came to fruition. Perhaps Mr Carlaw and I should set up a support group, on the basis that we are not very good at hitting targets. However, I promise that I will join the cross-party group on veterans. It sounds like an excellent group that I would be happy to put my time into.

There was a positive side to my career choices. During my time in Westminster, from 1997, I seized the opportunity to serve with the RAF for two terms, as part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme. From my time on the Scottish Parliament Corporate Body, Presiding Officer, you might know that I feel strongly that this Parliament should be actively involved with the scheme. I certainly recommend that my

colleagues who currently serve on the SPCB, such as Liam McArthur, who is in the chamber, pursue the idea. I believe that MSPs should be part of that UK-wide scheme, which gives parliamentarians lots of experience.

Keith Brown: I inform Mr Stewart that, in a previous debate, we got cross-party support for such an initiative. I spoke to the MP who is in charge of the scheme, and we are taking it forward, either through the SPCB or separately. It is a useful scheme. It has been suggested to me that we should have a Scottish version, which I had not thought of before, rather than joining the UK scheme. We are considering both options just now.

David Stewart: I support what the cabinet secretary has said. In my experience, the scheme is extremely successful, and I would endorse either model. The key thing is that parliamentarians get experience of the armed forces across Scotland, so I would certainly support the initiative.

During the two terms of my involvement with the scheme, I had experience of RAF Kinloss and RAF Lossiemouth, as well as a memorable week in Basra, in Iraq, which I can perhaps bore members about at great length some other time.

I flew in a Tornado fast jet, a Nimrod maritime aircraft and a Sea King search and rescue helicopter. On my last day with the RAF, the Sea King that I was involved with had to attend an emergency in Glencoe. I distinctly remember flying a few hundred feet above Loch Ness on the way to Glencoe and observing at first hand the bravery, expertise and professionalism of the pilots and the winch crew as they saved the life of a young Swiss mountaineer who had fallen off the mountain and had severe facial injuries. I appreciate that my experience was a very brief snapshot, but it has given me tremendous admiration for the armed forces and veterans.

We should always remember that people do not stay in the armed forces for ever, and that our responsibility to people who have served our country does not stop when they leave the services. The covenant that we make with those in the service community does not stop when they rejoin civilian life.

It is also important that we bear in mind that, as a country, we have invested a great deal of money in training our servicemen and women and that, although we have a duty to ensure that they are looked after, we also have a duty to ensure that that investment in skills and training is not lost to society. That is just one reason why it is important that we ensure a high-quality transition from the services to civilian life.

The unfortunate picture that is portrayed by some in the media is of dysfunctional ex-servicemen and women struggling to cope with meaningless civilian life. Nothing could be further from the truth. Success hardly ever makes the headlines but, for the vast majority of veterans, the step back into civilian life is painless and successful. Indeed, an example of that more typical reality comes from a constituent from Inverness, who proudly served with the Scots Guards. Like most of his fellow guardsmen, he took every opportunity for training and education that the Army offered and, having left the Army, he now has a successful career with a civil engineering company that values the special skills that a service veteran can bring.

As we have heard, however, some veterans find the transition difficult and need our assistance. They may need help to find a home or a job or to deal with a variety of health problems, and where help is needed, it must be given quickly. From the valuable work that has been carried out by the Scottish veterans commissioner, Eric Fraser, we know that around 1,800 men and women complete their military service and settle in Scotland each year. The commissioner has been charged by the Scottish Government with investigating how veterans cope with transition, using the excellent Forces in Mind Trust as a guide.

There are currently around 400,000 veterans in Scotland, and it is the Scottish Government's responsibility to ensure that they have adequate and suitable housing, health and social care, education, skills and training so that they can readjust to civilian life. A key aspect of that is ensuring that veterans are not socially excluded but receive the most appropriate support, guidance and assistance, both during transition and in the many years thereafter.

I am glad that the Scottish Government has established the Scottish veterans fund to support groups and organisations that provide assistance to Scotland's ex-service personnel, their families and their dependants. The fund has been established by ministers in collaboration with Veterans Scotland, and it will focus on new or innovative approaches to veterans issues, seeking to develop areas and activities that are not currently funded by either the Scottish Government or the Ministry of Defence. However, the commissioner's report clearly shows that veterans need a lot more support, especially with housing, health and social care.

I welcome the debate, which has highlighted the special skills that veterans bring to the workplace and to society at large. Let us not forget that we owe veterans through the social covenant. Leaving the services is not the end of a meaningful career but a transition to a new one in

which a veteran's considerable skills can continue to be utilised for the benefit of society as a whole.

15:18

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I acknowledge Dave Stewart's point that, for many people leaving the armed forces, the transition to civilian life is successful. However, we must focus on those who find leaving the armed forces and adapting to civilian life difficult. I very much agree with Jackson Carlaw's observation that they will have been in a structured situation. Some will have gone from chaotic lives to that structured situation, but all that stops when they are discharged, and we must support them.

For some, the struggle takes their lives to extremes of alcoholism, drug abuse and relationship breakdown. There will be veterans who are homeless on the streets of Scotland, and there are certainly veterans in our prisons—regrettably, many for crimes of violence that are connected with alcohol. Those individuals have been failed by society. They are not there only because of post-traumatic distress disorder, although that may play a part; they may be there simply because of the awfulness of adjusting to civilian life from an organised army, navy or other forces life.

Given my constituency, the matter is of particular interest to me. The Scottish Borders has a long history, going back over decades and, indeed, centuries, of families joining regiments. Also, Glencorse barracks are located in the Midlothian part of the constituency.

I commend the Lothians veterans centre. Jackson Carlaw spoke about how people can access the help that they might need with quite simple things, such as getting a general practitioner. The Lothians veterans centre, which is located in Dalkeith, provides ex-service personnel and their families with face-to-face support in relation to matters such as health and wellbeing, housing and employment. It also provides support in relation to two areas that no member has mentioned yet: comradeship and remembrance. People have been discharged who are grieving for injured comrades or comrades who did not return.

Veterans Scotland has a dedicated and very comprehensive website that deals with those issues. Under the heading "Civilian life in the Scottish Borders", veterans and their families are signposted to the support that is available to them and told about the priority that they may be given.

For example, on housing, veterans are directed to the low-cost initiative for first-time buyers and to the various charitable organisations that

specifically provide housing for Scottish veterans. The website also covers the simple matter of how to locate and get on the list of a GP in the area.

On employment, the career transition partnership provides support on simple matters, such as how to write a CV, how to research the job market and how to learn interview skills. Veterans will not have dealt with such issues for a long time while in the services.

I turn to the combat to construction—a nifty term—traineeship initiative from Persimmon Homes. I was quite impressed by that. I was there to see about a bus shelter, but things developed—I will tell members about that later, when Dave Stewart tells us about his flight experiences.

The initiative, which is for veterans in England, involves a two-year apprenticeship scheme that leads to a level 2 national vocational qualification, usually in joinery or bricklaying. The apprenticeship pay rate is £8 an hour. Close to 100 ex-forces personnel have joined the company since September 2014 on that two-year apprenticeship framework, leading to those qualifications in wood or trowel occupations. The scheme is fully supported by the Construction Industry Training Board and the Skills Funding Agency.

However, a combat to construction trainee in Scotland who wanted to train as a joiner or bricklayer would have to enrol on a four-year apprenticeship, leading to a level 3 Scottish vocational qualification. According to the company, an apprenticeship of four years' duration does not work for two reasons. First, it is not commercially viable for the company. The second, and more important, reason is that it is not attractive to ex-forces personnel, who do not want four years of further training.

The company is exploring alternatives for Scotland, such as a commercial training programme with no SFA funding and therefore no Scottish Building Apprenticeship and Training Council involvement. However, that would result in a lesser qualification that would not be transferable and which would not be recognised outside Persimmon. The potential of a two-year timber frame erection qualification at level 2 is also being investigated.

Members may ask why I am going into the issue in detail. I am doing so because we could take that good idea from England, and I have no problem with good ideas from England.

Ex-service personnel are used to taking orders, and people in the trades are used to taking instructions and to outdoor work, and they are fit. Although I accept that there must be rules regarding apprenticeships and national qualifications, the Government could look at what

flexibility might be possible for suitable people who are returning from service and whose training could perhaps contribute towards a qualification.

I noted the cabinet secretary's comments on apprenticeships. I know that I have pounced on him with my proposal—that is the way to do it—but I hope that he will look into it.

I commend Poppyscotland, which has financially supported my constituent Corrine Boyd-Russell, whose son, Paul McGuigan, was shot and murdered by a fellow ex-serviceman in 2009, within 24 hours of arriving in Iraq as a security guard for G4S.

There is an inquest going on, so I must constrain my comments. However, Poppyscotland was absolutely wonderful in providing funding for accommodation for that poor laddie's mother so that she could attend at least the early stages of the inquest, which was otherwise way beyond her means. I put that on the record because some people do not know the things that Poppyscotland does, which go way beyond the selling of poppies. They do not know where that money goes.

I am very heartened by the tone and content of the debate because it shows that the Parliament has other personalities that are quite different from the rather raucous hostility at First Minister's questions. I hope that we take that tone in support of our armed forces and veterans and in recognition of their value. I also hope that, at decision time, we will speak with one voice.

15:25

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): I am really enjoying the election campaign; I am enjoying being out there. There is a lot of cut and thrust, obviously, and it can sometimes get a bit heated, but it is also great to come into Parliament and get real mature discussion on a serious issue. So far, everyone has treated the debate that way.

I am glad that I am taking part in this important debate, but I ask members to forgive me if, at the beginning of my speech, I indulge in just a little bit of nostalgia. I cannot quite go back as far as Jackson Carlaw and the Sopwith Camel, but I would probably have missed the targets as well because I think that he and I have similar difficulties with our eyesight.

However, I recall well, in the early days following the election of the Scottish National Party minority Government in 2007, being pleased unexpectedly to be given the role of Government liaison with the MOD as part of my job as Minister for Parliamentary Business. In that role, I attended the first meeting between the Scottish Government and the tri-service heads of the armed forces in Scotland. I recall well the impact that the former

First Minister's words had on how they felt: he told them that the armed forces are part of the strong threads that make up the tartan of Scotland. The former First Minister went on to say that he wanted the service heads to challenge the SNP Government to produce the best possible package of support for Scotland's veterans. To be frank, the service heads took up that message incredibly enthusiastically but, and which is just as important, so did the ministers—at that time, it was Stewart Maxwell, who did a great job—and the civil servants who are responsible for delivery of the policies, some of whom are here supporting the minister.

The result was—as Jackson Carlaw mentioned—that we have probably the best package of support for veterans anywhere on these islands. That is not to say that, as others have said, services cannot be improved, whether they are on housing, health, employability, wellbeing or information and co-ordination—all the issues that are taken on in the constructive report by the Scottish veterans commissioner called "Transition in Scotland".

I believe strongly that the right person to lead the work on delivering the required improvements is Keith Brown. The cabinet secretary is highly respected in the veterans community not only because he is a veteran himself but because he has shown in his role in Government that he is determined to make a difference and is committed to doing so.

I will pick up on one particular area in the "Transition in Scotland" report and quote from it rather extensively—if colleagues will forgive me for doing so—because I could not agree more with what the commissioner says. The way he captures things in the paragraph that I will quote expresses exactly what the tone of the discussion should be this afternoon. Just as Keith Brown talked about the need for everyone in society to recognise the contribution that service personnel can make, the commissioner said:

"I have also become aware of the need to PROMOTE the strengths, skills and attributes of our Service personnel with much more passion and determination. Too often these people are labelled either 'mad, bad or sad'—a grave disservice to a talented and committed cohort who have the potential to make a considerable contribution to Scotland's economy, communities and society after they complete their military service. Reinforcing the positive qualities of Service Leavers and challenging the negative perceptions is, I am convinced, the first step in changing attitudes, opening up more employment opportunities and making it easier to make that 'good' transition."

That explains well what we are about. The commissioner captured it well.

I want to play my part today in promoting

"the strengths, skills and attributes of our Service personnel"

with a story from my own family. One of my sons joined the RAF—which seems to be an emerging common theme. I hope that he will not mind my saying this—he is a big strong man now—but, at the time, like most young men, he was a bit raw and a little naive about the world. Some people still say that about me. I remember, in the time leading up to his joining, reading about the RAF's core values—I had concerns about what he was letting himself in for. I had not really understood it all as much as I should have done at the time. Those core values are mutual respect and self-respect, integrity, moral courage, honesty, responsibility, justice, physical courage, loyalty, commitment, teamwork, personal excellence, discipline and pride. Who could argue with those core values?

I well recall my heart bursting with pride as my son made his transition from his initial training on to life as a fully fledged serviceman at a ceremony at RAF Halton. That young man was well on his way to embracing the core values of the RAF—core values that served him very well indeed as he made the successful transition from service life to civvy street.

Of course, not all our ex-servicepeople make that successful transition. Many have put their lives in jeopardy in helping us all, and we all owe them a huge debt for that. When a member of the armed forces returns from conflict, hangs up their uniform and becomes a civvy, it can be a very difficult time for them. Most of them have no idea of the scale of the challenge it can be—leaving behind their job and their friends, finding accommodation and sorting out paperwork to apply for benefits, as well as adjusting to a completely different way of life. Those are all individual challenges. When they are put all together, it can result in serious problems for some.

Ensuring that every service leaver has the skills, support and advice to complete the transition successfully is crucial, not only to the individual but to their family and wider society. I know first-hand from my son about the incredible training and skills that he was provided with. That made me think about what the Scottish veterans commissioner's report says at page 20. The commissioner refers to the benefit that young service leavers might be able to get from being part of the opportunities for all programme. They might have missed out on an opportunity the first time round because they decided on a military career. The recommendation in the report says:

"The Scottish Government should consider introducing flexibility to relax the age restrictions, extending the eligibility for criteria within 'Opportunities for All' for Early Service Leavers."

That is quite a good idea, and I am sure that the cabinet secretary will be looking at it closely.

In my constituency, we are very lucky to have ASAP—the armed services advice project—which provides focused advice and information to the armed forces community. ASAP is part of the local citizens advice bureau, and it is run by Ally Gemmell, who is a veteran himself. Ally and his colleagues are able to help those who are struggling with the massive life changes that they are facing.

Today I thank Ally and other people who work for Poppyscotland or for any of the many other ex-servicemen's and ex-servicewomen's charities that exist in Scotland. They have given that extra bit of help to people when they have needed it most. I say to them, "Thank you. You do an invaluable job."

15:33

Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I begin by saying that I cannot share with members any tales of my life in uniform—sadly, I never even made it into the brownies or the girl guides. Nevertheless, it is a privilege to speak in today's debate and to have the opportunity to pay tribute, and express my gratitude, to all those who have served and fought to protect our country and the freedoms that we take for granted.

We have recently commemorated Gallipoli 100 and Anzac day, when people across the country attended services to remember those who gave their lives in some of the fiercest fighting that took place during the great war. We are in the midst of four years of commemoration, in which we are remembering the centenary years of the great war and all those who fought in it.

As the report that was recently published by the Scottish veterans commissioner shows, the challenges that our service personnel face today in transitioning to civilian life are still very real and significant. Indeed, it could be argued that, with the growing pressures on our local services and a very real housing crisis that is affecting all of Scotland's citizens, that transition is being made even more difficult for our service personnel.

As a Fife councillor, I was inundated with casework from constituents who had a desperate need for housing or whose housing was unsuitable. As an MSP, I still find that housing is one of the biggest issues for my constituents, and I know that my colleagues will agree that a large part of their casework focuses on the housing needs of their constituents.

That housing crisis provides an additional problem for our veterans. As the report by the Scottish veterans commissioner highlights, there is

a unique difficulty for veterans and their families, who previously had their housing needs catered for, when they are faced with having to find a long-term home for themselves. Given the shortages of affordable, social and council housing, there is always a very real possibility that our service personnel who are transitioning to civilian life will be left homeless. That is not acceptable.

As a Parliament, we accept that we need to build more affordable homes in Scotland and that Governments of all colours have failed to address that problem adequately in the past. In Fife, the Labour-led council has taken strategic decisions to address the problem with a programme to build 2,700 homes, but we need a national house-building strategy to end our housing crisis.

As a Fife councillor, I had the privilege of working with Councillor Charles Haffey, who is a Royal Navy veteran who saw active duty in the Falklands war, and is Fife's armed forces champion. As a Fife MSP, I continue to work with him and to be immensely proud of the work that Labour-led Fife Council does to support veterans. Fife has truly led the way in improving engagement with and support to the armed forces community. In particular, extensive work has been undertaken to recognise and put in place the support measures that our veterans need in order to find employment and set up a new life outwith the armed forces.

Fife Council, its partners in the public sector and a number of voluntary organisations have worked closely together to ensure that our veterans have access to the support structures and services that enable them to use their unique skills and talents to achieve their full potential. That is all brought together on the "Fife Firm Base" pages of the council's website. I know that Councillor Haffey takes his role very seriously and is conscientious in his efforts to build effective partnership working and networks to support armed forces personnel, veterans and, of course, their families.

The report points out that the future for many veterans is not always filled with such optimism. Indeed, the challenges that are highlighted in the report—social isolation, mental health problems, disability and a lack of basic skills—can have a devastating effect on the ability of our veterans to reintegrate into and thrive in civilian society.

We must do more for our veterans who are returning to civilian life with mental or physical disabilities. We know that improvement is needed in our mental health services and that we must make it easier for everyone to access those services. We must also do more to tackle the stigma of mental ill health and raise awareness of those conditions in our communities. It is particularly important that our veterans can access those services and get help quickly, because

although we know that the incidence of mental health conditions is not significantly higher among our veterans, their illnesses tend to be more complex and severe.

We must ensure that we are doing everything possible to remove the barriers to our veterans who suffer with physical disabilities living full and active lives. In particular, we have a duty to ensure that our veterans receive the social care and additional support that they need without being financially burdened by the costs.

We have a special duty and responsibility to care for and support those who have been injured while serving this country. Too often, it seems that that is not happening. For example, just this week I was contacted by Mr Smith, who is a constituent of mine from Rosyth. He asked me to share his case with members. Mr Smith, who served in Northern Ireland, was injured during one of his tours of duty, and he lost his leg in later years. Despite fighting to receive the war pension that he feels he is entitled to and working with a number of organisations that have helped and supported him, he has been told that the MOD has lost the paperwork that relates to his case and therefore cannot give him the financial support that he needs. We all know that that is not good enough and that veterans such as Mr Smith should not become victims of system failure, but should be treated with the dignity and respect to which they are entitled.

As I stated before, I am immensely grateful for the contribution of our veterans. I am also optimistic that it is becoming easier in Scotland for our veterans to reintegrate and to play a full and active part in civilian life.

I have highlighted some of the things that we are doing well and areas in which we could do more. We need to make it easier for all stakeholders to work together to ensure that we get it right for the members of our veterans community and their families.

15:39

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): I, too, welcome the debate and the opportunity to participate in praising veterans' contribution to Scotland and, in particular, in welcoming the first report of our veterans commissioner. The report certainly vindicates the appointment of a commissioner, which is one of a range of Scottish Government initiatives for veterans that have attracted cross-party support. Those include the Government's support for the Scottish veterans fund, which has distributed £700,000 to relevant charities around Scotland.

As members have said, the vast majority of veterans go on to make a positive contribution to

life in our country, which is why a smooth transition is so important, and that is what the commissioner has concentrated on in his report. Anything that we can do to ease the transition from service life to civilian life is important. However, if that transition goes wrong and the support is not there, problems can develop further down the line, and sometimes many years down the line.

I will concentrate on the mental health issues that a minority of veterans face, which can develop long after their period of service is concluded. Research published in *The Lancet* has found that personnel who served in combat roles in Iraq and Afghanistan are far more likely than others are to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues. Those in combat roles are of course disproportionately Scottish, because of the strength and expertise of Scottish infantry units. Because of that, there is concern that the next 15 years might deliver a potential mental health time bomb, with rapidly increasing numbers of veterans seeking support for PTSD-type mental health issues. Statistics suggest that, on average, it takes 13 years from the onset of symptoms for a veteran to reach out for advice, support and professional treatment. Of course, next year marks 13 years since the beginning of the Iraq war.

On page 29 of his report, the commissioner talks about the mental health services that are provided, and he praises the work that is being done. He singles out for praise two third sector services that are supported by the Scottish Government. One is Combat Stress, which provides help with post-traumatic stress disorder to veterans and which is a joint initiative with the NHS that is funded to the tune of £1.2 million a year. The commissioner also singles out the veterans first point service, which was created in 2009 in partnership with NHS Lothian to deliver a range of support, including clinical support. I welcome the £640,000 that the Scottish Government has given to that. Dr Lucy Abraham, who is the lead clinician, says that a key part of the success of veterans first point is that peer support workers work closely with the psychotherapy team. Before the service was established, veterans could be deterred by complicated referral routes and the stigma around mental health.

That is a model of good practice, so I am pleased that it is being rolled out to other health board areas in Scotland, using money that has been made available from fines that were levied on the banks following the London interbank offered rate—LIBOR—scandal. The funding is worth £2.5 million over two years. It is probably appropriate that people who have served their country in such an exemplary way are funded by fines on organisations that perhaps have not.

There is a considerable need for support using the veterans first point model in my area of South Scotland, although we have examples of good practice, such as the charity First Base in Dumfries, which works with veterans across the region who are experiencing difficulties. The Nithsdale area, which includes the town of Dumfries, has one of the highest concentrations of veterans in Scotland. The First Base project, which was established in 2010, has worked with 150 clients with an age range of 20 to 80.

When the project was launched, the waiting time for a veteran to receive support for PTSD-type symptoms from the local mental health team was around nine months. To address that problem, First Base came up with an innovative model of its own and reached an agreement whereby it raised £5,000 to fund half a day of work a week from a young psychotherapist in the local NHS. After a year, NHS Dumfries and Galloway took over the funding of the service. However, the partnership became a victim of its own success. Word spread of the excellent and effective treatment that many local veterans had received, so the waiting list has grown again.

First Base has asked whether it can have another half day of the psychotherapist's time but, unfortunately, that is not possible, because pressure of work means that his colleagues would need to backfill for him more than they do already, which is just not possible. It might seem obvious that the solution is to channel the LIBOR cash through the veterans first point roll-out to assist in Dumfries and Galloway, but the director of psychological services there says that the short-term nature of the funding available through the LIBOR grant is problematic.

The cabinet secretary might be aware that recruiting NHS doctors in rural areas is challenging in itself and that the number of consultant vacancies is often very high, so recruiting someone for a short-term post will obviously be even more challenging. It has been put to me from within the NHS that a long-term solution is needed; it has also been put to me that a decentralised model would be more appropriate for a rural area such as Dumfries and Galloway than, say, the Edinburgh model, which has a drop-in facility and a centre of excellence. It has been suggested that, if a psychotherapist could be recruited, they could travel around Dumfries and Galloway and offer treatment as close to people's homes as possible.

I know that the veterans minister has a meeting soon with First Base, and I am happy to raise that issue in advance of that, as forewarned is forearmed. However, I know that he will do everything that he can to help. As the commissioner said in his report, the services that

we are getting in place, particularly in the collaboration between the third sector and the Government, are working very well. I will obviously appreciate anything that the cabinet secretary can do to help when he meets First Base.

I am aware that I have concentrated on some of the challenges facing veterans, but I am very well aware of the contribution that they make and I am delighted to have been able to contribute to this debate.

15:47

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Like others, I welcome the debate and the notably constructive and consensual tone that has characterised the contributions to the debate from members so far. Like Jayne Baxter, I can boast no personal pedigree in the uniformed services, although I did manage two years in the cubs and two years in the army cadets, but that was more of an excuse to play football and get sweets from the tuck shop.

I took part in a similar debate to this in the chamber just over a year ago, and I am delighted that we have a further opportunity to consider issues relating to veterans, particularly in this instance the very considerable positive contribution that they can and do make to the country. In last year's debate, I confess that I, along with others, raised questions about the creation of a veterans commissioner. At the time, there were certainly concerns, even within the veterans community, that resources might be better deployed by increasing funding to organisations that were already providing valuable support and advice to veterans.

However, we are well beyond that debate now and I am happy to pay tribute to Eric Fraser for the work that he has done generally since his appointment last August and for the measured and insightful report that he has produced on the transition from the armed forces to settling in Scotland. We all recognise that the transition can present serious challenges for certain individuals and their families, but I think that the commissioner has helpfully identified a number of very practical measures that can be taken that will deliver improvements that will not only help service personnel and their families but secure benefits for our wider society and, indeed, our economy.

As the Labour amendment points out, Poppyscotland and the Royal British Legion have identified other areas where more targeted help might be provided. I think that those are certainly worthy of full and detailed consideration and I welcome Keith Brown's confirmation that that is happening.

Every year in Scotland, around 1,800 men and women complete their military service and settle with their families in communities across the country. That transition from the armed services into civilian life invariably involves leaving behind not simply a job but a home and a community—a way of life, in fact.

It is worth acknowledging, as the commissioner does, that most, like Bruce Crawford's son, cope with that change remarkably well, demonstrating that, among the many skills that veterans have, is the ability to adapt and deal with a range of fundamental life-changing experiences that few of us have ever had to endure. Where that works well, the transition sees not only employment and a home secured but a strong and supportive social network established, enabling each veteran and their family to become net contributors to society over the longer term.

As the motion rightly identifies, those leaving the armed services do so more often than not with good training and skills as well as a sense of duty and discipline, all of which should make them attractive propositions for potential employers across a range of different fields. That has not gone unnoticed. I know from discussions with those in the oil and gas sector, for example, that they have for some time identified former service personnel as ideal candidates to fill many of the much publicised skills gaps and vacancies in that sector. What effect the current downturn in the oil price will have on those opportunities for veterans is uncertain, but the natural fit seems set to continue to be of mutual benefit.

That example also illustrates the benefit, indeed the necessity, of good collaborative working between different stakeholders. Oil & Gas UK and OPITO have worked closely with the enterprise agencies and veterans groups to identify and open up those opportunities. Without such a joined-up approach, it is difficult to see how much could have been achieved on behalf of those transitioning back into civilian life.

That focus on collaboration is a theme of Eric Fraser's report. He rightly praises the Glasgow veterans employment programme, which is run by Glasgow's helping heroes and Glasgow City Council. Under the scheme, a wage subsidy is paid to employers taking on ex-servicemen and women aged between 25 and 49 who would otherwise not qualify for employment support. That allows existing skills to be adapted to provide a better fit with the civilian job market. The benefits of that, on top of delivering employment for veterans, are estimated to be in the region of £17 million through increased economic activity and reduced benefit costs.

I was also interested to hear about the project run by Forth Valley Chamber of Commerce called

veterans into new employment, which is an initiative, with backing from the MOD, Poppyscotland and others, that recognises the transferable skills that many service leavers have that can be applied to running their own businesses.

I will turn to the needs of younger service leavers. The cabinet secretary will be aware that Mr Fraser has identified a number of improvements that can and should be made to support that group. Specifically, there is a call for the Scottish Government to

“consider introducing flexibility to relax the age restrictions, extending the eligibility for criteria within 'Opportunities for All' for Early Service Leavers.”

Those entering the services at an early age may not have had a chance to improve their educational qualifications during their short military service but may find that, when they leave, they are already too old to benefit from opportunities for all. That would seem straightforward to fix and, like Bruce Crawford, I very much hope that the cabinet secretary and his officials will find a way to resolve the situation in the near future.

Keith Brown: There is flexibility up to the age of 24. For example, somebody who joined the services at 18 on a three-year short-service engagement would be eligible to take up those opportunities for some years. However, given the points that Liam McArthur and Bruce Crawford made, I undertake to look at the situation further.

Liam McArthur: I thank the cabinet secretary for that intervention.

Eric Fraser calls for the Scottish Government and Skills Development Scotland to

“consider actively promoting modern apprenticeships to early service leavers and to their potential employers.”

Although it might be slightly surprising that that has not been happening to date, Keith Brown gave a fairly accurate assessment of the situation. Again, I welcome his commitment to look at what more can be done to make this information more widely available.

As I have said, many leaving the service do so very successfully thanks, to a greater or lesser extent, to the support that they receive from a wide range of agencies. It is no secret, however, that some struggle. In that context, I will concentrate my concluding remarks, as Joan McAlpine did, on the issue of mental health. That is an absolute priority for me personally and for the Liberal Democrats more generally.

Stigma surrounding mental ill health is a problem for our society as a whole, but for those with a background in the services it can often be markedly worse, for the reasons highlighted by Stewart Maxwell. I am delighted therefore that the

Liberal Democrats have pledged an extra £10 million to help support servicemen and women suffering from mental health problems. That more than doubles the money that is currently available to help veterans overcome problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder and is part of a £3.5 billion investment in improving mental health provision, from which Scotland would benefit significantly. That money would also help to provide support in relation to alcohol and drug misuse and dual diagnosis of substance misuse and mental health problems. It would allow for investment in services such as community-based therapy and short-stay hospital treatment, and more targeted employment support to help get people back into work.

We ask our armed forces to put their lives on the line for our country. It is only right that as a country we provide servicemen and women with the support that they need thereafter to fulfil their potential and to make the valuable contribution that they wish to make and we wish to see them make.

The cabinet secretary opened his very well-judged remarks by drawing attention to the genuine and firm cross-party consensus that exists on veterans issues. He is absolutely right about that and that consensus—along with the insights of the veterans commissioner and the tireless work of Poppyscotland, the British Legion, Erskine, citizens advice bureaux and many others—gives me confidence that we will see further improvements in the future, allowing veterans to make the positive contribution that we all wish to see.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

I understand that my colleague gave members up to seven minutes for their speeches. I am afraid that I must ask members to keep to their seven minutes.

15:56

Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in the debate because it was my good fortune, in more than 30 years of running a business, to have the opportunity to employ and work with a number of armed forces veterans. Some of them were among the very best people I have ever worked with. All of them brought valuable qualities to our workforce. Part of that was a healthy and intelligent attitude to work; part of it was an ability to fit in constructively with a team; and part of it was a loyalty to, and a regard for, the safety and wellbeing of other members of the team, which is of crucial importance on building sites.

All those qualities are important and have a valuable place in any workforce, but what was

truly outstanding and remarkable about the veterans I employed over the years was the self-discipline that they brought to bear. They would always arrive on time for work with their boots polished. I was never greatly concerned about the boots being polished, but I greatly admired their self-discipline, which manifested itself in every aspect of their work.

Along with that went pride in their work—pride in a task well accomplished or a job well done. From that in turn arose a sense of dignity—that quality that has been described as the dignity of labour. It is an attitude that manifests itself in the belief that even the smallest and seemingly most unimportant task is worth doing well. When quality is our aim, it can only be truly delivered when we take that approach. The whole can only be greater than the sum of its parts when each part of our various labours is delivered with care and with the wish to deliver our respective parts well. In the business context, that—for me, anyway—is the basis of real, long-lasting and sustainable wealth creation.

From my experience, that sense of personal worth and dignity is a quality that, although it is not exclusive to armed forces veterans, is certainly more prevalent in veterans. From that dignity springs an unassuming self-confidence that is an all-too-rare quality. It is an easy confidence that allows for good and accurate communication. The veterans I worked with were always happy to come and tell me about problems and discuss them in honest and constructive terms. I found that to be invaluable. Any business that does not have that constructive dialogue and feedback loop with its employees denies itself the full opportunity of real and meaningful improvement in what it does.

I must also say that, when I employed tradesmen who learned their trade in the armed services, not only were they true masters of their craft but they had a can-do and problem-solving attitude that was equally valuable.

I have dwelled on those qualities at some length because I am aware that our veterans do not always enjoy such positive perceptions. Part of that seems to go hand in hand with the nature of the employment that they undertake on our behalf. As a nation, we in Scotland have a healthy distaste for war, but it is unfortunate when that spills over into misguided perceptions that affect the individuals involved. In my experience, such negative perceptions do not match the reality.

I am glad that our cabinet secretary with responsibility for veterans—the first minister in any of the UK nations to have such a responsibility—is a veteran himself and understands veterans' needs. I am glad that he has wasted no time in appointing Eric Fraser, who is a veteran himself, as the Scottish veterans commissioner, and that

the commissioner has in turn wasted no time in producing the insightful “Transition in Scotland” report, which details a number of practical suggestions for improvement.

Scotland has a good record of looking after its veterans, but improvements can be made, and we need to take care not to overstate the negative aspects of the challenges facing veterans. I am pleased to share my positive experiences of employing veterans in the hope that other employers will recognise the many good qualities that veterans bring to their work and the valuable contributions that they can make to any business and to Scotland at large.

16:01

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak about the contribution of our veterans and I note that, while those who serve in the armed forces play a vital role in protecting our national security, the contribution that they can and do make to society does not end when they leave the services. Like other members, I declare an interest: my maternal grandfather rose to the rank of major, along the way winning the military cross in the Gordon Highlanders, and I am the nephew of a Pay Corps staff sergeant and a cousin of someone who reached the rank of captain in the Royal Engineers. This is a subject close to my heart, and I echo the comments from colleagues and welcome the tone that has been struck in the debate.

In recent months, there have been two important reports published on the support that is available for veterans as they transition to civilian life. One report, entitled “Six years on: Revisiting the Employment Support Needs of Veterans in Scotland”, is a follow-up to Poppyscotland’s 2009 research into the employment support needs of veterans. The other report, entitled “Transition in Scotland”, is the first report from the veterans commissioner, Eric Fraser, and was showcased at an event that was hosted by Alex Fergusson here in the Parliament just a few short weeks ago.

It is important to acknowledge, as Poppyscotland’s report does, the developments that have taken place since the first piece of work was published in 2009. New resources dedicated to supporting veterans who are transitioning to civilian life have been introduced during the intervening period and we have made progress. There has been a renewed political focus on meeting veterans’ needs, which has resulted in developments such as the establishment of a minister with responsibility for veterans in Scotland and the UK-wide adoption of the armed forces covenant. More recently, Eric Fraser—who is in

the public gallery today—has been appointed as the veterans commissioner.

There has been a growing understanding of veterans’ transition and employment support needs, partly as a result of studies by Lord Ashcroft, the Forces in Mind Trust, the Royal British Legion and Poppyscotland. There has been an increase in partnership working among support agencies, and a range of new services for those who struggle with securing employment. Partnership working in a general sense will be critical as we move forward.

It is important to acknowledge, as other members have, that most veterans make a successful transition to civilian life. However, Poppyscotland released some concerning data on veterans’ employment last year. The veterans commissioner notes that those figures come from only one source, but, whichever way one looks at them they appear to demonstrate that, although progress has been made, we still have some way to go.

With regard to specific areas in which progress requires to be made, the commissioner highlights that some employers see veterans, and especially older service leavers, as aggressive, inflexible or difficult to manage—as “mad, bad or sad”—which is a phrase that I think Eric Fraser used at the parliamentary event. That has to change. These people may often have fought in dangerous conditions, but just because they have had such experiences does not mean that they cannot integrate back into civilian life or that they should not be fully supported to do so.

Lord Ashcroft and the Forces in Mind Trust have recommended the adoption of personal development plans. Those would provide a record of qualifications, training, education and achievements for all service personnel, for which—as Eric Fraser acknowledges—the cabinet secretary has been advocating for some time.

We need to make sure that employers and educational institutions understand that the skills, experience and qualifications that service personnel have gained during their time in the military can make them a real asset.

I understand that work is on-going in the case of educational institutions; for example, Glasgow Caledonian University’s learning partnership works with the armed forces, three colleges in the city and Glasgow’s Helping Heroes. The scheme is open to armed forces personnel who are nearing the end of their time in the military and are considering a return to education to further develop their skills. Opportunities to study for qualifications at a number of levels are on offer. Applicants are invited to make a recognition of prior learning claim, so that they can tell the

organisers about their previous learning, including the valuable knowledge gained through work and life experiences.

More widely, further education colleges throughout Scotland offer upskilling programmes to early service leavers, and those leaving the armed forces can utilise their exit grants to pursue such courses.

Although gaining employment is not a panacea, it can help to solve other problems such as securing housing or tackling the self-esteem issues that some suffer from. We should recognise that although some service personnel leave through choice, others have had no option, and some have been handed their P45 while on the front line, which is a disgrace. The Poppyscotland report notes that, for some veterans, it is not just the gaining of employment that can assist in those ways. For some the social aspects of employment services are as important as the potential of getting a job. A number of veterans with employment support needs face a myriad of complex and interrelated social, employment and health challenges. It may be that getting assistance relating to the world of work leads to veterans being directed to support that they require for other parts of their lives.

Twice last year I spoke in the chamber on the issue of veterans and highlighted the Houses for Heroes project in Carnoustie. I am delighted to advise the cabinet secretary that the project, which he launched symbolically by beginning the demolition of the old folks home that was on the site, is coming to fruition. Construction of the five properties is complete and tenancy discussions are under way.

The commissioner very much highlighted in his report the need to ensure that those leaving the forces have information on housing options. As with information on education, it is important that information on housing provided to service leavers in Scotland is tailored to the Scottish system. The Scottish Government currently provides “A Scottish housing guide for people leaving the armed forces and ex-service personnel”. Multiple councils throughout the country provide their own leaflets and information packs, and in Angus, service leavers can accrue housing points ahead of returning to civilian life. It is to Scotland’s credit that, outside of London, we have the most bed spaces dedicated to veterans. Organisations providing that accommodation include the Scottish Veterans Residence, Houses for Heroes, Haig Housing and Erskine. Many of those groups were founded in the aftermath of world war one, and yet they are continuing to provide an invaluable service.

All charities use the common housing register, which is hosted by Veterans Scotland. That

system, which makes use of a single database and a single application form, has been recognised by York university for its impact on meeting an important need.

It is also key, when looking at this topic, to remember that veterans’ families may face difficulties in the move away from the forces. It is a big change for all involved and veterans’ families, such as spouses who found it difficult to progress their own careers owing to moving frequently or being posted overseas, may well need support too. Those people also have a lot to offer and there is a need to ensure that their wellbeing is catered for.

Presiding Officer, when our service personnel come to leave the forces, they will have done their bit for the country. In return, we must surely make certain that they can continue to have fulfilling lives and get a fair deal after they return to civilian life.

16:08

Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab): It is a pleasure for me to speak on the subject of making the most of our veterans’ contribution to Scotland. As some members will know, I have served in the Territorial Army for many years—and managed to hit my own targets, members will be pleased to know. I am also on the board of the Lowland Reserve Forces and Cadets Association. I also have links with ABF the Soldiers Charity—formerly the Army Benevolent Fund—which helped more than 750 soldiers, veterans and their families in Scotland last year alone.

I have been made aware of the wide spectrum of support that is needed to help our former servicemen and women adapt to civil life—or civilian life, as we know it in parliamentary language. The public tend to be very aware of military charities that deal with headline-grabbing issues such as mental health, the wounded in action and, to a lesser degree, residential care. That is vital work, which has a higher cost per case, but it is for a comparatively small number of veterans.

When we look at the contribution that our veterans have made, we need to acknowledge the large number of them who need lower-cost support to deal with the consequences of returning to civilian life. For example, many ex-service personnel and their families had many aspects of their lives managed by the services. Once they leave the services, many of them have to try to access housing, education, employment and, in some cases, benefits for the first time in many years; indeed, for some of them, it will be first time in their lives that they have had to do so.

Please note that I repeatedly talk about veterans and their families separately, as they are a very important part of our community. I would like to acknowledge the work of the three services charities—the Royal Navy and Royal Marines Charity, ABF the Soldiers Charity and the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund—in quietly continuing to provide vital support to many veterans and their families in Scotland.

I turn to what I feel is an injustice in the Scottish Government's charging guidelines for social care. I fully support the insult to injury campaign that is run by Poppyscotland and the Royal British Legion. It is unacceptable that injured veterans who have been awarded compensation should have most of it taken away to cover the costs of social care. I am not making a political point here. I understand that social care services are under pressure as a result of the SNP's policy of freezing the council tax, but clawing back money from injured veterans and other vulnerable people is deeply distasteful.

I want to keep the discussion as non-political as possible, because I know that the issue is more important than politics. I know friends, relatives and constituents who have been in the armed forces and who have come to harm, but it is more painful to witness that harm and to see that there is not much that an individual can do to support them. Instead of having to rely on charities, such veterans should be able to rely on government, whether local, national or regional. Government needs to fulfil that role.

When a serviceman or servicewoman signs on the dotted line, they know that they are volunteering to put their life on the line for their country.

Keith Brown: I have a question to put to Hanzala Malik. Around a third of local authorities in Scotland do not claw back that money. If he feels as strongly as he appears to feel about that issue—he is quite entitled to feel that way, as I do—does he not agree that the best way of dealing with it would be for the UK Government, which is the authority that oversees pensions and benefits, to simply say that such moneys should be disregarded when it comes to care costs? That would be a simple way of doing it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will reimburse you the time.

Hanzala Malik: That is very kind of you, Presiding Officer.

It is very easy to blame the other person and say that it is a reserved matter, but we should be able to make those decisions ourselves. We have done so in many cases. It is all about priorities and recognising the contribution that our servicemen and women make. It is important that we give

them the support that they need. When someone serves overseas on the front line, they need to know that they have the support of members of the community and that hearts and minds are behind them so that if, God forbid, they should come to any harm, there will be someone there to pick up the pieces and to support them and their family. That is very important.

Indeed, I would go further. I think that the Scottish Government should examine the possibility of providing our veterans with free public transport, because they are a group who, like our pensioners, deserve such a contribution from our Government.

It is important that we recognise the contribution that our servicemen and women make—I know that the cabinet secretary does recognise it. I take on board what all the members who have spoken today have said. I genuinely believe that everyone feels as passionately about this subject as I do—I am not anybody special. However, I will say that we need to do more for our men and women who actually put their lives on the line.

Bruce Crawford: Would Hanzala Malik accept that the Scottish Government already ensures that veterans who have been injured have free public transport? Is he really suggesting that we should now extend that to every one of the 400,000 veterans in Scotland?

Hanzala Malik: Yes, I am. Why not? What is the big problem? I am not questioning anyone's sentiment—I am making that absolutely clear. All I am saying is that we need to be there for our community. We need to be there for our pensioners and our veterans. There is no harm in looking at that suggestion. I am not saying that it must be started tomorrow; I am just asking the Government to look at the possibility of doing it.

Bruce Crawford: Would Hanzala Malik extend that to all the ambulancemen, policemen and firefighters who have been involved in public service?

Hanzala Malik: I think that you are clutching at straws now; there is no need for that. I am talking about those people who sign on the dotted line, knowing that they are putting their lives at risk. There is a huge difference between those people and people from other walks of life. Please do not misunderstand what I am trying to say.

Let us respect our veterans to the hilt. If that means giving them a free bus ride, why not?

16:17

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I welcome the debate and its tone. It is a very important debate for me, because we have a sizeable community of veterans in my constituency and the armed forces

are an important part of life in Renfrewshire. The county has more Victoria cross recipients for its area than any other part of the Commonwealth.

I do not wish to sound like my colleague Stewart Stevenson when I talk about this, but a soldier from Kent called Stephen Gifford married a Paisley woman called Margaret Clark in the early 1800s. If he had not married that woman and settled down in Paisley, my family may not have been from the town of Paisley.

Members: No!

George Adam: That one incident changed history to that extent. Stephen Gifford was a member of the 57th regiment, which fought in the peninsular wars. In one battle, 422 of 570 men died, so he was one of 148 survivors—a very lucky individual.

That kind of background is common in the demography of my constituency, so it is not unusual that we have such a connection with the armed forces. It is only logical that many young men and women from our area join the services.

As the local MSP, I work with the local branch of Legion Scotland in Paisley, which is known as the comrades club. It does not have a number, which is very unusual in the Legion: we just like to be different that way. Some of the cases that we work on are very difficult. I work with its welfare officer on many challenging issues, including housing. Those who make appointments with the welfare officer on a Saturday or Sunday have to ensure that they have a taxi to take them home, because there is a good chance that they will not be able to drive afterwards. That is one thing about working with Legion Scotland.

I will talk about some of the issues that veterans in my constituency are dealing with. As I said, housing is one of them. It is good to see that recommendations 1 and 2 in the Scottish veterans commissioner's report mention that housing is so important. A number of charities in my area provide housing for veterans, but a lot of the housing stock is getting quite old and has not had the investment that it needs. It is only right that we ensure that we can work with those charities. However, those charities must be responsible when dealing with members of the armed forces and show some form of leadership. We have a strange situation in which you can take a man or woman out of the army, but you cannot take the army discipline out of them.

I met an individual who was having difficulty with one of the charities. He did not have a boiler in his home and he was being refused one, but he kept sitting there because the charity was like an army structure. There was an officer, or someone who had been an officer, and he was calling that gentleman "sir" when we were just trying to get

him some basic things that he needed for his property. I had to say to him, "We're here to represent you and make sure you can get what you need for your home. You're not in the army any more." That is part of what we are dealing with when we deal with veterans, because many of them have that mindset, having spent a lot of their life in the services. We spend a lot of time discussing a handful of houses, which should not be the case.

One of the other things that are shocking is that, when we go to armed forces days or remembrance Sunday, we see that the demography of the men and women who are marching or taking part in the parades is changing. They are becoming younger because of some of the conflicts that we have had, which creates further challenges in dealing with their reintegration to civilian life. There are many problems with young men and women coming out of the forces in their mid-20s after having signed up in their teens. They have a sudden realisation that they have to pay their own bills and balance their own cheque books. Not having a basic financial background is a problem for many young men and women coming out of the forces.

I have a constituent who got the military cross when he was in Afghanistan, before being made redundant. He had money because he had been on six tours in Iraq and three in Afghanistan. The Army had looked after him during that period, but when he came out of the armed forces he went on a six-month absolute binge with all the money that he had saved up. No doubt he had a fantastic six months, but after that he had absolutely nothing. He went for housing, did not know how to pay all his bills and had difficulties for a number of years. Luckily, he is now moving forward with his life, but that is not an unusual story with young men and women coming out of service. Our armed forces and our society need to look at that to ensure that we are supporting those young people when they come out of the forces.

It is my belief that how we support our veterans is one of the factors on which we can judge our society. Earlier, I mentioned my distant relative, Stephen Gifford. He was lucky enough to be pensioned off and to travel before settling in Paisley, but that is not the norm. As I have already mentioned, financial problems are always an issue when it comes to service personnel, and they find it difficult to get support. They do not all join the legion and talk to the welfare officer, and many of them do not walk into my office and discuss their issues with me. We need to find a way of locating those young and older men and women so that we can work with them to support them.

Christine Grahame: Could the MOD do more than it is doing at the moment to integrate people

in their transition into the community? Everybody has good wishes, but I feel that there is a role for the MOD to ensure that the period of transition is smooth.

George Adam: There definitely is such a role: to be fair to the MOD, it is trying to work on packages at the moment, but it is still not enough. Those young men and women are having difficulty; that is one of the most important things. If we cannot ensure that those people can be part of life and pay their bills and get on with it, how are we going to say that we are supporting those young and older service personnel?

We are dealing with people who have defended their country—some of whom have made the ultimate sacrifice. When we deal with those who have gone to places where Governments have told them to go, we need to ensure that we can look after those service personnel when they come back. That is how we are judged as a society; our doing that shows that we actually care.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call Rob Gibson, I invite members who have participated in the debate to come back to the chamber for closing speeches, which will take place after Mr Gibson's speech.

16:24

Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): I am delighted to be contributing to this debate on veterans. The motion recognises

"the challenges facing veterans transitioning to civilian life",

as do I. I also agree with the motion that

"their training, skills, sense of duty and discipline mean that employers and companies benefit greatly from employing veterans".

I want to concentrate on the part of the commissioner's report that deals with employability support models. There are two aspects to consider: the personnel who are about to be made redundant and will return to civvy street; and the people who want to provide services for them.

Employability support models include the approaches that the commissioner has suggested should be included in a personal development plan. People leaving the forces have to get the information about the kinds of courses that are suited to their skills. I understand that the careers transition partnership and the enhanced learning credit administration system, which helps with the costs of learning in nationally accredited schemes for veterans to take part in, must be geared up to deal with Scottish conditions. Recommendation 12 of the report says:

"The Scottish Government, its agencies and Scottish Local Authorities should work with the UK Government to ensure that the new Personal Development Plan and related course modules are relevant to those settling in Scotland."

In my constituency in the north of Scotland, a gentleman called Mike Ellis provides courses on which people learn outdoor skills. He runs a one-man operation called Helmsdale Charcoal and Coppice, which offers a woodsman course to level 3. That requires five days' practical training, so it requires residential work, which makes for another disadvantage in terms of providing that course in the north at Helmsdale, which is quite far along the far north railway line, and is just before Caithness on the A9.

Mr Ellis has been offering the courses to individuals. The course recognises the potential for trainees to enjoy the skills that are associated with outdoor pursuits. It builds on the discipline and confidence in practical work that woodsmanship entails. Using hand tools in woodland settings can be very therapeutic. There is potential in the north of Scotland to provide that, and Mr Ellis's company is a good example of a small business that is providing something for which there is a need. However, there are difficulties in so doing.

Mr Ellis is the only person in the UK who provides the course to level 3. The careers transition partnership tends to focus on large providers; it tends not to focus on people who are geared up to providing fairly small courses—which, of course, could expand. Mr Ellis says that, when he talks to the careers transition people, he is told to show that there is a demand. However, the point is that he can supply the service, but the careers transition people have to show veterans that it is possible to take advantage of such courses.

Mr Ellis's work has been featured on BBC Scotland's "Landward" and on the BBC's "Countryfile". Woodsmanship is a great skill that is needed in many outdoor jobs that are well suited to veterans. Indeed, across much of rural Scotland, there is a need for people with veterans' skills, dedication and discipline. The careers development people recognise that. The One Awards organisation, which handles accreditation and matches up English and Scottish awards, has said that for the past two years military personnel under their occupational resettlement or rehabilitation scheme returning to duties have been offered the course to develop their skills and experience, so that they can start their own woodsman and coppice businesses in other places. We should try to encourage the potential for such skills to be built up for people to enjoy. Mr Ellis has been invited to go to the South

Lanarkshire Council area to offer his courses to veterans there.

I make a plea in that, when we are looking at how the Scottish Government operates and co-ordinates such matters, we recognise that there is the potential for courses in rural parts of Scotland and people out there who could offer those courses and who want to be a part of that.

One of the findings in the commissioner's report is:

"If Service Leavers settling in Scotland are not to be disadvantaged, military skills must be mapped to Scottish qualifications."

I have dealt with that. There is also a need to take a comprehensive look at the policies and the support that is available in Scotland for opening access to further and higher education for service leavers of all ages. Mr Ellis is a good example of somebody who is providing that education to level 3, which is the best that can be offered. We must enable him to get over the disadvantages of his location and ensure that the support services in the personal development packages are given a chance to get to where those courses are. I hope that the Government will take that proposal on board and that we can unite behind it.

16:31

Jackson Carlaw: This afternoon has been hugely enjoyable. We have had a constructive debate and I have enjoyed listening to the speeches from all sides of the chamber.

I offer some assistance to the official reporters, who have been somewhat discombobulated by my assertion that I might have been a teenager when the film "The Shawshank Redemption" came out. Although it is true that, for most Conservatives of a certain age, life began in 1979—I was 15 at that time—it is not altogether fair to suggest that I was a teenager when the film came out.

I thank Mr Maxwell and Mr Crawford for their references to my having flown in biplanes and Sopworth Camels. Were that true, I would also have to thank Mr Maxwell for the many years of experience that he brought to servicing those aircraft at the time.

I was amused by George Adam's speech. My introduction—this time as a teenager—to the military triumphs of Paisley was through a fictional account by George MacDonald Fraser of the life of Harry Flashman. I read with some entertainment that he picked up his first wench, as he put it, on the grass outside Paisley abbey. Were that not a fictional account, I might well have believed that the rakish antecedents of Mr Adam found their favour in that exchange—however, maybe it was allegorical.

Moving to the substance of the debate, I will touch on the Labour amendment. I said nothing about it in my opening speech, expecting to hear a bit more of the narrative supporting it, but I now realise that Mr Macintosh is going to deal with that in his summing-up speech. A number of colleagues around the chamber are slightly uncomfortable about the idea that we might end up with a division later. Although I am sympathetic to the sentiments that underpin the amendment, I think that the issue is slightly more complicated—there is a UK Government dynamic to it as well as a Scottish Government one. Conversations are taking place, and I, too, would appreciate not being put in an awkward position. In any event, I do not think that the amendment would advance matters. I leave it to Mr Macintosh to develop Labour's position in his closing speech.

There have been a lot of speeches that I have enjoyed considerably. Normally, Mike MacKenzie is a bastion of partisan invective that is directed at me and others on this side of the chamber, yet today he made a hugely positive and compelling speech on employment.

In previous debates in which we have talked about the rehabilitation of offenders in society, I have stated that, having been in the Scottish motor trade for 25 years, I think that there is an obligation on employers—if one believes in the principle of rehabilitating offenders—to create opportunities for offenders in businesses that offer appropriate careers. It occurs to me that we should perhaps take a more proactive approach to employers and seek to establish a body that would look to participate in the kind of personal development plans that Rob Gibson talked about. I am thinking of the Scottish Motor Trade Association and organisations such as the one that is presided over by Sir Arnold Clark. Such organisations are represented across Scotland's communities and have a mix of employment opportunities.

I suppose that I am being slightly narrow in looking at what are traditionally male areas of employment, but those organisations have camaraderie, discipline and a quite structured approach to the development of a multiplicity of careers. I always felt that to be the case in the retail motor industry, which I was involved in. I just wonder whether we might look beyond the retail motor industry to a broader list of employers. I think that many employers would be willing to participate if they thought that they were contributing in some way to the re-entry of the armed forces community in society.

There were strong contributions on the subject of mental health. Joan McAlpine talked at length about post-traumatic stress, which is an absolutely key issue. The mental health issue is typical of the

issue that prevails in society more generally. It is very often simply depression—depression that has grown out of the difficulties faced by those re-entering society not getting access to employment opportunities or housing.

Although we have—rightly—spoken constructively and positively, I suppose that there may be a little acid in the drink when we reflect on the fact that too many of our ex-servicemen end up with custodial sentences, too many are registered as homeless and too many suffer complicated issues arising from access to alcohol, or from depression and other general mental health issues. We have a huge responsibility to accept that there must be investment in services that, to an extent, are slightly more specialised than the services that are needed by those in the general population who suffer from those conditions.

I touched on the subject of charitable status. I think that we must recognise that there is an issue. I have talked about how the public perception of the armed forces has grown, which has led to a tremendous rise in charitable giving to armed forces charities. Many have been set up for the best of reasons, but they will perhaps not all prove to be sustainable. As we move beyond this period, during which so much has been open and made demonstrably apparent to us, having been brought home to us through parades and armed forces day in the summer, the reality is that some charities will not be able to sustain themselves. There will be a difficult and uncomfortable conversation—it is one that we, as politicians, may have to be prepared to participate in and lead—about a number of charities probably having to amalgamate and or having to be carefully targeted going forward, if we are not to find that some of them get into difficulties that become quite counterproductive and unfortunate. That is a huge responsibility.

Charitable giving may start to decline, so the huge amount of money involved may lessen slightly. The responsibility of Governments in the future—because our responsibility for veterans extends into the future—will be one that we must be prepared to meet and a challenge to which we must rise.

It has been a constructive debate and I thank all members who participated in it. We will support the motion.

16:38

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Scottish veterans commissioner's transition report. It is clear that there is nothing in the report to which any of the parties across the chamber would take exception. There are a

number of sensible recommendations, and we look forward to the Government taking them forward.

Even clearer are the feelings of warmth and respect expressed by every single member towards our armed forces, early service leavers and veterans. Nearly every single member told a personal story about themselves, their family or someone they know. That reveals our emotional connection with and empathy for veterans.

The report flags up issues around housing, employment and health that must be addressed. Those issues were reflected in a number of the speeches. Christine Grahame talked about the need to tackle the problems created by alcohol dependency; Jayne Baxter pointed to the need for more and better housing; and Graeme Dey highlighted the work of Glasgow Caledonian University in improving education and qualifications for veterans.

I was struck by the many examples of good practice cited in the report, particularly from our local authorities and the third sector. The support offered to our veterans by the city of Glasgow, for example, was singled out for praise. I am sure that that was not a surprise to any of my colleagues who represent that city.

I recently had the good fortune to visit Bellrock Close in Cranhill, which is a fantastic new housing support service in the east end of Glasgow that the Scottish Veterans Housing Association runs in partnership with others on behalf of Scottish Veterans Residences.

Bellrock Close provides exceptionally high-quality accommodation, but it is also very much geared towards providing the transitional support that is the subject of the debate. Every veteran has a dedicated key worker and a support team to help them access additional services in areas such as health, welfare benefits, further education, volunteering and job searches, up to the point at which the veteran secures a home in the community and is ready to move on. From speaking to residents, it was clear to me that they hugely valued that service and benefited from it.

I was also pleased that the commissioner's report acknowledges the role and importance of having high-profile public champions who provide political leadership. In my local authority area, East Renfrewshire, the council leader Jim Fletcher is particularly active in promoting the interests of ex-services personnel. East Renfrewshire Council has worked with other authorities—particularly Renfrewshire Council and Inverclyde Council—on jointly training customer service advisers to ask the right questions so that they identify veterans and signpost them to specialist advice services for housing, employment, benefits or medical

treatment. In that task, they are ably supported in my constituency by the local citizens advice bureau. Bruce Crawford mentioned the ASAP service in his constituency, and in my area, we have a specialist veterans adviser in the CAB.

Other members drew attention to a number of welcome initiatives. Dave Stewart talked about the armed forces parliamentary scheme, although I am not sure whether he was trying to encourage us or put us off with the idea of a flight in a Tornado.

I thank Stewart Maxwell for highlighting armed forces legal action, the discounted legal service that was started by Allan Steele. AFLA is doing excellent work and I understand that it is about to expand into America.

I thank all members for their contributions. The report from the veterans commissioner and the debate have provided many examples of good practice and encouragement as well as an analysis of what needs to be done if we are properly to support former members of the armed forces as they move into civilian life.

No matter how consensual the debate and how much agreement there is across the chamber, it would be wrong to have a debate on veterans in Scotland without making reference to the insult to injury campaign, which Poppyscotland and the Royal British Legion launched in January this year. Most members will have received at least one letter, if not more, from veterans who are affected by the issues that it raises.

I will outline the essence of the campaign. Veterans who were injured in service on or before 5 April 2005 receive a war disablement pension. Those with a similar injury but who were injured on or after 6 April 2005 receive compensation under the armed forces compensation scheme.

There is widespread variation in Scotland as to whether those injured veterans are able to keep all their compensation or are expected to use it to pay for care. Having conducted a comprehensive survey, Poppyscotland believes that only a third of war disablement pensions are fully disregarded—I think that the cabinet secretary quoted that figure a few minutes ago.

There are also variations between the treatment of war pensioners who were injured before 2005 and the treatment of veterans who have been injured since then and are in receipt of armed forces compensation. To put it bluntly, an injury from the Falklands conflict seems to count for less than one that was suffered in Afghanistan.

The Scottish Government's guidance for residential care suggests that the Government take all but the first £10 a week of a veteran's compensation. That does not compare well with

the situation in the rest of the UK, where at least armed forces compensation scheme payments are disregarded. It is also worth highlighting, by comparison, the fact that local authorities are required to exempt compensation that has been awarded to civilians who have been injured in the workplace.

The British Legion and Poppyscotland can see no reason for the disparity between the treatment of injured veterans and that of war pensioners in the social care system, and I have to say that I agree with them. I am sure that no member in the chamber believes that it is fair that disabled war pensioners should be treated differently from other injured veterans. I am also sure that there is no one in the chamber who thinks that it is acceptable that war pensioners should be treated less favourably than civilians who have been injured in the workplace.

That final point in particular demonstrates that the current situation is in breach of the armed forces covenant, which states that service personnel, veterans and their families should not be disadvantaged as a result of military service.

On an encouraging note, since the launch of the insult to injury campaign, many local authorities have considered or are considering their own charging practices and their discretionary powers. I am delighted to report that my own local authority has agreed to abolish any charges that it might have levied on veterans living in East Renfrewshire. That is clearly the right thing to do.

Poppyscotland is calling on the Scottish Government not just to harmonise the way that local authorities treat the two military compensation schemes but to revise existing charging guidelines so that all local authorities are required to fully disregard war disablement pensions in social care means testing.

I understand the points that were made by the cabinet secretary and by Jackson Carlaw. By the way, I thoroughly enjoyed Jackson Carlaw's opening and concluding speeches.

I am sure that all members recognise that military compensation is awarded as recompense for the pain, suffering and loss experienced by injured service personnel and veterans. Although I am slightly disappointed that we cannot all unite around our amendment, I ask the cabinet secretary to tell Parliament in his winding-up speech what progress he intends to make on the issue and when he will report back to Parliament.

In light of the cabinet secretary's remarks, I hope that my Labour colleagues and I will be able to ask the Presiding Officer whether we can withdraw our amendment. I do not wish to take anything away from the highly consensual debate

that we have had and the practical steps that we can take.

Earlier in the debate, my colleague Mary Fee talked about the importance of not discussing veterans as if the issue was a political football. I am going to take the brave step of disagreeing with her—the cabinet secretary might know what is coming next. Every year, to celebrate armed forces day, which falls on 27 June, the parliamentary team organises a game of football against RAF veterans—yes, Mr Crawford, it is the RAF again. Last year, Raith Rovers was generous enough to accommodate us as part of the club's commemoration of the centenary of the great war. Unfortunately, the RAF was a little bit too strong last year, and we will need to call up our own reserves for this year's fixture. I ask the cabinet secretary whether, as a reliable right back—or is it right midfield?—he is willing at least to pencil in the fixture. We are looking at the morning of 12 June. Any other members who fancy the chance to display their talents for a good cause should please let me know—Mr McArthur in particular.

The veterans commissioner concluded his report by calling on us to consider veterans as an asset to our communities, rather than simply as people in need. That point was made by the cabinet secretary, Dave Stewart, Liam McArthur and many other members, and it is a good message that we can unite around. We are pleased to support the first report of the Scottish veterans commissioner.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call on Keith Brown to respond to the debate. Cabinet secretary, we have a little bit of time in hand, so I can give you until 5 o'clock.

16:47

Keith Brown: Thank you, Presiding Officer. I am grateful to members for what, as others have said, has been a very constructive and thought-provoking debate. Some of the suggestions that have been made have certainly given me further food for thought, and they will be of great interest to the Scottish veterans commissioner, Eric Fraser, as he continues with his work.

The commissioner's future work will significantly shape what we do, either as the Scottish Government or in partnership with our strategic partners. Members will be aware that, in previous debates on support for the armed forces community in Scotland, I have rehearsed what had been delivered, what was in train and what would be examined, explored and developed. Members will also know that I have come to the chamber and reported on progress, pointing to our contribution to the UK Government's annual report on the armed forces covenant. It is fair to say that

our input into that document has been widely acknowledged and welcomed by the MOD, by the military, by veterans organisations and by the wider armed forces and veterans community. I suppose that I would say this anyway, but there is a great deal of regard around the rest of the UK for what we have managed to achieve for veterans in Scotland.

Members who have been here longer than I have might remember a very critical report that was made in 2007 by the House of Commons Health Committee, which was not at all complimentary about the services that our veterans received. We have come a long way since then.

We have reported back on what we have done, and we have always done that against the backdrop of our 2012 policy document, "Our Commitments", which I had the pleasure of launching at Edinburgh castle on 5 September 2012. Members may recall that that document set out in some detail what initiatives and programmes were being pursued across the Scottish Government within our devolved responsibilities. That is now under the day-to-day control of the director general for learning and justice, Leslie Evans, in her capacity as armed forces advocate.

"Our Commitments" was always intended to be a baseline document around which the Scottish Government would push new initiatives and workstreams in support of the armed forces veterans and their families. In that work, Leslie Evans has been ably and enthusiastically supported by external organisations such as Poppyscotland, Legion Scotland and, of course, Veterans Scotland, which I meet quarterly. Our work is also heavily influenced by the Scottish veterans commissioner, of course.

It is my view that it is time to refresh "Our Commitments" to give it more impetus and focus to address the range of new ideas, actions and challenges that have been identified through the work of the commissioner, our on-going discussions with our partners and suggestions that have been made today by Rob Gibson and others.

I heard a very good suggestion when I was over at tartan week in Canada recently. There is an app that people who have been in the armed forces can have in New Zealand and Australia. It says where all the veterans who want to subscribe to it are around the Commonwealth. If a person has served alongside the Australian army and happens to be in Australia, they can find their colleagues from that time. That is an excellent idea. We will look at those new ideas as well as some of the ideas that have been mentioned today.

I have asked the officials to embark on a programme of work to update "Our Commitments" with a view to publication in early 2016. In parallel with that, I will continue to highlight, promote and stress that the vast majority of men and women who serve in our armed forces do so with honour, distinction and pride, that they bring the full range of skills that they have honed during their service into civilian life, and that they are valuable assets to our communities.

Like Jackson Carlaw, I refer to the way that Mike MacKenzie spoke about the qualities of the veterans whom he had worked with. Mike MacKenzie also identified the very important quality of self-discipline, which the armed forces are very good at instilling in people. That is probably the most enduring quality that the armed forces can offer through their training and ethos.

As I have said, veterans are employees, employers, entrepreneurs and volunteers. On a previous visit to Canada, I saw a strong programme in which veterans were encouraged to move into franchising as entrepreneurs. The idea of being in charge of themselves but having a structure to work within appeals to veterans in many ways.

I will look to our strategic partners to help us with this task. I know that the military, Veterans Scotland, the wider ex-service charitable sector and the families federations have been helpful before and now fully endorse that stance.

I think that Graeme Dey mentioned families in particular. They are really coming into focus. People realise that many veterans issues that we deal with really should involve consideration of the families. People have talked about veterans in Graeme Dey's constituency going from 45 Commando to do three or four tours in Afghanistan. It is often not appreciated that, each time, that will have been preceded by a six or seven-month training period in which the service personnel will have been away from their families. Many of them will have found those training periods more stressful than being in Afghanistan, as they have been forced to be removed from their families. We have to concentrate on the effect on families.

I want to go back to some of the points that have been raised. Mary Fee quite rightly raised transition issues. I think that she asked whether we have examined those. We do generally, and we provided a response to the report that Lord Ashcroft produced tackling that. Much of the responsibility lies with the armed forces. We would like to have perhaps a more constructive relationship with the MOD in which it—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can I stop you for a moment, minister? I am sorry about this. Can

we have the back door closed? Thank you. I can hear noise.

Keith Brown: We have looked at that issue and will continue to look at it. Lord Ashcroft produced quite a useful report, which identified a number of areas. As I have said before, the armed forces should look at housing from day 1 of somebody's service career and what the person will do when they come out of housing. There are some schemes, but there are not enough of them, and they are not substantial enough to support those in the armed forces who want to buy a house, for example. Those schemes are not nearly well enough known about. In terms of education and future employment, a great deal could be done to structure people's careers in the armed forces so that they have the best chance of a career when they come out. We have made those points in the past.

I was going to mention Jackson Carlaw's reference to being a teenager and watching "The Shawshank Redemption". Perhaps I could not quite remember how long ago "The Shawshank Redemption" came out because I am of a similar age. I know that it is a favourite of my son, and I know exactly the scene that Jackson Carlaw talked about. It was the one in which the guy who had been in prison for nearly all his life came out and ended up forcing himself back into prison, because he felt more comfortable there. I think that he eventually took his own life because of that institution, which he had been so used to. I know that Jackson Carlaw did not try to portray veterans as similar in any way to people who are in prison, but it is true that not having a structure around them presents one of the biggest challenges for our veterans.

Stewart Maxwell mentioned the fire service, and he was right that I visited it. The person who was in charge—I am not sure exactly what his rank was—said that he had been told early on in his career always to try to ensure that there was a smattering of veterans in his force. He reckoned that they provided a stable, productive and reliable element, as well as the calmness under pressure that is essential to a good fire service.

I mentioned tartan week. While we were in New York, we went to see a veterans benefits agency. I was struck by the fact that, unlike our approach, when support is provided after somebody has left—

Stewart Maxwell: Will the minister take an intervention?

Keith Brown: Certainly.

Stewart Maxwell: The cabinet secretary talked about the good fit between the fire service and ex-forces personnel. I certainly share that view and mentioned it in my speech. Is he aware of any

groups that look at clear and obvious routes into employment, such as the fire service or other organisations that are suited to some members of the forces, and then link into the MOD and the forces before personnel leave? One of the problems that members have mentioned is the disconnect between leaving and getting into employment. Connections between organisations such as the fire service and the military while people are still in the military would be a good way of providing the smooth transition that we have all been talking about.

Keith Brown: That is a good point. Where I have seen that done most actively is in the motor trade, which is the area that Jackson Carlaw identified. For example, First has a good scheme that involves mainly mechanics. One of the things that we found out at the reception that was held by the cross-party group on armed forces veterans was that there is a shortage of heavy goods vehicle drivers, and a lot of qualified HGV drivers come out of the military. We need to effect that straightforward transition. Many individuals come out of the armed forces with telecommunications and IT skills, which are skills that we need in the workforce.

We are working on the point that Stewart Maxwell raises, although that is done better in some other countries. The UK Government is trying to address the issue through the corporate covenant, and we are doing one or two things to try to ensure that there are developments in Scotland.

We do not intend to expand the concessionary travel scheme in the way that Hanzala Malik suggests, as that would cost tens of millions of pounds, so it is a very serious proposition. I understand that he meant it in good faith, but we do not propose to do that at this time.

On the point that Christine Grahame raised about Persimmon Homes, we have looked at the issue, although we perhaps need more detail, perhaps from her, about the scheme. I undertake to take up with colleagues the issue of how we can make the apprenticeship scheme work better for veterans.

Many other members made tremendous speeches, so I apologise that I cannot mention them all.

Before I finish, I underline that the reality is that veterans are an invaluable asset to employers and to the community in Scotland. The flavour of the debate has been that all members share that view although, rightly, they did not want to gloss over some of the challenges that a small number of veterans face. We should continue to provide support for them. I ask members who have shared that view about the benefits of veterans to society

to undertake to communicate that on a personal level whenever they can, because that should really be the story.

That is a key plank of the commissioner's report, which we have discussed today. I hope that it is very much the beginning of the process of trying to get the message out there, even for veterans themselves. They often do not appreciate some of the skills and training that they have had and their relevance to civilian life. Graeme Dey made an important point about self-esteem. We can do a great deal.

Jackson Carlaw was right to say that one benefit just now is that there is popular support for veterans. People can distinguish the service of veterans from the fact that they have been sent to places by politicians, which is important. However, we cannot take that for granted in future, so we have to continue to work on it. I give my assurance that the Scottish Government will continue to strive to do everything that we can to support those who have served our country so well. That is not just about those who need our help with employment, health or education; it is about those who do not necessarily need our help but who need our support. We should be the advocates for our veterans when they come back into society, as real assets to companies across the country.

The main point of the debate is to highlight the extent to which veterans continue to do that. They transition to civilian life and produce tremendous work in the various fields that they go into. We have to ensure that we help those who find that a challenge, but we should also give credit to those who come out of the armed forces and play a productive role in our society.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on making the most of the contribution of veterans to Scotland.

Before we move to decision time, I call on Mary Fee to speak.

Mary Fee: Thank you, Presiding Officer. I am grateful to be given this opportunity. We had a very good debate this afternoon that was very consensual and positive. Following on from the very constructive comments that the cabinet secretary made about working with members across the chamber to resolve the issues around social care, I seek leave to withdraw my amendment.

Amendment, by agreement, withdrawn.

Decision Time

Meeting closed at 17:00.

17:00

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

There is one question to be put as a result of today's business. The question is, that motion S4M-13045, in the name of Keith Brown, on making the most of the contribution of veterans to Scotland, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament commends the contribution that the armed forces and veterans make to life in Scotland; welcomes publication of the report, *Transition in Scotland*, by the Scottish Veterans Commissioner; recognises the challenges facing veterans transitioning to civilian life but believes that their training, skills, sense of duty and discipline mean that employers and companies benefit greatly from employing veterans, and seeks a coordinated approach, bringing together public and private sector stakeholders, in removing barriers to Scotland's veterans realising their full potential.

Members who would like a printed copy of the *Official Report* to be forwarded to them should give notice to SPICe.

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