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Thursday 18 January 2018

CONTENTS

	Col.
GENERAL QUESTION TIME	1
South of Scotland Enterprise Agency (Interim Board).....	1
R100 Superfast Broadband Programme	3
NHS Grampian Waiting Times	5
Scottish Ambulance Service (Moray)	7
Pharmacies (Community Health).....	7
Glenrothes 70th Anniversary	8
FIRST MINISTER'S QUESTION TIME	10
Police Scotland.....	10
Care Homes.....	13
Food Train (North Ayrshire).....	16
Policing and Mental Health Demands	16
Kyle Laird.....	17
Save Our Bield Campaign	18
Impact of Short-term Letting	18
Scottish Conservatives (Devolved Powers)	20
Plastic Pollution	21
Scotch Whisky (Post-Brexit Customs Arrangements).....	22
Inshore Fishing Industry (Support)	23
Get It Minuted Campaign.....	24
Early Learning and Childcare Workforce.....	26
CENTENARY OF WOMEN IN THE BRITISH ARMED FORCES	28
<i>Motion debated—[Maurice Corry].</i>	
Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con)	29
Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP).....	31
Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con).....	32
Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab).....	34
Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con).....	36
The Minister for Employability and Training (Jamie Hepburn)	37
SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS	41
<i>Motion moved—[Jeane Freeman].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Annie Wells].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Monica Lennon].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Alex Cole—Hamilton].</i>	
The Minister for Social Security (Jeane Freeman)	41
Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con)	45
Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab)	48
Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD)	51
Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)	54
Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con)	57
Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP).....	59
Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP)	60
Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab).....	63
Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green).....	65
Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP).....	67
John Scott (Ayr) (Con)	70
Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)	73
Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)	75
Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)	77
Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP).....	80

Alex Cole-Hamilton	83
David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)	85
Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con)	88
Jeane Freeman	91
DECISION TIME	96

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 18 January 2018

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

General Question Time

South of Scotland Enterprise Agency (Interim Board)

1. **Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government when the full membership of the interim board for the south of Scotland enterprise agency will be announced. (S5O-01664)

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Jobs and Fair Work (Keith Brown): Membership of the south of Scotland economic partnership was announced on 17 January.

Colin Smyth: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer. Although he promised that the new board would be up and running by the end of last year, I very much welcome that he has—at last—announced its membership. I am sure that that had nothing whatsoever to do with the fact that my question was being asked today.

Does the cabinet secretary share the concerns of stakeholders, particularly those in the business community and the third sector locally, that they were not consulted on who the members of the interim board should be? Will he give an assurance that, when it comes to appointing the members of the full agency, that process will be led by stakeholders in the south of Scotland and not imposed from Edinburgh? Does he also accept the concerns of a number of local stakeholders that the £10 million budget that he has announced, which is about 15 per cent of the budget of Highlands and Islands Enterprise, will not deliver the transformational economic change that we need in the south of Scotland?

Keith Brown: I think that we should be willing to let Colin Smyth go along in his own little bubble, in which he is convinced that the announcement was due to a question that he was due to ask.

Colin Smyth referred to the £10 million for the agency. What did Labour do? Did Labour ever establish such an agency?

Members: No.

Keith Brown: Did Labour ever put £10 million into the south of Scotland?

Members: No.

Keith Brown: Colin Smyth's comments are absolute nonsense.

In a tweet, Mr Smyth attacked the board's membership, and there is an allegation that the members are Scottish National Party appointees. How biased are we if we have appointed people such as Lord Thurso, Wendy Alexander and Susan Deacon? Again, his comments are absolute nonsense. I wonder how Colin Smyth, as a local MSP, expects to have any productive relationship with that vitally important board if he attacks its members on the day of their appointment.

The interim board will make a big difference. It will lead to the establishment of the substantive body, for which we will bring forward legislation this year. The partnership has been established and will have £10 million to spend. That is far more than the Labour Party ever did in Dumfries and Galloway or in the rest of the Scottish Borders.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): I am pleased to see so many women on the interim board. The cabinet secretary will be aware that an economic challenge for the south of Scotland is that of encouraging young people to stay in or move to the area and to live and work there. How will the board seek to address that issue?

Keith Brown: I agree that securing diversity on the partnership was important. We are ambitious for the partnership. It has an opportunity to bring a fresh approach to tackling the challenges and opportunities in the south of Scotland. The partnership will deliver a prioritised work plan that is tailored to the needs of the area and informed by the views of people across the area. As I said, we have announced £10 million in additional resources to support it in its activities.

As part of its engagement, the partnership will want to seek the views of young people to shape its work. We want the south of Scotland to have a thriving economy in which young people have opportunities to develop skills, take up apprenticeships and have good-quality jobs, and we want it to be seen as an attractive place in which to live and work.

I know that Professor Griggs, the chair of the partnership, would be happy to meet the member to discuss the partnership's work.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I am encouraged by the wide breadth of knowledge and expertise of those appointed to the south of Scotland economic partnership. However, there seems to be lack of tech focus. Will the cabinet secretary outline whether the board will feed into and help to improve connectivity in the south of Scotland, and, if so, how it will do that? What role will the agency have in that regard?

Keith Brown: There is substantial technical expertise in the body. Perhaps Rachael Hamilton has just seen an announcement of the names of the board members. It may be worth while for her to investigate further and to find out the technical expertise of the members.

I am grateful for Rachael Hamilton's statement about the quality of the people on the board—that is the right approach to take. There are exceptional people on the board. As I said, we will bring forward proposals for the substantive body this year. That will, of course, allow us to have a chance to see the work of the current members and to think about the board's future composition.

We have acted on the matter quite quickly, as other parties in the chamber have asked us to do. I can give Rachael Hamilton an assurance on the engagement that she seeks to see happening, not least in relation to connectivity. For that reason, I am very pleased that hauliers, for example, are represented on the board. The board will take that work forward as part of its priorities and work plan.

I am happy to discuss the matter further with Rachael Hamilton if she feels that things are not progressing in the way that she would like.

R100 Superfast Broadband Programme

2. Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what impact the R100 superfast broadband programme will have on rural areas. (S5O-01665)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Connectivity (Fergus Ewing): The R100 superfast broadband programme will make rural Scotland one of the most digitally connected places anywhere in Europe and will underpin and enable future economic growth. It is the only universal superfast broadband programme in the United Kingdom, and it demonstrates the Scottish Government's ambition to make Scotland a world-class digital nation.

Stewart Stevenson: I very much welcome what the cabinet secretary has just said. Given that the Scottish Government seeks to make universally available broadband speed that is three times as fast as that which the UK Government plans to deliver, can the cabinet secretary identify any particular benefits that that higher speed in Scotland will have in rural areas?

Fergus Ewing: Mr Stevenson is correct. The UK Government might consider that 10 megabits per second is adequate for homes and businesses, but I certainly do not. That is why we have stipulated in our programme that we will seek to deliver 30 Mbps for every home and business in the country by the end of 2021.

The digital sector is now worth more than £4 billion to the Scottish economy, and research shows that every £1 of public investment in broadband returns around £20 in net economic impact. I believe that, through our investment of £600 million to deliver universal, 100 per cent access to superfast broadband, we will see created in Scotland a digital infrastructure that will allow businesses across the country—particularly in rural and remote areas—to modernise, digitalise, innovate and grow.

Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con): I welcome the £600 million that has been promised for the R100 programme, which will be spent in 2019 to 2021, but I find it exceptionally disappointing that the budget for digital connectivity this year has been slashed from £136 million to £58.5 million. Obviously, that will impact on rural premises in north-east Scotland, where people desperately need a decent broadband speed now. How can the cabinet secretary justify slashing this year's budget when so much remains to be done?

Fergus Ewing: The £600 million is the largest investment in any single broadband project ever in the UK. The money will be used when it is required, and not before it is required. That is how government is done.

Incidentally, if Mr Chapman and the Tories want to have any vestige of the ability to claim that they are standing up for Scotland, they should apply their attention to the fact that the UK's contribution to the £600 million for broadband provision, which is a reserved function, is a measly 3 per cent. Do the Tories support that? I think that we will have a prolonged period of radio, broadband and mobile silence from the Scottish Tories on that issue. Not one of them has the backbone to stand up for Scotland.

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): When will residents in rural Aberdeenshire, for instance, who regularly receive speeds of around 7 or 8 Mbps, find out when they will reach the promised 30 Mbps?

Fergus Ewing: I thank Mr Rumbles for a perfectly reasonable question, to which there are two answers.

First, during 2018, new broadband access will continue to be provided under our two highly successful digital superfast broadband contracts, at an investment of £400 million. There will also be further commercial investment during the year.

Secondly, the details of the contracts that we will award under R100 in respect of three segments in Scotland—north, central and south—will become available as soon as possible after the contracts have been awarded.

Plainly, we have to deal with the tendering process and go through it in accordance with the competitive dialogue process to get best value for money for the taxpayer and to keep Mr Mackay as happy as he can be. We also have to take care to get it right, and that is what we will do, in one of the most complex tender exercises that has taken place in Scotland. Once we complete that exercise, we will provide information as soon as we can to communities throughout Scotland, which understandably wish to know when each person and business will have access. We will provide that access by the end of 2021, which is a pledge that only this Government is making.

NHS Grampian Waiting Times

3. Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on progress towards meeting waiting times targets in NHS Grampian. (S5O-01666)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Shona Robison): The Scottish Government continues to work closely with colleagues in NHS Grampian every day to monitor the extent of winter pressures and to ensure that capacity is managed so that the board continues to deliver safe and effective care to support improvements on all key performance targets.

NHS Grampian has received more than £8 million this year to improve all parts of the patient pathway, including out-patient consultation, diagnostic tests, and in-patient and day-case treatment. A number of initiatives are already under way to support sustainable improvements, including additional theatre sessions being delivered for a range of specialties. We have allocated more than £1.3 million to NHS Grampian to support resilience across unscheduled care pathways over winter.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Last year, I raised the case of a Moray constituent who had been waiting for heart surgery in the NHS Grampian region. Thankfully, my constituent's surgery was scheduled for this week, which is 16 months after the original general practitioner referral. I am sure that the cabinet secretary will join me in wishing him well.

Figures show that more than 2,000 people per month are still waiting too long for treatment in NHS Grampian, which has a knock-on effect on island health boards that send patients to NHS Grampian for treatment. Will the cabinet secretary assure members that she will continue to assist NHS Grampian to improve waiting times and to ensure that no one else has to wait that long for treatment?

Shona Robison: I wish Jamie Halcro Johnston's constituent a speedy recovery from his procedure.

We are working closely with NHS Grampian and all boards to make the improvements that need to be made, which is against the backdrop of increasing demand for services. However, we are putting in record levels of resources and the forthcoming budget has a further big increase in funding for the national health service, all of which will help to make improvements to the treatment and care of patients.

In addition, the member will be aware that we launched a new elective access collaborative programme that is being taken forward by Professor Derek Bell. The programme will make similar improvements to those that have been made in unscheduled care, leading to Scotland's accident and emergency departments being the best performing in the United Kingdom for two and a half years. That was through a collaborative programme, which is now being replicated for elective care. It will make a big difference.

We are making investments and also reforms so that we can ensure that patients get timely access to treatment.

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab): Does the cabinet secretary agree that the failure of NHS Grampian to meet treatment standards is not because of the efforts of NHS staff, who continue to go above and beyond, but is the responsibility of the cabinet secretary and the Scottish Government, which has failed to adequately staff our wards and to give the resources and support that our NHS staff need?

Shona Robison: Like other boards, NHS Grampian has been trying to recruit staff. The funding is there, but the board has had difficulties in recruiting staff such as, for example, theatre nurses. I do not know what Anas Sarwar thinks can be done if the money is there for the post but, when the board goes out and tries to recruit, it has difficulty recruiting. The shortage in some specialties is not just a Scottish or UK issue but an international one. However, NHS Grampian is working hard to ensure that it continues to deliver safe patient care and make the improvements that it is trying to provide.

I will end on this note, though: it is a bit rich for Anas Sarwar to come here demanding additional resources for the NHS when his party is not proposing additional resources for the NHS in the budget. That is not his party's priority for the budget, as was laid out very clearly yesterday. It does seem a bit rich to come here demanding more money when his party's budget proposals, such as they are, do not prioritise the NHS at all. Does not Mr Sarwar think that that is a bit rich?

Scottish Ambulance Service (Moray)

4. **Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on progress towards the expansion of Scottish Ambulance Service provision in Moray. (S5O-01667)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Shona Robison): The Scottish Ambulance Service has been working in partnership with NHS Grampian to put additional ambulance resources in place in Moray. Discussions are on-going to look at what ambulance resources are required in Moray in the medium to long term and a business case is anticipated to be ready by the end of this month, which will be jointly reviewed by both organisations.

Richard Lochhead: I thank the cabinet secretary for her answer and I am sure that she will want to join me in paying tribute to the Scottish Ambulance Service for the role that it has played in dealing with the winter pressures on the national health service over the past few weeks.

As the cabinet secretary will know from her recent meeting with ambulance workers in Elgin, for which they were very grateful, the service has had to cope with its own pressures in Moray over the past few years. As the cabinet secretary said, there has been some recognition of that with additional resources. However, outstanding issues remain in terms of having an additional, new emergency ambulance based in Elgin and with the on-call situation in Dufftown to be addressed as well. I would be grateful if the cabinet secretary could keep a close eye on that and put pressure on the Scottish Ambulance Service to expedite those long-standing decisions.

Shona Robison: First, along with Richard Lochhead, I pay tribute to the Scottish Ambulance Service. The service has done an amazing job over the past few weeks in particular in dealing with winter pressures. I had a very productive meeting with many of the front-line staff in Elgin and I pay tribute to Richard Lochhead for raising the issues concerned on a consistent basis. As he will be aware, a number of initiatives are under way to help to address those issues. I will be keeping a very close eye on them and would be very happy to keep Richard Lochhead informed of those developments as they go forward.

Pharmacies (Community Health)

5. **Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what role it considers pharmacies should play in supporting the health of the communities that they serve. (S5O-01668)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Shona Robison): Community pharmacy plays an

important role in the provision of national health service pharmaceutical care, providing highly accessible services for people both in hours and out of hours. We want more people to use their community pharmacy as a first port of call for the treatment of self-limiting illnesses and medicine-related matters, and for on-going self-management support for people with long-term conditions.

Ruth Maguire: Does the cabinet secretary agree that folk can both receive help for themselves quicker and relieve pressures on hospital staff during the busy winter period by making use of the excellent advice and treatment available from community pharmacists?

Shona Robison: Yes, absolutely. Part of the communication strategy this winter has been very much to highlight the role of community pharmacy. The member might be aware that our strategy for pharmaceutical care, "Achieving Excellence in Pharmaceutical Care: A Strategy for Scotland", published in August 2017, emphasises that the pharmacy team in NHS Scotland is an important part of the workforce, with specialist skills and much-needed expertise in medicines. It will also form part of the multidisciplinary team on the back of the new general practitioner contract once it is agreed. We are very keen indeed to promote the role of community pharmacy.

Glenrothes 70th Anniversary

6. **Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to support the 70th anniversary of Glenrothes. (S5O-01669)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government welcomes the planned programme of events due to take place in Glenrothes over 2018 that is being organised by local groups and Fife Council to celebrate that important date. Although no specific Scottish Government activity is planned in favour of locally developed and owned celebrations, those local events will link to wider Scottish Government initiatives such as the year of young people.

Jenny Gilruth: This week, Glenrothes lost a true community champion in David Nelson. I hope that the cabinet secretary will join me in sending condolences to Davy's wife, Maureen, and to their family.

Can the cabinet secretary assure me that she will discuss with Fife Council the ways in which the 70th anniversary can be celebrated properly? Is she aware of any funding that community groups might be able to access?

Fiona Hyslop: Anniversaries of towns should not just be about the physical place, as it is the

people who make the place—people such as David Nelson, the Glenrothes community champion. I extend my condolences to Mr Nelson's family.

I would be happy to discuss with Ms Gilruth and Fife Council how any national activity on funding can align with the Glenrothes 70th anniversary this year. I understand that the Edinburgh International Book Festival is already planning to do so.

First Minister's Question Time

Police Scotland

1. Ruth Davidson (Edinburgh Central) (Con): Last week, the justice secretary tried to close down questions over his role regarding Police Scotland and the position of the chief constable, and he failed. Since then, we have had lawyers and senior police officers exchanging further blows, we have had more evidence of details being kept from this Parliament and, most worryingly, we have had an admission that no record exists of the meeting at which Michael Matheson intervened over the chief constable's return to work. Does the First Minister really believe that this fiasco has shown a functioning system that is either transparent or accountable?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, I say to Ruth Davidson that the justice secretary did not try to "close down" the issue. What the justice secretary did was come to the chamber, make a statement and answer questions in a robust and comprehensive way. That is the accountability that the Parliament and, indeed, the wider country should expect from the Government and from individual ministers.

What Michael Matheson set out, which I will set out again today, is this: there is a role for the Scottish Government—indeed, a role for the justice secretary—in ensuring that the Scottish Police Authority carries out its functions properly. Of course, the decisions about the employment of the chief constable are for the Scottish Police Authority. That division of responsibility is very clear and well understood.

Michael Matheson was right, when faced with the news that the Scottish Police Authority was inviting the chief constable back to work the very next day after that meeting, to ask questions such as whether the Police Investigations and Review Commissioner had been consulted, given the on-going investigation into allegations about the chief constable, whether the senior command in Police Scotland had been consulted and whether steps had been taken to ensure the welfare of any police officer who had raised concerns. He was not able to be satisfied on those matters, which is why the then chair of the Scottish Police Authority looked at the matter again.

I am not sure what Ruth Davidson would have said if, on the day following that meeting, the chief constable had turned up at work again. No doubt, that would have created a great deal of controversy. If, when MSPs had rightly started asking questions—as they undoubtedly would have done—it had transpired that the justice secretary had asked none of those questions, we

would have had Opposition leaders justifiably coming to the chamber asking why he had not.

The justice secretary has acted entirely appropriately. I would have thought that all members across the chamber would have welcomed that fact.

Ruth Davidson: The First Minister repeats the justice secretary's comments from last week, but the matter goes a lot further. It is about whether the justice secretary acted unlawfully in directing the Scottish Police Authority to prevent the chief constable from coming back to work against its own recommendations. The truth is that we do not know. In fact, we cannot know because, last Thursday, Michael Matheson said that he would be "happy" for minutes of his meeting with the SPA to be released only for the SNP Government to then claim that—incredibly—no minutes had been taken.

The justice secretary took a massive decision to intervene to prevent the head of Scotland's police force from returning to work and there is no written record of that. I think that that is shocking—why does the First Minister not think so?

The First Minister: There are a number of relevant points to be made. The first point—which I made last week in response to a Tory back bencher—is that, week after week, in the chamber and in the media, we hear Opposition MSPs, in effect, accusing the Scottish Government of not intervening enough in the operation of Police Scotland. Now, we have Opposition leaders coming here to complain that the justice secretary asks legitimate questions.

The justice secretary did not instruct the chair of the Scottish Police Authority. What the justice secretary did was ask questions. I say again that, had the justice secretary not asked those questions and had the chief constable returned to work, I am absolutely sure that Ruth Davidson would have been among the first to get to her feet and demand to know why the justice secretary had not asked those questions.

We know what the justice secretary asked, because he came to Parliament last week and answered questions on that very matter.

Ruth Davidson: We have got to a point at which the cabinet secretary intervened to prevent the chief constable from coming back to work, there is no official record of the meeting and the Parliament was not informed about it until six weeks later, yet the First Minister stands there and says that it is fine by her. To cap it all, the former justice secretary, Kenny MacAskill, has said that it was just a chat, that there was no need to take minutes, that the public do not need to know about anything and that we should just trust the Scottish National Party. Well, we cannot.

Last year, three other senior police officers were suspended and, in those cases, the justice secretary could not have been clearer. He insisted, repeatedly, that he could not intervene and that

"we must respect the process."—[*Official Report*, 29 November 2017; c 19.]

The problem is that he said that after he had already secretly intervened in the case of the chief constable.

Can the First Minister explain why the justice secretary told Parliament that the law prevented his intervening in disciplinary matters when, just weeks before, he had privately done just that?

The First Minister: The justice secretary did not intervene in a disciplinary matter; he asked legitimate questions of the SPA to determine whether it had carried out its functions appropriately. Let me be clear not just that it is fine by me that my justice secretary asks legitimate questions but that I expect that of my justice secretary. I expect my justice secretary to do the job that he was appointed to do.

I have no doubt that, if, on the day after that meeting, the chief constable had turned up at work and it had turned out that the PIRC and the senior command had not been consulted and that no steps had been taken to protect the welfare of police officers, the first questions that Ruth Davidson and other Opposition MSPs would have asked are: "What did the justice secretary do? What questions did the justice secretary ask?" Had it turned out that the justice secretary had simply folded his arms and not bothered to ask any questions about whether the SPA had carried out its functions appropriately, Ruth Davidson would probably now be asking me whether I still had confidence in my justice secretary.

The hypocrisy of the Tories on the matter is breathtaking. The justice secretary did his job properly on behalf of the people of Scotland.

Ruth Davidson: The public has a right to see the decisions that the Government takes—they must not be taken behind closed doors and in secret. It seems that the rules governing our police service are whatever the SNP decides it wants them to be. We have ministers intervening in private while telling Parliament that they cannot, and we have promises to be transparent while meetings are taking place without any record being made of what is going on. It is the SNP's secret Scotland and it stinks.

We have to act. It is clear that the legal framework does not ensure proper accountability. We say that it is time to amend the law so that this Parliament, not the Government, has more power over our national police force. The First Minister

knows that she will find support for such changes from across the chamber. It is her chance to show that she is listening for once. Is she listening?

The First Minister: The public know what happened, because the justice secretary came to Parliament last week and answered questions. There is a distinction between the operational independence of the police and disciplinary and other matters of the Scottish Police Authority. The justice secretary did not intervene in matters in which he should not have intervened. It is the justice secretary's job to ensure that the Scottish Police Authority, as a public body, is carrying out its duties appropriately, and that is exactly what the justice secretary did.

I am not sure what Ruth Davidson is arguing for. I am not sure whether she is arguing that the chief constable should have been allowed to come back to work without any of the appropriate questions having been asked. The justice secretary is accountable to Parliament and has made a statement in Parliament. The relevant committee is also looking into the matter and will, no doubt, ask further questions. The justice secretary acted appropriately and will continue to do so.

I cannot help but think that what we are getting here from Ruth Davidson—this week of all weeks—is a deflection. This is the week in which we have seen her party fail abysmally to stand up for Scotland on important matters related to Brexit and in which we have found out that the Scottish Tories do not have a backbone between them—they are nothing more than lobby fodder.

Care Homes

2. Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab):

One of the foremost reasons for growing pressure on the national health service is a growing crisis in care provision. The sector is on the brink of collapse. Demand for high-quality care homes for our elderly is rising and Scotland needs at least 1,200 more care home places a year to meet it. Can the First Minister tell us how she plans to do that?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, although I recognise the challenges in social care, I do not agree with Richard Leonard that the sector is on the verge of collapse. I think that that does a disservice to those who work in it.

In the current financial year, almost half a billion pounds of front-line NHS spending will have been invested in social care services and the integration of health and social care. That will continue to support the delivery of, amongst other things, the living wage for adult care workers and increase payments for free personal and nursing care. In the next financial year, we will give an additional £66 million to local government to bring into force

the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016 and maintain payment of the living wage. Over the past three years, funding through the national care home contract has increased by more than 13 per cent, which helps independent care providers to invest in their staff and the quality of their service and to make a return on their business.

There are some care homes—those run by Bield Housing & Care, for example—that are in difficulty right now, and our priority is to ensure continuity of care for those residents with no compromise whatever in the quality of their care. In fact, Scottish Government officials will be meeting Bield today, I think, and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport will meet the company later this month. We will do everything we can to protect the interests of residents in such very regrettable situations.

Richard Leonard: I am glad that the First Minister has mentioned Bield care homes. Last Saturday, Labour MSPs attended a save our Bield campaign group meeting in Glasgow and heard first hand from families, telling of the stress that their frail, elderly relatives are under, because they are about to be evicted from their specialist care homes. These are people in their 70s and 80s who are being evicted—some are even in their 90s. One woman, Nancy Sutherland, is 94; she has been a Bield tenant for 23 years and, along with 166 other elderly people, she is about to lose her home. Mrs Sutherland has dementia, so every day she relives the trauma; every day, she asks her daughter where she will be moving to; and every day, her anxiety levels rise. They rise, because her daughter has no answer. Does the First Minister?

The First Minister: I appreciate that Richard Leonard has raised this issue; it is important in general, but it is particularly important for the residents of Bield care homes. It is exactly because we recognise how unsettling—indeed, how traumatic—this decision has been and will be for residents, families and employees that the Scottish Government will continue to work to do everything we can to guarantee continuity of care for Bield residents and ensure that there is no compromise whatever in the quality of their care. Since being alerted to Bield's decision, we have engaged with the company, the Care Inspectorate and the chief officers of integration authorities to ensure that plans are being put in place for residents. As I said in my previous answer, officials are meeting Bield today and the cabinet secretary will personally meet the company later this month to discuss the progress of that work.

The national contingency planning group, which includes the Government, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Care Inspectorate, integration authorities, trade unions and providers,

is also engaged on this issue. In particular, the group considers how national and local partners are managing the impact of such decisions in respect of residents, their families and, of course, the workforce. This is a vital issue, which is why the Scottish Government has been and will continue to be engaged in making sure that the interests of residents are protected.

Richard Leonard: I thank the First Minister for the tone of that answer. I remind her that she told the chamber last March that she was

“absolutely committed ... to protect the most vulnerable people and ensure that supported accommodation is put on a sustainable and secure financial footing.”—[*Official Report*, 2 March 2017; c 24.]

I am bound to ask the First Minister where that protection and commitment to those most vulnerable people are now. Scottish Care’s chief executive, Dr Donald Macaskill, has warned her Government that the care home sector is in a fragile position. He has said that the Bield situation should

“act as a wake-up call”

to properly fund care in Scotland, yet we know that, instead, it faces cuts. Week after week, my party makes the case against those cuts—the First Minister’s cuts—which affect people such as Mrs Sutherland and too many others like her. The First Minister’s care policies are failing. Surely she must see that the time has come for her Government to stop the cuts to lifeline services, or will she continue to fail people like Mrs Sutherland?

The First Minister: I am not sure whether Richard Leonard listened to the first answer that I gave him, in which I pointed out that, over the past three years, funding for the national care home contract has actually increased by more than 13 per cent. That is a recognition that the Government understands the challenges that the care home sector faces. We are working with care organisations, including with Scottish Care, to address those challenges, and we will continue to do so. I have already addressed the issue around Bield care homes, but as well as the care home sector we are seeing an extension of care delivered at home. The hours of home care delivered in Scotland have increased in the past year by 11 per cent, so across all those different aspects of care we are taking action to ensure that the interests of our older people are protected, and that will become increasingly important because of the ageing nature of our population.

I am not particularly keen to get into a political to and fro over an issue that is important to the interests of so many older people, but Richard Leonard has mentioned the budget. We are putting forward a budget that is about protecting public services, investing an additional £400

million in our national health service, and giving a fair deal to local authorities. Yesterday, we agreed with the Green amendment to the motion that said that we are open to amendments from other parties ahead of the next stage of the budget. It was regrettable that, on a motion that talked about protecting public services and giving a fair wage increase to public sector workers, instead of voting with the SNP and the Greens, Labour actually voted with the Tories against those things. It is utterly inexplicable.

If Richard Leonard wants to engage properly in the remainder of the budget process—assuming that he can get a tax policy together before then—I will welcome that, and we can have constructive discussions about how to ensure that we continue to deliver on the very important issues that he has raised today.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): There are some constituency questions, the first of which is from Kenneth Gibson.

Food Train (North Ayrshire)

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): The First Minister will be aware that North Ayrshire health and social care partnership has decided to cease its £75,000 a year grant to the Food Train from 31 March, and that 172 vulnerable, elderly people, 43 per cent of whom are 85 or older, will be denied a vital service that allows them to stay in their own homes rather than, in some instances, being taken into care at a cost of £26,869 per person per year. Housebound constituents have told me that the volunteer who delivers their food is often the only person they speak to each week. Does the First Minister agree that the decision to cease funding the Food Train in North Ayrshire is a penny-wise-pound-foolish decision that should be urgently reconsidered and reversed?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The Food Train does a lot of good work. The Scottish Government has provided funding in previous years to pilot the Food Train, which has been expanded to a number of local authority areas. Responsibility for the commissioning and delivery of services lies with the North Ayrshire health and social care partnership, but I will ask the Minister for Public Health and Sport to examine the situation further. I am sure that we all want to recognise the important contribution made by the volunteers who have been delivering the Food Train service so successfully in North Ayrshire.

Policing and Mental Health Demands

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Last week, Chief Superintendent Paul Anderson said that mental health demands are the greatest challenge facing his officers in the city of Dundee.

Does the First Minister agree with me that the time has now come for a mental health accident and emergency facility, open seven days a week—including over the weekend—with access to specialist nurses, doctors and counsellors, to open in Dundee and in other places across Scotland that desperately need such facilities?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Broadly speaking, yes, I do agree. Indeed, one of the factors behind the future strategy for policing in Scotland is about the changing nature of demand. Certainly, when I speak to senior police officers, they often talk about the mental health issue and the additional demands that it is putting on the police. It is also why, last year, I announced, through our mental health strategy, additional funding to have mental health workers in places such as police stations and prisons, as I recognise that there is often a need for mental health support across a range of different settings.

These are issues that are being looked at through our mental health strategy and they are issues that I hope will attract cross-party support from right across the chamber.

Kyle Laird

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): This week, the *Airdrie and Coatbridge Advertiser* brought to my attention the heartbreaking case of 17-year-old Kyle Laird from Coatbridge, whose mother unexpectedly passed away over the festive season. Kyle's mother was a lone parent and he is now financially responsible for himself and his family home. Kyle is actively seeking work but is struggling to make ends meet due to gaps in the benefits system. What support can the Scottish Government give to Kyle and to other young people who have no parental support—and qualify for only limited support through the benefits system—to remain in their own homes?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): First, I am sure that we all want to convey our condolences to Kyle on the passing of his mother and the dreadful, heartbreaking situation that he now finds himself in.

I do not know all the details of Kyle's circumstances; I would be happy to ask the social security minister and indeed the economy minister to speak to the member to see whether there is any support that the Scottish Government could provide or point Kyle to.

Everybody knows my concerns about the operation of the benefits system; I visited Start Up Stirling yesterday, which is a fantastic organisation that is doing a great amount of work, principally around food support for people who have fallen victim of the benefits system. I spoke to two

individuals in particular who told me about the problems that universal credit, in their case, had created for them.

The benefits system—the welfare system—in any country should be a safety net. It should be there to support people and help people in times of need, not push them further into poverty. Unfortunately, all too often, it is doing the latter rather than the former. Perhaps the case that has just been raised is an example of that. I would be very happy to have ministers look into Kyle's particular situation and I am sure that we all wish him the very best.

Save Our Bield Campaign

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): On Saturday, I had the privilege of taking up the invitation—which I think was extended to all members of the Scottish Parliament—to attend a save our Bield campaign meeting, to hear directly the consequences of the decision by Bield to revise its business model. It is a revision which, in effect, has led to the planned eviction of elderly residents from their homes and the potential loss of 300 jobs from a workforce that does its best for these residents. If those 300 jobs were all located in one place, perhaps there would have been more effective action already.

I hear what the First Minister said about all the meetings that have taken place, but will she direct her cabinet secretary for health to meet the save our Bield campaign and union representatives as a matter of urgency, to identify how the Scottish Government will protect the rights of older people to be treated with proper respect and ensure that the staff, who face huge uncertainty in relation to their jobs, can be told what the Scottish Government will do to support them at this very difficult time?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The health secretary will be happy to meet any interested parties, given the seriousness of the situation. I will not repeat everything that I said in response to Richard Leonard. However, when I was health secretary, I dealt with a similar situation—the collapse of a care home company—and I know how difficult that was for the residents involved and how difficult it was for all the partners to come together to find solutions.

The Scottish Government will continue to work with anybody and everybody to find the solutions that are in the interests of residents and we will be happy to meet others who want to achieve the same outcome.

Impact of Short-term Letting

3. **Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** I am sure that the First Minister is aware of some of the

work that my colleague Andy Wightman has done with his homes first campaign, drawing awareness to the impact of the incredible rise in short-term letting. It is an impact that is being felt in Edinburgh as well as around the country. It is damaging to communities. It raises the cost of properties that are let as permanent homes for people to live in. There are examples close to the Parliament of entire stairwells that have been turned over to short-term lets, save for a single lone resident, which has a terribly damaging impact on people's mental health.

The changes announced today by one major platform, Airbnb, will not undermine the business model of those who want to convert entire properties to short-term lets. Does the First Minister accept that there is a huge difference between what is generally called the collaborative economy, whereby people put a spare room in their home up for short-term let, and the conversion of entire properties to what are effectively mini-hotels, which operate without paying any business taxes and distort the housing market in the way that I described?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): There are a range of important issues to consider, which Patrick Harvie is right to raise. I certainly understand the pressure in some parts of the country, although not all parts, for new controls over short-term letting of residential properties. We will certainly consider any appropriate changes in the period ahead.

Patrick Harvie mentioned the collaborative economy. I know that he will be aware that there is currently an expert advisory panel on the collaborative economy, which has been gathering a wide evidence base on a range of topics, including short-term lets. The chair of the panel, Helen Goulden of the Young Foundation, met the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Jobs and Fair Work earlier this week. We understand that the panel's full report is due to be published shortly and we will certainly consider its recommendations and then make a decision on what action it is appropriate to take.

Patrick Harvie: I am certainly aware that the report on the collaborative economy is due soon and we will all take an interest in it because there are many opportunities in that economy. However, I repeat that there is a huge difference between the collaborative economy and the exploitative housing economy that we are beginning to see. Airbnb itself is a member of the Government's expert group on the collaborative economy, so we should not look to it for solutions to that particular problem.

The impact on the housing market is our responsibility as a Parliament and the First Minister's responsibility on behalf of the

Government. We can resolve those issues only by giving councils the power to regulate. That could be done relatively simply. The Government can allow councils to use planning use class orders to make it clear that there is a distinction between a home being a home and a home being converted into a mini-hotel using continual short-term lets.

Does the First Minister agree that there is an important distinction between the collaborative economy and the exploitative economy? Does she agree that councils should have the option—which no council would have to use if it did not think that there was a problem—to use the mechanism that I described to control the growth of short-term lets and ensure that the housing market operates for homes first?

The First Minister: I make a point of clarification. Patrick Harvie said that Airbnb is on the expert panel. I understand that that is true, but it is important to point out for balance that so is the Scottish Trades Union Congress. We should be interested in the recommendations that the panel brings forward.

I recognise the distinction that Patrick Harvie makes—indeed, I think that I did so in my earlier comments. I think that everybody would recognise that distinction. It is important to point out that it is for the planning authority, which in Edinburgh would be the City of Edinburgh Council, to consider the evidence on a case-by-case basis on whether the principal use of a property had changed from residential to business. I know that some argue that new powers are required. I am not ruling that out.

The expert panel is meeting right now. I readily acknowledge that it is taking evidence on a range of issues, but it is looking at the issue of short-term lets. Given that its report is due to be published shortly, it makes sense to wait for that, consider the evidence and recommendations that it brings forward and then decide what changes might be appropriate and bring them forward at that time. We will continue to look carefully at this matter and we will continue to listen to ideas from across the chamber and from a wider perspective.

The Presiding Officer: We have some additional supplementaries. The first is from Ivan McKee.

Scottish Conservatives (Devolved Powers)

Ivan McKee (Glasgow Provan) (SNP): After last year's general election, we heard great boasts from Ruth Davidson that her troop of Scottish Tory MPs would fight for Scotland's interests and more powers for Holyrood. Does the First Minister think that we have seen much evidence of that this week?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): No. As I said earlier, we are still trying to locate a backbone among the group of Scottish Tory MPs.

Presiding Officer, this is a very serious issue. We know, from the report that the Finance and Constitution Committee published that, across this chamber, members of the Scottish Parliament of all parties think that the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill, in its current form, represents a power grab on this Parliament. Yet, when the Labour Party lodged an amendment in the House of Commons this week to help to rectify that, instead of supporting it, the Scottish Tory group voted with the Government and against the interests of Scotland. In fact—perhaps with the exception of one measly abstention somewhere along the line—there has not been a single occasion on which any of the Scottish Tory MPs has voted in the interests of Scotland and against the Westminster Government.

Plastic Pollution

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): On what is perhaps a more consensual note, I congratulate Sorcha Cantwell, who is in the public gallery today, who has been recognised by Keep Scotland Beautiful as a clean up Scotland hero for the time that she has dedicated to cleaning up plastic pollution on our beaches. Will the First Minister explain how the Scottish Government can best encourage and support such individual, community and sectoral initiatives—for example, by supplying equipment—to help us all to tackle this global problem?

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I thank Claudia Beamish for raising that. I, too, take the opportunity to pay tribute to the work of Sorcha Cantwell, which serves as a reminder that we all have a responsibility to do more to tackle the throwaway culture and the issue of plastics, particularly in our seas. The Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform has just met Ms Cantwell to discuss the work that she has been doing.

As I said last week, the Scottish Government has been leading the way in taking action for some time now. We have already introduced a more comprehensive carrier bag charge and we will develop a deposit return scheme for Scotland. Last week, Roseanna Cunningham announced plans to ban the manufacture and sale of plastic cotton buds, and we will become the first country in the United Kingdom to do so. We are also currently considering how to tackle the issues of plastic straws and disposable coffee cups.

I know that there is a need to go even further. On Tuesday, the Cabinet discussed how we can continue to make sure that Scotland is a leader in

tackling the issue, which is such a blight on our environment.

Scotch Whisky (Post-Brexit Customs Arrangements)

4. **Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP):** To ask the First Minister what discussions the Scottish Government has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding concerns expressed by the Scotch whisky industry regarding the possible consequences of Brexit for customs arrangements. (S5F-01929)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The Scottish Government is in regular dialogue with the Scotch whisky industry. We are aware of its concerns regarding the introduction of a new computer system by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs for collecting duties and taxes for goods entering and leaving the UK. The industry believes that leaving the European Union will increase transactions fivefold. That is an extra burden on industry that is completely unnecessary. It is also one of the many reasons for our arguing that leaving the EU will significantly weaken our economy when compared with continued membership of the EU, and that the least damaging option is to remain in the single market. I hope that members from right across the chamber support that.

Richard Lochhead: I am sure that the First Minister will be aware that 90 per cent of Scotch whisky is exported and that a third of such exports go to the EU, representing 10 per cent of all Scottish exports. Is the First Minister aware that, with the UK Government rushing headlong into a hard Brexit, the Scotch whisky industry is expressing increasing concern about the potential for confusion and chaos at customs posts, given that the industry needs plenty of notice of new arrangements, a smooth process and to avoid congestion and delay in getting its goods to market?

With the clock now ticking, will the First Minister continue to apply maximum pressure on the UK Government to recognise the importance of the Scotch whisky industry and Scottish food and drink generally? Similar concerns about the impact of Brexit have been expressed by Rotterdam port. Does she agree that that is a perfect example of why the Conservative Party's political dogma and determination to leave the single market and customs union—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Okay, Mr Lochhead. We get the point.

Richard Lochhead: —are detrimental to Scotland's national interests?

The First Minister: I cannot believe that the Tories were groaning and moaning through a

question about one of our most important industries. That speaks volumes.

As Richard Lochhead said, the whisky industry contributes hugely to Scottish exports. Its concerns provide a case study in the self-destructive futility of leaving the single market. It is not just the whisky industry that has such concerns; the food sector resilience group, which is chaired by the Scottish Government and brings together associations across the food and drink supply chain, as well as other public sector bodies, is meeting as we speak. It will discuss the impact of customs issues and the possible disruption at ports in England, which could have a really damaging effect on all of Scotland's exporters. Those are the kind of concerns that drive our analysis that Brexit could hit our gross domestic product to the tune of up to £2,300 for every person in Scotland.

I do not want us to leave the EU at all, but if the UK Government is intent on that, we must stay within the single market. I remember when, not long after the EU referendum, Ruth Davidson challenged me in this chamber to make sure that we protected our place in the single market. Now she just meekly does as she is told. We will continue to stand up for Scotland's interests.

Inshore Fishing Industry (Support)

5. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the First Minister what support the Scottish Government is providing to the inshore fishing industry. (S5F-01941)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The Scottish Government recognises the importance of fishing to many of our coastal communities. Through our inshore fisheries strategy, we are working with fishing businesses and organisations around Scotland to deliver a more sustainable, profitable and well-managed inshore sector. Our work includes conservation measures for important inshore species, the provision of support for inshore fisheries groups and a £1.5 million programme of investment to improve data collection from our inshore fishing fleet.

Finlay Carson: The First Minister is aware of the great importance of the role that the scallop fishing industry plays in the economy of the south-west of Scotland. I believe that she was scheduled to discuss issues regarding the 2012 fisheries management agreement with the Chief Minister of the Isle of Man this morning, and I sincerely hope that those discussions were successful.

I raised concerns about the potential introduction by the Isle of Man of conservation measures that were more about protectionism than conservation back in August 2017 in a letter to the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and

Connectivity, Fergus Ewing. Why did it take until late December for the cabinet secretary to take any meaningful action on the concerns of the scallop fleet? Why has it taken the intervention of the First Minister to sort out the mess, which is partly due to the late intervention of Fergus Ewing? Will she apologise on behalf of her cabinet secretary for the unnecessary inconvenience and deep concern that have been caused to the Scottish scallop fleet and associated businesses?

The First Minister: I will deal with Finlay Carson's comments about the Scottish Government by putting on record some of the comments of those who work in the sector. The chief executive of the Scottish White Fish Producers Association has talked about the

"Great support for our Scallop fishermen from the Scottish Government";

and West Coast Sea Products, which is a Kirkcudbright-based processor and owner of vessels, has said that it welcomes the action that is being taken by the Scottish Government to invoke the dispute resolution process. The Scottish Government has been acting on behalf of our scallop fishermen.

As Finlay Carson said, I spoke to the Chief Minister of the Isle of Man this morning. I made very clear our opposition to the restrictions that the Isle of Man has put in place and our strong view—which I accept that the Isle of Man disagrees with—that those restrictions breach the fisheries management agreement that is in place. I also said that we would use the dispute resolution mechanism in the event that a resolution is not found.

I am glad to say that this morning's discussion with the Chief Minister was very constructive and positive. The Isle of Man will review its position, and I am very hopeful that we will reach a mutually satisfactory resolution of the issue within the next week. Hopefully, we will reach a position that is in the interests of our scallop fishermen. If we do, that will be partly because of the action that Fergus Ewing has been taking.

Get It Minuted Campaign

6. Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to the Campaign for Freedom of Information in Scotland's campaign, get it minuted. (S5F-01925)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The Scottish Government is fully committed to openness and transparency. I agree with the campaign's view on the importance of ensuring that appropriate records of business are taken. When meetings involving ministers meet the

criteria that are set out in the civil service guidance, appropriate records are routinely taken.

Monica Lennon: In my hand, I have a list compiled by STV journalist Aidan Kerr of 40 unminuted ministerial meetings and counting. The widespread practice of failure to record must end, so I commend the get it minuted campaign, which is simply asking that agendas, notes and minutes of Scottish Government meetings are held.

When asked earlier about the unminuted meeting with the former chair of the Scottish Police Authority, the First Minister told Parliament that she is fine with the way in which the justice secretary is conducting Government business.

Sticking with justice, the First Minister's official Paul Johnston met the chief constable on 30 November. Was that meeting also unminuted? If so, does the First Minister accept that such practice is not only a bad look but simply wrong? Will she make a commitment today that from now on all important Government meetings will be minuted?

The First Minister: I will make a commitment that we will continue to ensure that the guidance for civil servants about keeping minutes is complied with. I believe that that guidance is publicly available for any member to look at.

This Government has done more to put more information into the public domain than any previous Administration. For example, under previous Administrations, it was not the practice to proactively publish details of meetings and travel. We now do that. We will continue to ensure that the guidance is complied with and of course that ministers are properly accountable to this Parliament.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): It was suggested earlier that no minutes were taken when the justice secretary met the SPA to discuss the chief constable because it was just a mere "chat". However, we checked meeting room bookings, which show that to have that "chat", the justice secretary went to the trouble of booking an eight-person meeting room for two hours.

Members: Oh!

Liam Kerr: Will the First Minister tell us—
[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the question, please.

Liam Kerr: Is it general Government policy not—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the question, please.

Liam Kerr: Is it general Government policy not to minute eight-person two-hour meetings on the

fate of senior public servants, or would a minister have to specifically request that no minutes are taken?

The First Minister: I was not at the meeting, but I am hearing from the justice secretary that the meeting that we are talking about took place in his office, so I am not entirely sure what on earth Liam Kerr is talking about. If Liam Kerr wants to come back to the chamber at some point and ask a coherent question that I can understand, I will do my best to answer it.

Early Learning and Childcare Workforce

7. Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government will take to increase, and improve diversity in, the early learning and childcare workforce. (S5F-01939)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Ensuring that we have a high-quality workforce is key to our plans to almost double funded nursery education, and that of course includes improving diversity. Phase 1 of our recruitment campaign was launched in October last year. The campaign encourages people from all backgrounds, abilities, age ranges and genders to consider a career in early learning and childcare. We are also increasing the number of early years modern apprenticeships by 10 per cent year on year, and we are raising the amount paid to employers and businesses to support apprentices aged over 25 to help to widen the age profile of the workforce.

Tavish Scott: This week, the First Minister's own skills agency said that the work that is going on in recruitment is not enough and that a more diverse workforce is needed. Does she therefore accept that nursery and childcare take-up by two-year-olds is way below expectations and that many organisations doubt that the Scottish Government can meet its recruitment target? Is recruitment of the 11,000 new staff that is needed to deliver the expansion of childcare on track?

The First Minister: The policy is on track. I am not sure whether Tavish Scott is perhaps mixing up two equally important issues. The issue of take-up by two-year-olds is important. We see very high take-up by three and four-year-olds and we want take-up by two-year-olds to increase. That is important, and is slightly separate from the broader issue of recruitment of additional workers into the workforce to support the expansion of provision that I have spoken about. I have set out the Government's ambition to attract 11,000 new workers into the workforce to support that.

Tavish Scott is absolutely right to say that, in addition to that overall number, we want greater diversity. One of the things that I talk about often is the need to get more women into careers in

science, technology, engineering and mathematics. It is equally important to encourage more men into childcare professions. Those are really important matters, and as part of our overall ambitions to grow the workforce, that need for greater diversity is central to all that we do.

Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con): That leads nicely on to my question. Childcare and early years education have traditionally been seen as a female industry, with women accounting for 97 per cent of the workforce. That suggests that we could do more to encourage men to see a career in the area as the important and rewarding career that it is. What steps is the Scottish Government taking to change perceptions of careers in childcare and early years?

The First Minister: That is a responsibility for the Government and for all of us. We made those points when I launched the Scottish Government's drive to recruit thousands more people to support our expansion. The recruitment campaign focuses on the need for greater diversity as well as the need to grow the numbers. The underrepresentation of men in such careers is a long-standing and intergenerational issue. It is important that we take the time to explain why the career is a worthwhile one for men to pursue and why it is important to the development of our children that men as well as women provide that care. That is all part of tackling the occupational segregation that, in most professions, affects women but that in this one is a particular issue for men. I hope that we all do as much as we can to encourage young men to see a career in childcare and early years education as a very worthy and worthwhile option.

Centenary of Women in the British Armed Forces

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): I ask members of the public who are leaving the chamber to do so quietly, because we are still in session.

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-08845, in the name of Maurice Corry, on 100 years of women in the British armed forces. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

I think that Mr Corry wishes to raise an issue with me as a preliminary, and I am happy to hear it.

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Some of my guests from the armed forces are in the lobby downstairs, waiting to take their seats in the public gallery. Obviously, they cannot do so at the moment because a lot of people attended First Minister's question time and they are now leaving. I request a short suspension until my guests take their seats.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am delighted to oblige you, Mr Corry. Please let me know once you have taken a swift look behind you and seen that your guests have arrived. I suspend the meeting briefly.

12:48

Meeting suspended.

12:51

On resuming—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call on Maurice Corry to open the debate. You have seven minutes, or thereabouts, Mr Corry.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes that 2017 is the centenary of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), which was the first time that women were formally fully enrolled in the armed forces; further notes that more than 57,000 women, including some from the west of Scotland, served in the WAAC from July 1917 till 1921, including some 10,000 in France in a variety of roles, including drivers, clerks, signallers, cooks, bakers, orderlies, waitresses, codebreakers, printers, gardeners, domestics, typists and phone operators; understands that the earliest advocates for the creation of the WAAC, and also the corps' first chief controller and controller, were the Scots, Mona Geddes and Helen Fraser; believes that women form a valued and integral part of the British Armed Forces; welcomes that, since September 2017, every role in the Royal Air Force is now open to women, making it the first branch of the British military to do so, and notes the views that other military branches should follow suit.

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): Thank you for the adjournment to allow my guests to take their seats.

It is an honour to begin the debate. First, I would like to thank the members whose support for the motion has allowed the debate to happen.

I am delighted to welcome to the chamber female representatives from the Royal Navy and the Royal Military Police, a number of female veterans and women from the forces. Between them, they have decades of service and dedication to our country and I am sure that the whole chamber wants to join me in thanking them for their service. It is great to see them all here and I thank them for attending.

I welcome members of St Michael and All Angels church in Helensburgh, who are towards the back of the gallery. Among them are several serving members of the armed forces and veterans in their parish. Being in Helensburgh, the church's parish covers Her Majesty's Naval Base Clyde—Faslane—and the base at Coulport. The parish extends to cover a very large number of people. I am very appreciative of their presence today and I welcome them.

Members know the phrase “those magnificent men and their flying machines”, but I would like to put forward the phrase “those wonderful women and their flying machines”. Members might recall documentaries on BBC television over recent years about the incredibly brave work that members of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force undertook. The work was to deliver new aircraft to operational airfield bases from the manufacturers. That involved flying fighter aircraft and light and heavy bombers with very limited navigational aids, often solo, and in extreme weather of all sorts.

Through the bravery and superb skills of those women, our front-line Royal Air Force squadrons—both fighter and bomber squadrons—were able to achieve success in air operations in the second world war. No more was that demonstrated than in the battle of Britain victory, with replacement Spitfires and Hurricanes brought forward to squadrons by those wonderful women in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force.

Today, women are involved in most areas of the British armed forces. Many people will have seen news reports and documentaries about our aeromedical and aero evacuation teams operating in Iraq and Afghanistan. Those teams contain many female doctors, nurses and medics. Interestingly, many of those women were recruited as reservists from the national health service, particularly—I am glad to say—from NHS Tayside and Ninewells hospital, to name one hospital among many in the United Kingdom. Women

stepped forward to serve their country in its time of need.

It is not well enough known, but the ability of women to serve in the armed forces was driven forward by a Scotswoman, Mona Chalmers Watson. During the first world war, she served as the first controller of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, or WAAC. She led a force that was more than 57,000 women strong, including 10,000 women in France, and served from July 1917 to 1921.

Mona Chalmers Watson was a fascinating individual. She was not only one of the founders and the main drivers behind the WAAC but the first women to obtain an MD from the University of Edinburgh's medical school. She edited the “Encyclopaedia Medica”, a 15-volume work, the first edition of which appeared in 1900, and published two books, “Food and Feeding in Health and Disease: A Manual of Practical Dietetics” in 1910 and “The Book of Diet” in 1913. She was a noted suffragette before the establishment of the WAAC, and had concentrated on improving the levels of pay offered to the women taking over men's jobs; she also served as a doctor for the suffragette prisoners in Perth.

Mona Chalmers Watson regarded the creation of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps as

“an advance of the women's movement and ... a national advance.”

She noted that, for the first time, women had

“a direct and officially recognised share in the task of our armies both at home and overseas.”

In a recruiting pamphlet, she wrote:

“this is the great opportunity for every strong, healthy and active woman not already employed on work of national importance to offer her services to her country.”

I could go on and on, but I am sure that everyone has got a flavour of just how impressive a woman Mona Chalmers Watson was in every aspect, including in her military career.

The impact of the changes affected the outcome not only of the first world war but of every conflict since. During the second world war, for example, women played a vital role in securing victory against Nazism, and there were more than 80,000 women in the Women's Land Army at its height.

Membership of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force peaked at more than 180,000, representing more than 48 nationalities. We are lucky enough to be joined today in the gallery by Georgina Archibald, who was a member of the WAAF, post the second world war, I think. She is here with her daughter Fiona, who was a member of the Women's Royal Naval Service, and her granddaughter Lillas, who is an applicant to become a Royal Navy pilot. I welcome them all. That is three generations of

women serving our country and testament to the vital role that women have played, and will continue to play, in our armed forces. It certainly makes me feel very humble, indeed, and I am sure that it is the same for other members here.

Everyone should have the opportunity, if able, to serve our country in any way they can and see fit. The Royal Air Force has every role available to everyone who is able to meet its criteria, so everyone, irrespective of their gender, is welcome to join. Since 1917, women have played a vital role in our country's defence; I am sure that, over the next 100 years, they will continue to play that vital role. *[Applause.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I request those in the public gallery not to applaud, tempting though it is. I understand why they want to do so, but it is not permitted.

12:57

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): I thank Maurice Corry for bringing the motion to the chamber for debate.

The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps was created during 1917 and became the Army's first all-female unit, fulfilling essential medical and clerical roles both in the United Kingdom and in France.

In marking the centenary of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, we have to recognise why it was established. When war broke out in 1914, women queued alongside men to volunteer for whatever roles were available. However, the military view was that nursing was the only suitable role for women. During the war, 19,000 women served as nurses and up to 100,000 served as part of voluntary aid detachments.

Female medics such as Dr Elsie Inglis, who graduated from the Edinburgh School of Medicine for Women in 1892, offered their services to the Royal Army Medical Corps. However, she was told:

"My good lady, go home and sit still."

Supported by the suffrage societies, Dr Inglis set up her own female-staffed hospital units, and they made their own way overseas, where their help was quickly accepted by the Belgians, the French and the Serbs.

The attitude of the British military changed in 1916 when Britain faced a major manpower shortage due to mounting casualties, especially the slaughter on the Somme where, on the first day of the battle, British forces suffered 37,000 wounded and 19,000 fatalities to gain only 3 square miles of territory. In early 1917, Lieutenant General Lawson was asked to review the role of women in the military. He examined how women

were taking on men's jobs on the home front and, as a result, the idea of women performing basic military jobs no longer seemed ridiculous. His report found that supporting women to enter military service would release men for front-line duty.

The History Press website explains:

"The corps was established in such a rush that the chief controllers were still negotiating details of pay and accommodation for months after the first draft arrived in France, and the corps was not officially instituted until 7th July 1917. It was clarified that the women had enrolled as civilians and would not be enlisted in the army, this was only a temporary force created out of necessity."

By 1918, more than 57,000 women had served in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, 9,000 of whom had served overseas. Five members were awarded the military medal and 83 members died in service.

Despite proving its worth, the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps was disbanded in 1920. It was nearly 20 years later, on the outbreak of world war two, that the Auxiliary Territorial Service was formed as the women's branch of the British Army. Finally, the Army and Air Force (Women's Service) Act 1948 was passed, which allowed for a permanent peacetime role for women in Britain's armed services.

The Ministry of Defence has a crisis in recruitment and, as a result, it will lift the ban on women in combat roles by the end of 2018. Despite the fact that the size of our armed forces has nearly halved since 1980, there is still a shortfall in recruits. The "Filling the Ranks" report states:

"The Royal Navy and the RAF are now running at around 10% short of their annual recruitment target, whilst for the Army the shortfall is over 30%."

I welcome the fact that women are finally to be treated equally for all roles in our armed forces, but that should not be about filling the gaps in the ranks. If the MOD really wants to address the recruitment crisis, it should set pay at a level that attracts the best recruits instead of at a paltry £14,931 per annum, which is less than the real living wage. Our armed forces personnel—men and women—deserve better.

13:02

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands)

(Con): As an ex-soldier, it is a pleasure for me to take part in this debate. I thank Maurice Corry for lodging the motion so that the Parliament can celebrate the vital contribution made by women as part of the British armed forces.

It is hard to believe today that, just over 100 years ago, at the outbreak of the first world war, the idea of women serving in our armed forces

was considered to be ridiculous. As Gordon MacDonald said, a famous Scot, Elsie Inglis, who was a suffragette and a doctor, offered her medical services to the War Office only to be flatly refused. She was told:

“My good lady, go home and sit still.”

I fear that that was a dangerous comment in those days, and I repeat it only with caution.

Elsie Inglis went on to establish the Scottish women's hospitals, which saw 1,500 women support our European allies with the ambulance drivers, orderlies and cooks they needed.

By 1917, our armed forces changed their minds and the first all-women unit in the British Army was officially instituted as the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. The creation of that unit heralded the start of a century of progress for women in our armed forces, and the unit was quickly joined by the Women's Royal Naval Service, which was formed in 1917, and the Women's Royal Air Force, which was formed in 1918.

When women were again called upon to serve their country in the second world war, they supported the campaigns on land and the sea and in the air. We should not forget that, in world war two, even our Queen donned uniform to serve our country.

We should also not forget the women who served as part of the Special Operations Executive—or the Baker Street irregulars, as they were known. We still do not know all the stories involving ordinary women with extraordinary courage who served behind the lines. The last surviving female British spy of the second world war, Sonya Butt—or agent Blanche—passed away in 2014. That she had an MBE and was mentioned in dispatches by the age of 20 gives an indication of her actions. Sonya Butt used her beauty to tease out information from German soldiers, but she was also deadly. She wreaked havoc on the Nazis by blowing up bridges and railway lines and ambushing German convoys, and she helped to turn the tide of war in the allies' favour.

Sonya Butt's example has been replicated in many conflicts since the second world war and I pay tribute to those women who have served as part of the UK armed forces around the globe. Women have been deployed in operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, and there is a growing recognition of their importance to our armed services. Soldiers, such as my son, who served in the conflict zones see women as a critical part of our armed services.

In this debate, we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the formation of the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps. It was the dedication of the women who served in it that led, 50 years ago, to

the Army and Air Force (Women's Service) Act 1948, as Mr MacDonald mentioned, which finally allowed a permanent peacetime role for women in our armed services.

Since that point, the wheel of progress has continued to turn and, in recent years, the intake of female personnel has risen. Thirty per cent of our army cadets are girls, and women have risen to the top ranks, with Major General Susan Ridge becoming the first ever female general to serve in the British Army.

It is right that we pay tribute today to those women who served in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps in the first world war. We are conscious that they not only gained the gratitude of men and women of their generation for their contribution but blazed a trail for future generations of women to do the same in every conflict thereafter.

13:06

Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): I pay tribute to Maurice Corry for securing this afternoon's debate. I am grateful to him for the fantastic opportunity to pay tribute to all the women who directly or indirectly fought for our country. I also pay a personal tribute to the women who are currently serving in our armed forces—I am aware of some uniforms in the public gallery. It is all too rare that we have the opportunity to say thank you and to share our gratitude for the work that they do every day to keep us safe, so I thank them for that. When I visited Redford barracks at about this time last year, I had the great privilege of thanking some of those women in person.

I thank Maurice Corry for bringing Mona Geddes into my world. He referred to her as Mona Watson, but she also had the persona of Dr Alexandra Mary Chalmers Watson and took a number of other names over the years. I will not repeat much of the story of her fantastic life, because Maurice Corry told us about that in his opening remarks.

He mentioned that she was a suffragette who fought for equal pay for women, who, more than 100 years ago, were doing the jobs of men. We are still fighting for that today, 100 years on. He also marked the fact that, in 1898, she was the first woman to graduate from the University of Edinburgh with a medical degree, having completed a chemistry degree two years before that. However, he did not mention that she postponed her engagement and marriage to her husband, having refused to marry him until she had those letters after her name. That is a lovely feminist story to have in the history books, and it is lovely to recollect how important that was to her.

Maurice Corry also mentioned Mona Watson's connection to Elsie Inglis. They were friends and, together, they established the Scottish women's

hospitals, which Edward Mountain recognised. We talk a lot about how we fail to put on record the role that women have played in the Army or in conflicts over the years, and official statues are a way of providing a constant reminder of those roles. The member will be aware that there is a campaign to have Elsie Inglis remembered in Edinburgh with a statue. In Edinburgh, there are more statues of dogs than there are of women. As a friend of the canine, Presiding Officer, that might not be an issue for you, but it is an issue for many people across the region who would like to see a formal recognition of Elsie Inglis's work.

It is interesting to note that a wing was named after Mona Geddes in the Elsie Inglis Memorial Hospital in Edinburgh. When the hospital closed, we lost the one existing memorial to Mona Geddes.

Perhaps there is more that we can do to recognise the role that women have played over the past 100 years. In societal terms, many of the ways in which we do that are through popular culture, such as in the countless TV programmes that feature women rather than men in the first and second world wars. My favourite book, "The Night Watch", is focused entirely on the role of female ambulance drivers in the second world war—I encourage colleagues to read the book, as it is a cracking read.

However, I can think of only one statue that recognises a female for playing a role in the first or second world war, and it is outside what is now a community centre in Gretna, which I visited as a party leader this time last year. The statue is outside what used to be the munitions factory—HM Factory, Gretna—which was set up by David Lloyd George to provide munitions for the first world war. It is generally recognised that, without that factory and the work of the women in it, there would not have been the necessary material for the soldiers on the front line and the war would not have been won. The women who worked in the munitions factory were commonly referred to as the "canary girls", because the nature of the chemicals that they were using meant that their skin was dyed yellow, and they lived with that throughout their lives. I was pleased to see Russell Brown, back in 2015, when he was the MP for Gretna, bring together all the surviving women who had worked in that munitions factory. There were 11 women living who had worked in the factory and seven came together to mark what they had done during their time there.

That leaves me with a thought that I will close on: I wonder whether the minister might be able to reflect on those women and on what the Scottish Government could do in this centenary year to bring together any surviving women who had a role in the WAAC or in the munitions factory to

commemorate them properly and perhaps have some sort of lasting tribute to the women who served.

I thank Maurice Corry for this opportunity and pay tribute to all the women who have served and continue to serve.

13:11

Michelle Ballantyne (South Scotland) (Con):

I, too, thank Maurice Corry for bringing the debate to the chamber. Like the colleagues who have spoken before me, I am honoured to be able to recognise the contribution of women to the armed services and recognise the centenary of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps.

One hundred years ago, the war to end all wars introduced us to the concept of total war, whereby an entire economy shifted on to a war footing and everyone's lives changed. A new era in history for women was started, because, with men away fighting, women found themselves fulfilling every role in the factories, on the land and in the forces. During that time, the suffragettes used the slogan "Men may bear arms, but women bear armies" in the argument for women to have the vote. I have no doubt that, if our Scottish suffragettes were here today, they would join us with pride—despite some of their reservations about women serving—not only because women now have the vote but because, as a woman, I am able to stand here as a member of the Scottish Parliament, as the wife of an ex-army officer, as the mother of sons who served on the front line in Iraq and Afghanistan and as someone who was also able to serve in her own right as a commissioned officer in the RAF volunteer reserve training branch.

In the early noughties, I received a message from a friend who was a Tornado pilot stationed in the Falklands. The message went something like this:

"The world has turned on its axis. I am standing here in an apron with all my male colleagues preparing afternoon tea for the local people while the skies are being patrolled by an all-female aircrew."

I think that that was a first at the time, and it certainly changed the perspective of my male friends in the RAF.

I will finish with a thought that will take us back to the past. A lady came forward recently and put a message on a bottle that said:

"Some serve and some give all."

As a young girl, I was incredibly moved by a poem that was written by a gentleman called Marks and given to a lady called Violette Szabo, who served as a spy in France during the second world war. She was persuaded—or volunteered—to do that after her husband was killed at the battle of El

Alamein, although she had a very young daughter. Violette's story was made into a film, albeit that it is not entirely accurate. It tells the story of how Violette worked behind the lines and was eventually captured and tortured, then executed by the Germans in 1945, just before the end of the war. The poem that was given to her really struck me when I first heard it. I will read out the poem and leave members with the thought that, for me and many of the people to whom I speak, when people decide to serve in the armed forces and are willing to risk giving everything, it is memories and thoughts such as those in the poem that we should always keep dear when we celebrate the nature of not only women but men in the armed forces. The poem goes like this:

"The life that I have
Is all that I have
And the life that I have
Is yours.

The love that I have
Of the life that I have
Is yours and yours and yours.

A sleep I shall have
A rest I shall have
Yet death will be but a pause.

For the peace of my years
In the long green grass
Will be yours and yours and yours."

Lest we forget.

13:15

The Minister for Employability and Training (Jamie Hepburn): I join other members in thanking Maurice Corry for bringing to the chamber this important and interesting debate, which has allowed us to acknowledge the significant contribution that women have made to our armed forces. Given the nature of the centenary, there has been a lot of focus on the past, but it is also correct that we recognise and acknowledge the on-going contribution that women make to the armed forces today.

We have had a number of debates to mark the contribution of our service personnel. Few, if any, members of this Parliament will not have a family connection to the armed forces, and many members have a direct connection, having served themselves. It is correct that we have had this opportunity to debate the subject.

I join Mr Corry in welcoming those he has invited to the public gallery to witness the debate. It was correct that we had a short suspension to allow them to witness the debate—it was apposite that Mr Corry requested that and generous of you, Presiding Officer, to grant it. I thank those who are here today for their service, past and present.

In recent years, we have seen many significant milestones, with 2014 seeing the centenary of the outbreak of the first world war and this year seeing the centenary of the end of the great war, which was supposed to end all wars. Sadly, of course, that was not the case. Many events will be held during 2018 to acknowledge and recognise that centenary, and the debate provides us with an opportunity to do so early in the year.

We no longer have any living veterans, male or female, from the first world war. Indeed, living memory of the second world war is rapidly passing. As the years go by, that lived experience will pass even from generations that had a connection to those who lived in those times. As a child and a young man, I was able to speak to my grandfather about his experience—at least, the experience that he was willing or wanted to talk about. I am sure that he did not want to talk about most of it. My grandmother served in the land army, which has been mentioned, and she was able to tell me about her experience, providing me with a direct connection to that generation. They were cherished family members for me, but my children's generation never met them. For them, they will be more distant ancestors. It is, therefore, vital that we do all that we can to listen to and value the memories of those who remain and can recall that time while we still have the chance to do so.

The debate has rightly focused on women who have served in the armed forces over the past 100 years. There are additional notable centenaries to honour alongside that of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps. The Women's Royal Naval Service was also formed in 1917, and Keith Brown is looking forward to a meeting with the Association of Wrens later this month. This year, we also mark 100 years of the Royal Air Force and the formation of the Women's Royal Air Force in 1918.

The first world war saw women serve formally in the armed forces for the first time. Their roles, which were numerous and varied, included wireless telegraphist, electrician, printing duties, motor vehicle maintenance, tinsmith, fitter and welder. As is more often spoken of, women also made a massive contribution on the home front, and we should remember the women who were nurses and doctors in all three services. The Royal Navy and Army nursing services were formalised in 1902, with the RAF following, as I said, in 1918. Those women worked in difficult and challenging conditions, tending people with dreadful injuries. It is hard for us to imagine how appalling it was.

Dr Elsie Inglis has been mentioned by several members. She worked against the convention of her day and went against the advice of the War Office by going forth and setting up the Scottish

women's hospitals for foreign service. In November last year, the First Minister attended an event at St Giles's cathedral to mark the centenary of Dr Inglis's funeral.

The debate allows me to thank one of my constituents, Alan Cumming, who has done a significant amount of work to raise awareness of the Scottish women's hospitals. His story is interesting. He regularly went to Serbia because he is a football fan and went to watch Red Star Belgrade. He met a Serbian friend who said, "If you're from Scotland you must know about the Scottish women's hospitals." Alan was embarrassed because he had never heard of them. That sparked an interest in the subject, and he has since done a significant amount of work on the topic, including publishing books, instigating the making of a television documentary and establishing a website to commemorate the project and ensure that people remember the contribution of those brave women who set up the Scottish women's hospitals.

In the second world war, women again served with distinction. In many cases, they paid the ultimate sacrifice in occupied territory while working for organisations such as the special operations executive. Women were also involved at Bletchley Park, where they made a significant contribution to the defeat of fascism and Nazism in Europe. As we have mentioned, other essential roles were carried out by women in the land army and other services.

On Kezia Dugdale's point, it is undeniable that we could better recognise the efforts that women made in that war, and I would be happy to hear from any member who has a suggestion as to how we can go about that.

As I said, given that the debate is about a centenary, it is understandable that we have focused on history, but we should remember that women continue to serve in active combat roles. In Iraq and Afghanistan, women have been working alongside men in the armed services, providing humanitarian support including disaster relief. We should remind ourselves that that role of the armed services is as essential as its role in keeping us safe.

As Mr Corry's motion describes, the Royal Air Force has now opened all roles to women—it is the first of the three services to do so. The Army has lifted the ban on women serving in close combat roles and consideration is now being given to whether women should serve as Royal Marines commandos. It is right that all branches of the armed services look to follow the RAF's example and ensure that all military roles are open to women.

We have heard a lot about the vital roles that women have played in the armed forces over the past 100 years. Let me assure all members that the Scottish Government is fully committed to supporting all those who serve or who have served in our armed forces—both men and women—and we will continue to work collaboratively with our partners in the public, private and third sectors to deliver support to them. We take that commitment seriously and I repeat it today.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank all members for their interesting speeches.

13:23

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Social Isolation and Loneliness

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon. The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-09927, in the name of Jeane Freeman, on building a connected Scotland: tackling social isolation and loneliness together.

The Minister for Social Security (Jeane Freeman): I am pleased to open today's important debate about an issue that has rightly gained prominence. Social isolation and loneliness are now recognised as having a major impact on our health and wellbeing, and although the issue has often been talked about as something that affects older people, the fact is that it can affect any one of us at any age and any stage of our lives.

It is important to understand what we mean when we talk about social isolation and loneliness. Social isolation is about the quality and the quantity of social relations a person has. Loneliness is a subjective but important feeling that is based on a person's perception of their social connections. Both matter.

I want to commend the important work that was done by the Equal Opportunities Committee in the previous session of Parliament on age and social isolation, which was the first work of its kind, at least in the United Kingdom if not further afield.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): Does the minister welcome, as I do, the appointment of a UK Government minister to lead on loneliness for the UK?

Jeane Freeman: I do indeed welcome that appointment, and I thank the member for raising the matter. I have written to the minister in question, Tracey Crouch, to congratulate her on her appointment, and I have offered to work with her and to share our draft strategy.

The Equal Opportunities Committee's first recommendation in its report on age and social isolation was that the Scottish Government should develop a national strategy to tackle social isolation. There have, of course, been other important developments since then, not least the one that Ms Wells mentioned. Members will be aware that, before her death, Jo Cox established a commission on loneliness. She recognised loneliness as an important human issue, one that does not discriminate and one that—to use her words—is everyone's business. Following her tragic death, her parliamentary colleagues have taken forward that work, and late last year the commission published a call for action for Governments to show national leadership in this area.

Last year, I was privileged to meet Brendan Cox to discuss our work and the commission's, and I am grateful for its support and encouragement for the leadership that we—and, I hope, from today, this Parliament—are showing.

On Tuesday, I was proud and pleased to take an important step when I launched the draft of our national strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness, "A Connected Scotland". In it, we aim to articulate a vision of the kind of Scotland that we need to build. It is a vision of a Scotland in which community connections are increased and everyone feels able and encouraged to participate as they want to. I visited the hidden gardens in Glasgow. That is a fantastic example of a community-based project that supports people to connect socially, and such community-driven work is absolutely vital if we are to bring about change.

All the evidence tells us that the issue is an important one that we need to address. The campaign to end loneliness review highlights that loneliness has impacts on our health that are comparable with those of smoking and obesity. Age Scotland has pointed out that loneliness can increase the risk of mortality by 10 per cent. It has been identified as a serious public health issue by the Mental Health Foundation, Age UK and many others. Further evidence tells us that being lonely or socially isolated can lead to depression and contribute to an increased risk of dementia.

Carers UK suggests that eight out of 10 carers feel lonely or isolated. In the first half of 2016, 31 per cent of callers to Silver Line Scotland identified loneliness in how they were feeling. The GoWell study in deprived areas of Glasgow found that just over 31 per cent of working-age adults who were disabled or suffering long-term health conditions were frequently lonely and that 17 per cent of men and 15 per cent of women in those areas reported frequent loneliness. Childline figures for 2016-17 reported that a large number of counselling sessions—the majority of which were with girls—focused on loneliness.

We know the significant physical and mental health impacts of loneliness and that particular groups—carers, those who are living in poverty, young mothers, those who are in poor health, disabled people, the bereaved, our lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex community, and those in our ethnic minority communities—all face an increased risk of suffering from social isolation and loneliness. Above all, loneliness is an issue that touches each one of us. It may be something that we have personally experienced and it is more than likely that each of us knows of or worries about someone who is right now feeling lonely or isolated.

There can be no one-size-fits-all approach; nor is this a problem that can be legislated away or

fixed with a single initiative. As a Government, we have already taken important steps. Our Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 strengthens the voices of communities in decisions that matter and has the ambition for truly meaningful local decision making through the decentralisation of power. We have invested significant resources in supporting local community-based projects. Last year, our £500,000 social isolation and loneliness fund demonstrated that small grass-roots initiatives can have a profoundly positive impact on the number of social connections that a person has.

However, this is about more than just money. It is about what all of us can do to build a more connected and cohesive society. We must challenge and tackle the stigma surrounding social isolation and loneliness—stigma that makes too many people reluctant to admit that they are lonely or feel isolated, and which makes people feel that it is their fault that they are in that position or that they are a burden. That stigma takes away whatever confidence people had and makes them retreat from the social connections that are so vital to our wellbeing.

Recent work by the Carnegie Trust has identified that kindness can go a long way to reducing social isolation and loneliness. That work has kick-started a real conversation about the role that kindness can play. I want to ensure that our approach to tackling this matter is informed by that conversation.

As with so much of what we as a Government need and want to do, tackling social isolation is not the responsibility of one part of our work—it is a collective responsibility across Government. We will continue to promote positive health and wellbeing, and to support the development of strong and positive relationships by giving our children and young people the best start in life. We will continue to tackle poverty and inequality through the 50 concrete actions in our fairer Scotland action plan, and we will continue to support and recognise the key role that is played by the third sector and volunteers in our society.

We will continue to ensure that our places and spaces encourage people to get out and about and to shape their own environments. Accessible public transport is vital to people being able to remain socially active, particularly in rural areas, so our forthcoming transport bill will aim to give people access to the best possible services. In our cultural strategy, we will seek to reflect the important fact that people can connect through the tremendous national asset of Scotland's rich culture and heritage. We will continue to invest in our country's national digital infrastructure to ensure that people can connect beyond their local communities.

We are doing a great deal already and it is right that we see how each part of the work that I have mentioned, and more, can contribute to the task at hand. The Government has an important role to play and leadership to show. However, the real impact will come not just as a result of national and local government working together but through working with and listening to our communities and neighbourhoods, our third sector organisations and our businesses—a partnership that harnesses and values our collective expertise and experiences.

The draft strategy rightly emphasises the point that people and communities have a central role in building and maintaining social connections and supporting those who may be socially isolated, and that the role of Government is to create the conditions that allow the ideas and initiatives that grow from communities to flourish. It is an approach that involves everyone, because we need everyone. It is not top down or ground up; it is about working together.

The solutions lie in our communities. Each one of us will know of a local activity or initiative that works because it goes with the grain of the community. We will know of work that is not directly focused on tackling loneliness but which, by bringing people together for one purpose, increases and reinforces the social relationships that we all need. Last night, I heard of a national health service-driven initiative to help older people exercise to reduce the likelihood of falls and increase the body's capacity to recover from a fall. That initiative provides real lived evidence that its work reduces feelings of loneliness and improves mental health among those who go along. Another example might be a men's shed that draws in a disparate group of individuals who discover talents that they did not know they had and shared interests that would have gone unknown but for that locally devised and locally driven opportunity. On Tuesday, people involved in such an initiative took the opportunity to make sure that I knew that, as individuals, they felt less lonely and more connected.

Governments do not do that; people do. Our job in Government and across the Parliament is to recognise that and use our resources and powers to support and encourage that work. Regardless of our political differences, we must recognise that, on this issue, the challenge for us all is to show collective leadership. I want us to ask ourselves four questions. What needs to change in communities to reduce isolation and loneliness and increase social connections? Who can play their part, and what can they do more or less of? What do we, as a Government, need to do to empower people and create the conditions for positive change? Each of us should ask ourselves,

“What can I do, in my community, to tackle loneliness and social isolation?”

The draft strategy sets out the work that is already happening, led by Government, the third sector and local communities. It also sets out the evidence on the issue and information to increase our understanding. Above all, though, the draft strategy invites all of us, as well as our stakeholders and the communities of Scotland that we serve, to start an open and co-operative dialogue in which we listen and focus on the task at hand and on the concrete steps that we can all take to tackle and reduce loneliness and social isolation.

The draft strategy signals the Government’s commitment to tackle social isolation and loneliness. It sets out our belief that we must do more to empower communities to lead in the area and that our role is to create the conditions for change to happen and to lead by example. Building a connected and cohesive Scotland is everyone’s business.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises that social isolation and loneliness affect people of all ages and stages of life; believes that it is people and communities themselves that have a central role in building and maintaining social connections and supporting those who may be socially isolated; acknowledges that the Scottish Government has an important role to play in showing leadership as well as creating the conditions that allow people and communities to design and deliver solutions that best meet their needs; welcomes therefore the publication of the Scottish Government’s draft strategy, *A Connected Scotland*, and encourages everyone to respond to this important consultation, and further welcomes the good work of a range of organisations from the third sector and elsewhere in tackling these issues, including the Campaign to End Loneliness and the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, which aims to highlight the fact that everyone can do something to help lonely people in the community.

14:43

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this vital debate on social isolation and loneliness. Given that 79 per cent of adults in Scotland experience loneliness, it is important that we get our approach right. We have seen, from recent media coverage and the support for continuing the legacy of Jo Cox, that real momentum is building. I am pleased that the Scottish Government welcomes the appointment of the new UK minister and has offered to share the draft strategy with the UK Government.

I am greatly encouraged by the fact that we are to have a national strategy that will seek to tackle the issue and make it everyone’s responsibility—from the Government down to local communities—to make a real difference. I sincerely hope that we can go beyond party politics to mould a genuinely effective strategy.

Social isolation has become a prevalent public health issue as we live increasingly independent and transient lives. The days of three generations living under the same roof and individuals staying in the same village, town or city for their entire lives are largely gone. More people than ever are going to university, moving away from their home towns and setting up new lives away from their parents.

Instead of the career ladder, we now speak of the career jungle gym, with young people moving from job to job as they connect the dots of an eclectic career path. Increasingly, technology is replacing face-to-face contact, from catching up with our friends on WhatsApp to using self-service check-outs. We are more likely to be alone and, although being alone does not always mean being lonely, it is important that we address that societal change. Further to that, we are becoming ever more aware of how groups such as carers, young new mums and those in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual community, for example, are disproportionately affected, and that should be built into the strategy.

Long-term cultural change is, therefore, key and something that can be achieved through Government and individual action. I am pleased that the draft strategy picks up on the need to focus on grassroots action and letting communities lead. I have been lucky enough to see at first hand some of the great initiatives that are out there.

When I visited the Food Train last year, the wider benefits that the charity provided struck me the most. Through delivering food shopping to people’s homes, volunteers went above and beyond their core duties to provide the friendship and vital human contact that we all need.

When visiting Contact the Elderly, a charity that organises monthly tea parties for older people, some of whom might live alone, I realised just how simple yet effective volunteer efforts can be. I was pleasantly surprised by the mix of ages at a tea party in Glasgow, as volunteer drivers and guests came together, taking a few hours out of their day simply to chat. Those initiatives showed me that simplicity can sometimes be key and that those who were volunteering got as much out of helping others as those whom they were helping.

From examples in the media, it has become apparent that thinking outside of the box is increasingly effective in combating social isolation and loneliness. Only this week, in the newspapers, there was the story of a London student moving in with a 95-year-old pensioner in what has turned out to be an arrangement that benefits both of them financially and, more importantly, in providing companionship. That simple idea could be systematically promoted in universities or

companies that have a lot of younger interns who cannot afford city rental prices.

Those ideas feed into the premise that intergenerational work is important in creating connections. To use a phrase coined by Age UK Scotland and the Mental Health Foundation, it is about treating older people as “assets” to the community.

Many people were impressed—as I was—by the recent Channel 4 Age UK trial in which nursery-age kids set up a classroom in a retirement home in Bristol. In the same vein, I would like to put forward the idea of a pen pal system in some schools whereby young people can write to older people who, perhaps because they live in rural settings, are hindered by a lack of transport and befriending services.

We know that there are huge wider benefits to tackling the issue. Poor physical and mental health is intrinsically linked to loneliness. Loneliness is thought to increase the likelihood of mortality by 10 per cent, and there are proven links between loneliness and higher dementia rates among older people. Research has found that people who are lonely are also more likely to suffer high blood pressure, poor sleep and depression.

The evidence points to people reporting to general practitioners and accident and emergency units when the root cause of their problems is loneliness, so I would like the Scottish Government to be systematic in its approach and to signpost appropriate support where we know that lonely people might first seek help.

I appreciate the strategy’s mention of social prescribing but, beyond research on its impact, I would like to know more about how social prescribing will become part and parcel of the health service’s response to loneliness. That will provide the foundation and structure to tie together the initiatives that are out there and promote them in a systematic way. The Royal College of General Practitioners found that patients were more likely to make contact with a group if they received clear information. At the start of its improving links in primary care project, it found that 50 per cent of patients accepted the recommendation of signposting to a local resource but that that figure increased to 80 per cent six months after the end of the project. Trial projects such as those in North Ayrshire and North Lanarkshire, whereby GPs in deprived areas refer patients to link workers who explain to them what services are available locally, have been shown to work very successfully.

I ask that, as well as providing an update on how many of the 250 community link workers that the Scottish Government has committed to recruit by the end of the parliamentary session have been recruited so far, the minister explain how we will

create a joined-up approach using resources such as the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations and how the Government intends to monitor and select pilot projects in local communities, which, if successful, can be recommended as models to be used elsewhere.

My final ask is that a Scotland-specific national day dedicated to tackling social isolation and loneliness be created. We all have a role to play in preventing social isolation and loneliness, but that could be supported by a national awareness of what is out there and what individuals can do in their communities to make a difference.

I reiterate the need for a systematic assessment of how any strategy would work, which is something to which I have alluded in my amendment.

I do not want us just to mean well; I want us to do well. For that to be the case, we need to find concrete ways of measuring and monitoring progress. I appreciate that the strategy contains a draft framework, but it would undoubtedly be strengthened by referencing exactly how levels of loneliness and isolation will be measured. It should also include a national indicator that commits us to reducing isolation and loneliness.

I reiterate my support for the draft strategy as we look to build on the legacy of people such as Jo Cox. This is an important step forward by the Scottish Government as we look to tackle an issue that is becoming more prevalent across the communities that we represent. Only by doing that will we give ourselves the best chance of succeeding in the longer term. Preventing social isolation and loneliness is the responsibility of us all, and I look forward to working together to build a strategy to address that vital issue in the coming months.

I move amendment S5M-09927.2, to leave out from “, and further welcomes” to end and insert:

“; recognises the need to find concrete ways of measuring and monitoring progress to best understand how the future strategy is working; welcomes the good work of a range of organisations from the third sector and elsewhere in tackling these issues, including the Campaign to End Loneliness and the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, which aims to highlight the fact that everyone can do something to help lonely people in the community, and further welcomes the appointment of a new UK minister to lead on loneliness and continue the work of Jo Cox.”

14:51

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to open today’s debate for Scottish Labour, because a national strategy to combat social isolation and loneliness is very welcome.

Scottish Labour committed to establishing a national loneliness strategy in our 2016 manifesto,

and we are fully committed to working with the Scottish Government to make sure that its strategy is a success. I congratulate the minister for her leadership on the issue so far.

As the minister has said, social isolation and loneliness can affect any of us at any stage of our lives, so it is important that we develop this national strategy, which will look at how we can work collaboratively across Government and Parliament and with external partners to combat social isolation and loneliness.

I thank the minister and Annie Wells for their recognition of our friends Jo and Brendan Cox. I also thank the many organisations that have provided helpful briefings for today's debate, including the Mental Health Foundation, Age Scotland, the British Red Cross, the Co-operative Party—of which I should say that I am a member—Marie Curie and Voluntary Health Scotland. I hope that I have not forgotten anyone.

There is a clear recognition across civic Scotland that loneliness is a growing problem and that it is in all our interests to grapple with it. The Jo Cox commission on loneliness carried out a year-long study and found that 9 million people across the United Kingdom are lonely, with health consequences costing the economy £32 billion every year.

We have heard evidence on the impact of loneliness. I would add that loneliness can be as harmful to health as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, which I find quite hard to believe.

Loneliness creates not only a huge burden on our public services but an unacceptable social inequality that must be eradicated. My colleague David Stewart, who is our new shadow minister for health, will close the debate today for Labour, because we see a need to work across policy areas.

The strategy is an opportunity to consider how the Government can show leadership by working with other partners to consider how we can take action that reduces social isolation and, by extension, prevents people from experiencing loneliness, where possible.

We have heard that loneliness affects people of all ages. Although it is most often thought of as a problem that affects older people, recent research from the Mental Health Foundation shows that loneliness has a negative impact on the mental health of tens of thousands of young people, too. With 2018 being the year of young people, and with the Government also committed to a strategy on child and adolescent mental health and wellbeing in addition to the on-going education governance review, I hope that the social isolation strategy will contain actions that reflect the on-going work across the Government to tackle the

issue, specifically with regard to the prioritisation of good mental health and the provision of access to school-based counselling at the heart of the education system.

I welcome the commitment in the consultation that, ultimately,

“we want to let communities lead.”

I am particularly struck by the sentiment in the Liberal Democrat amendment on the role that people can play in place making. That is timely, given that the Government's Planning (Scotland) Bill is very much on everyone's minds.

I agree that change happens from the ground up and that a complex problem such as loneliness cannot be tackled by any one policy document or a directive from Edinburgh. We also agree that we all have to play our part in combating loneliness. That is why my amendment is about the important role that local government has to play in delivering community services. Local government is responsible for the delivery of many services that are vital to connecting people, whether they are day centres, social care services for older people, community transport links or social activities through access to community-run leisure facilities, and it is responsible for funding local voluntary groups. It is important that we are honest about the challenges that all those services face and the impact that they can have for older people in particular.

I fully agree with the sentiments in the draft strategy on the need to empower communities and the important role that the third sector has to play, but we cannot have an honest conversation about how we will build cohesion in our communities without acknowledging that public sector budgets are being squeezed and that the knock-on impact of that on third sector organisations reduces their capacity to play that role. Community organisations are well placed to tackle loneliness, but they are at risk in places.

On the active groups, I have thought a lot about my own area of Central Scotland, including South Lanarkshire. If the minister has not had the chance to visit the Lightburn Elderly Association Project—LEAP—I am sure that it would be pleased to host a visit. It specialises in reducing loneliness through befriending services for older people, but its budget is to be slashed by 15 per cent—that is £8,000. If South Lanarkshire Council goes ahead with that cut, that will have an impact.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I hear what Monica Lennon says about the South Lanarkshire Council draft budget. Will she encourage her Labour colleagues on that council to engage with the current administration on the draft budget and put forward their proposals?

Monica Lennon: I had a meeting with Councillor David McLachlan, who leads the Labour group, last Friday, and I think that he has had a meeting with Councillor John Ross, who is the leader of the council. LEAP is based in Clare Haughey's constituency, so she, too, will be concerned about that potential cut of £8,000.

In our debate on loneliness last year, which was secured by my colleague Rhoda Grant, I talked about the benefit of organisations such as LEAP and how we can celebrate them. COVEY Befriending, which is another organisation that is based in South Lanarkshire, provides befriending to young people.

I was a volunteer when I was a student—which was not yesterday—and I recognise that Annie Wells's points about intergenerational links are really important. When I was a councillor in Whitehill, in Hamilton, we had an annual intergenerational lunch that young people came to. They cooked the food and joined older people to have lunch together. I was not one of the older people—I was somewhere in the middle. Members will get the theme. There was entertainment, and that brought everyone together. Such events are at risk if we do not invest in our local councils.

What we are getting at is that it is not just about warm words; we need appropriate funding. The third sector cannot continue to fill in the gaps when core services are being cut back.

I look forward to engaging positively with the minister as she takes forward the consultation on the strategy, which is important. Social isolation is a complex issue, and solving it requires not only leadership from the Government but active and constructive participation from all parties. We are fully committed to that.

I move amendment S5M-09927.1, to insert after "important consultation":

“; recognises the importance of local government in delivering community services that tackle loneliness, and that austerity-driven budget cuts to local authorities reduce their capacity to do this”.

14:59

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I am grateful to the Scottish Government for securing time to debate the issue and for the work that it has already undertaken in constructing the strategy that we are debating today. The timing is well pitched, as it comes hot on the heels of the festive period, which is a bright and joyous collection of days for most, but serves as a counterpoint to amplify the isolation that is endured by many.

That nearly 80 per cent of our adult population has experienced loneliness is a stark reminder of

the human condition: we are a social animal. So much about modern life precludes meaningful social interaction and considerable amounts of our lives are spent in virtual worlds of our own creation. Although, in many cases, we are active and informed, it is easy to spend much of that time in relative isolation.

Isolation can impact massively on physical health, with a heightened risk of cardiovascular problems and dementia. Loneliness and mental ill health have a causal and self-sustaining relationship and, given that one quarter of all GP appointments have an underlying mental health issue at their root, they have a massive impact on the flow and functionality of our wider health service.

I do not mean to do our country down when I point to the fact that recent studies show that the vast majority of people in the communities that we represent do not recognise the presence of a community spirit where they live. However, that is a worrying reality. We have seen that underscored in the steady erosion of opportunities for and engagement in volunteering, which we have heard a great deal about at meetings of the cross-party group on volunteering, which I am proud to convene. I am grateful for the work of the Scottish Government in its efforts to draw volunteering through as a golden thread in all policy areas.

How we construct the places where we live is key to turning that situation around. The built environment is extremely important to establishing meaningful social cohesion in our society and to reducing social isolation, but the pressures of housing demand and developers' business models mean that all too often we build dormitories and not communities. Planning by increment has been such that the expansion of our urban landscape has been undertaken without much thought of place. Thousands upon thousands of homes are built, but seldom with thought given to the creation of community hubs or spaces for communal activity and recreation.

It is in the maintenance of our existing towns and cities where we exacerbate the problem of isolation still further. I have previously told members of the time that I chaired the Scottish older people's assembly in this very room. On asking what their greatest concern was, I was shocked to learn that it was the fear of falling. Put simply, the fear of falling reduces the orbit of a person's world, especially at this time of year. As we know, the icy weather before Christmas brought with it a spike in the number of fracture cases presenting at our accident and emergency departments. However, people in their 80s, who are already frail and without faith in the safety of the pavements at the best of times, are far more likely to stay at home.

That is why I sought and won support from members for the introduction of a comprehensive national falls strategy. I have been challenged at times by Scottish National Party MSPs and Government ministers, who have pointed me to the 2014 falls framework. Although I accept that it exists, I tell them that it is not entirely working. It does not stretch to the provision of grit for our streets on icy days or to hand rails on our hills; it does not address the even surfacing of our roads and pavements; and it does not propose the training of non-NHS public sector staff on how to respond and offer assistance when somebody falls.

As such, we need to work with our local authority partners to devise a national falls strategy that looks at the risk of falls in every aspect of life. By so doing, we can reduce the strain on our NHS, improve social cohesion and, most importantly, increase the size of the social universe in which our most frail and infirm constituents currently exist.

Loneliness is not the preserve of the elderly. If we ask any young person who has endured an adverse childhood experience, they will tell us how isolating trauma, attachment disorder and loss can be, yet we still do not properly identify those young people, let alone help them to fully recover. A weight of evidence shows us that those events cause so much difficulty for young people in later life, and loneliness is right up there, which is why Sir Harry Burns put the issue at the heart of his review of NHS targets.

The theme was also picked up by the Red Cross in the briefing that members received in advance of the debate. It said:

“major life events which change someone’s sense of self and their ability to connect with other people should be seen as moments of particular risk.”

We must therefore act on the call from the former chief medical officer for Scotland and use the data already available to us to identify trauma early on so that those vulnerable young people receive access to trauma recovery at an early stage. That can be delivered through the simple act of befriending, which is one of the most powerful antidotes to loneliness that there is for any age group. However, we have seen many befriending services struggle with core funding in recent years. I therefore lend the support of members on the Liberal Democrat benches to calls from third sector organisations for mainstreamed Scottish Government funding to sustain those services.

We must look for an appropriate policy response to loneliness wherever we find it. To that end, I welcome the appointment by the UK Government of Tracey Crouch as a minister for loneliness—the silver lining of an otherwise calamitous

Government reshuffle—and I urge the Scottish Government to follow suit with such an appointment.

People are often lonely in our communities in plain sight. They are all around us, but are seldom known to us. However, their eyes are turned to this chamber for solutions, and it is incumbent on us not to let them down.

I move amendment S5M-09927.3, to insert at end:

“; believes that the planning decisions of local authorities can be driven by the pressures of demand at the expense of placemaking and social cohesion; considers that the way in which the built environment is established and maintained is an important factor in addressing social isolation and loneliness; welcomes that the draft strategy recognises that falls, and the fear of falling, are a common cause of social isolation, particularly among older people; recalls that the Parliament voted in favour of developing a national falls strategy on 2 March 2017, and urges the Scottish Government to explain how this is being progressed.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): We now move to the open debate, with six-minute speeches. We have some time in hand, so I can allow extra time for interventions.

15:06

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Producing a national strategy to tackle social isolation and loneliness will surely help in the battle against the feelings of isolation and loneliness that afflict so many people—feelings that have an impact on both physical and emotional wellbeing. I am sure that everyone in the chamber can agree that, when they imagine a better Scotland, part of that vision features more connected communities that allow all members of society to build meaningful relationships and feel part of something greater.

Most of us have probably experienced what the Government’s consultation refers to as “transient loneliness”—a temporary state sometimes provoked when contact with friends and family is limited. Unfortunately, once feelings of isolation take root, that can develop into a chronic condition that limits our ability to participate in society and enjoy life. Of course, many people feel embarrassed to share such feelings, even if they have someone to share them with.

Thanks to the work of organisations such as the campaign to end loneliness and the Jo Cox commission on loneliness, we are more aware than ever of the link between loneliness and poor mental health, with lonely individuals increasingly prone to depression and even suicide. If we examine the findings of a review of social isolation and loneliness in Scotland that NHS Scotland carried out last year, we see a worrying picture: 11

per cent of adults in Scotland often feel lonely; 22 per cent feel that they do not have a strong sense of belonging to their local community; and a growing number of children are at risk of social isolation because of poor peer support or bullying. I am also convinced that our modern obsession with social media plays its part too, as research consistently indicates that the more time people spend on line, the less time they spend in the company of other human beings.

What can we do, as a Parliament, as MSPs and as individuals, about loneliness? At the local level, Patricia Gibson MP and I have led a door-to-door campaign over the past two months to let constituents know the steps that we can all take to reduce loneliness in our communities. We provided information that includes contact details for organisations ranging from Age Scotland and the Ayrshire Community Trust and its volunteering organisations to LGBT Youth Scotland. At the national level, in a bold step forward, Scotland is the first nation in the UK, and one of the first in the world, to develop a national strategy to address loneliness. Above all, local communities themselves are the key to identifying and protecting those who are at risk of becoming isolated, but Government can foster an environment where those communities are empowered to design and implement their own initiatives that meet their own particular needs.

Community initiatives come in all shapes and sizes, and of course any group that comes together to learn a new skill or share an old pastime helps to build those vital connections that make us feel more rooted in our communities. Befriending can sometimes be the specific goal of an initiative; sometimes, it is just a happy consequence.

During First Minister's questions today, I raised the issue of Food Train in North Ayrshire, which is a befriending project in my constituency. Some members might already be familiar with the excellent work that that charity does across Scotland. In North Ayrshire, the service provides weekly groceries to 172 older people through a network of 40 enthusiastic volunteers, backed by two full-time employees. Not only does Food Train provide a vital lifeline by delivering groceries to housebound and isolated older people, but it forms meaningful connections between the volunteers and those they serve.

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): Mr Gibson mentions Food Train, which was also piloted in South Ayrshire. However, that pilot has been suspended because of a lack of funding from the Scottish National Party-led council. I know that he is going to be speaking to the minister about the situation, but will he also bring up the loss of that service to my constituents in Ayr, Prestwick and Troon?

Kenneth Gibson: Yes. John Scott and I had a brief discussion about that just after First Minister's question time, and I said at the time that I would be happy to speak to the minister with regard to South Ayrshire as well as North Ayrshire. I urge members across the chamber to sign my motion on Food Train in North Ayrshire, which is, as they will see, a completely non-partisan motion.

The power of a dependable relationship when someone can go for days at a time without company but has someone who can visit them, give news, chat and ensure that they are okay cannot be overstated. However, Food Train in North Ayrshire is soon to be taken away by North Ayrshire health and social care partnership. I believe that the decision should be reversed before serious harm is caused to the users, who have come to rely on the charity's physical and emotional benefits.

In this year of young people, it is especially important to remember that the problem of loneliness is not limited to older members of society. A report by the Mental Health Foundation in 2010 found that loneliness was most common between the ages of 18 and 34. Many campaigners have deemed support for people in that age group to be lacking as they are mostly too old to access youth services and too young for initiatives that are aimed at older people. Monica Lennon touched on that. In particular, young disabled people, LGBT teens and those from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to experience social isolation. Chronic and persistent bullying can lead to intense loneliness, reduced self-esteem and social anxiety in later life.

The new strategy ties in with the recently published document "Respect for All: The National Approach to Anti-bullying for Scotland's Children and Young People" and encourages an intergenerational approach to building connected communities. After all, every generation can learn from those who came before, and I am sure that Scotland's young people could teach us a few things, too, certainly on information technology.

There is no denying that austerity is forcing individuals and families into poverty across the UK. The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that cuts in welfare spending will lead to a 10 per cent reduction in the incomes of the poorest 20 per cent of working families. Meanwhile, an additional 1 million children in the UK will be in relative poverty in 2020 as a direct result of cuts imposed since 2013.

The Scottish Government is working hard to mitigate those cuts, and the strategy reaffirms its commitment to tackling poverty and inequality. However, when looking at both the causes and the consequences of social isolation, there are several core areas where the Scottish Government can

act. For example, recent studies have shown a definitive link between socioeconomic status and social isolation, with those living in poverty being increasingly likely to experience feelings of loneliness.

During the consultation and indeed after the strategy is finalised, I look forward to on-going collaboration between the Scottish Government, health and social care partnerships, schools, the third sector, grass-roots community organisations and others to make the goals that are outlined a reality. I am confident that, together, we can begin to turn the tide of the loneliness epidemic here in Scotland and serve as an example to nations around the world.

15:12

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): In the classic Simon and Garfunkel song “I Am A Rock”, the chorus is:

“I am a rock
I am an island”.

However, the song ends with the words:

“And a rock feels no pain
And an island never cries”.

As the good Book tells us in Genesis:

“God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone.’”

We are all aware that we are made for relationships. We need to interact with other human beings because, without that interaction, we end up with social, physical and mental issues. I suspect that, for too long, in our society and throughout western Europe, loneliness has not been taken as a serious issue, but let us look at the facts. Some 79 per cent of adults in Scotland have experienced loneliness and 17 per cent are always or often lonely. That means that nearly 1 million adult Scots are feeling lonely.

Loneliness occurs in individuals in many different situations, including older people who are stuck at home, mums and dads who are bringing up children and who lack adult company, and people in all age groups due to the breakdown of traditional society. Over the past—probably—50 years, we have seen a breakdown in our culture of community, volunteering and neighbourhoods.

One of my assistants said to me today that she knows only one family in her street, yet her mother, on hogmanay, had the whole street in and partied until 4am. There is something in that contrast that is about generational difference and change. That has a lot to do with the way we live and work. People are working longer hours. Sometimes their community is not to be found in the place where they sleep. Technology is both a blessing and a curse.

Although I am a Facebook fan, I am not convinced that it is an alternative to a good chat with someone in a pub or coffee shop. In fact, the opposite is the case: a number of my friends have said to me that they were going to come off Facebook because they were going through a difficult time. Facebook is about cats and dogs, happy faces and Murdo Fraser talking about himself. [*Laughter.*]

People with disability can be isolated. As we have heard, that happens across different areas and communities. Older people and those with disabilities, either because of communication difficulties—they might find it hard to speak and to build relationships—or because of loneliness, sometimes find that they are stuck in the house because they are scared of crowds and going out.

As Alex Cole-Hamilton pointed out, there are things that we can do both locally and nationally. I will give an example from Tuesday. There was snow and ice where I stay. The streets where buses run were clear, but the nearest street with a bus stop is about 600 yards from my door. Without help to prevent me from slipping on the ice, I could not get to the bus to get to work. Local authorities need to reconsider which roads and pavements are gritted. Too often, roads are gritted but pavements are not. That means that for weeks, or even months, some older people and disabled people are left isolated in their houses.

Recently, a GP told me that if he could deal with isolation among his older patients, he could cut the prescriptions that he writes by a third. There is a medical cost, too.

There are positive examples of things that we can do in Edinburgh. For example, vintage vibes is a project that has been going for a fairly short time. It seeks to bring together older and younger people, not just for the younger person to visit someone in their house, but to go to the cinema, go shopping or socialise together. It is surely a good thing for different generations to talk and share experiences.

Local authorities, communities, the voluntary sector and national Government all need to play their part. However, we all have a responsibility. How well do I know my neighbours or the older person who lives a few doors along from me? Can I take time out from my schedule to pop in and see that they are okay or do something for them?

I welcome the strategy. It is a helpful document. I welcome the announcement of a UK minister. I suspect that the only way that we will actually change things is for all of us to play our part.

15:18

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I have no doubt that social isolation can have a significant impact on a person's health and wellbeing and on their ability to recover from the emotional and physical setbacks that life throws at us and the bumps along the road. Social isolation and loneliness can affect anyone at any stage of life.

Today, I would like to talk about some older women in my constituency and the importance of the Food Train service to them. Although that service is being withdrawn, I am sure that the community will come together to fight to save it.

Sheila Alderson, who is from Irvine, has written of her sadness at last week's decision, saying:

"Food Train is more than a shopping service, it's an interaction as well. I get a good blether when I phone in my shopping order on a Monday, and we have a blether when they come to deliver my shopping as well. It breaks the week for me, they are friendly folk, they always ask how I'm doing."

Food Train also gives Sheila the freedom and flexibility to do her own shopping when she is up to it. If the weather is good, she can catch the bus to the local supermarket; however, if the weather is bad, or if she is not feeling up to it, she can order the food that she needs from Food Train. It lets her stay in her own home. By doing her own shopping, she can do what she enjoys, which is to cook fresh food for herself, but the end of Food Train means the end of the freedom of being in her own home and community.

Rosina Donnelly, who is 85 and also from Irvine, cares for her husband, who has dementia. In advance of today's debate, she wrote to me describing the announcement as a "bombshell" and Food Train volunteers as the "most wonderful caring people", saying that she knows that she can trust them to come into her home. She says:

"Without a single doubt in my mind,"

Food Train

"was the best thing North Ayrshire Council did for pensioners, making sure we could feed ourselves with a very trustworthy and reliable workforce. Food Train is our life line. If we can't feed ourselves, the next step is a care home and that is expensive and no one wants to end their lifetime out of their own home if it is at all possible to remain there."

I appreciate that local authorities and health and social care partnerships have to make very challenging and difficult decisions in these times of considerable economic pressure, but in reaching decisions to end services, they have to carry out proper impact and risk assessments and consult people on the front line who receive them. In the case of Food Train, the opinion of my more vulnerable constituents—the older people who rely

on the service—was not sought in making the decision, and that is simply unacceptable. I will do all that I can to support the save our service campaign to get the decision reversed, and I encourage other west of Scotland MSPs who have not already signed the petition, or Kenneth Gibson's motion, to do so, get involved and talk to the people in their patch who are affected.

Of course, tackling social isolation and loneliness is about not just services but wider societal change that we can all be part of by doing our own wee bit. As the draft strategy makes clear, that could be as simple as being kinder in our day-to-day lives; indeed, that has been identified as going a long way towards reducing social isolation among people at all ages and stages of life.

I was really touched by one particular primary school's approach to encouraging kindness, which I saw on social media last week. The outline of one pupil is drawn on a big sheet of paper on which is written "Reasons Why We Love" and then all the other children have to write something positive about their wee pal in the class. Last week's reasons included the following inspiring gems:

"He respects the whole class and our feelings",

"He never leaves anyone out"

and—my personal favourite—

"It is like he has 100 hearts and they are all good."

That is a beautiful thing, and it is something that we in this chamber could learn from now and again.

I hope that North Ayrshire health and social care partnership can find it in its heart to save North Ayrshire Food Train. Our older people really rely on it, and it certainly makes a difference.

15:23

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): Follow that.

Social isolation is undoubtedly a scourge of modern-day living. We have supposedly moved on as a society, but in this regard too many of our citizens have been left behind. Many of us have become too self-focused, interested in our immediate family, perhaps, but in little beyond that in any meaningful sense. I know that I have been guilty of that myself in the past.

That realisation hit me as a consequence of a comment made in the course of engaging with one of a number of organisations in my constituency that are making a concerted effort to address this situation. In relation to the lack of appreciation of social isolation and loneliness amongst the elderly, someone pointed to an everyday situation that many of us will have been confronted with. We

pop into the supermarket for a few essential items—in a rush as we always are—but we find ourselves standing in the queue, becoming increasingly agitated as the older person who is being served chats to the checkout operator about nothing much while holding the rest of us up.

I bet that many of us have been there, and perhaps we thought, “Come on, hurry up,” but here is a much more worthy thought: what about reflecting on whether that old person is enjoying the only interaction with another human being that they will have that day, or perhaps over the course of a few days? Is it really such a hardship for the rest of us to wait another minute or two before getting on with our lives? Surely all of us could make that small and seemingly insignificant contribution towards creating a connected Scotland, tackling social isolation and loneliness, and building stronger communities—the aspiration of today’s debate.

I am fortunate to represent a part of Scotland where considerable structured community-led and delivered efforts are being made to address loneliness and isolation among the elderly, which perhaps leaves us well placed to take forward the Scottish Government’s aim that people and communities should have a central role in building and maintaining social connections with those who may be socially isolated.

In highlighting that work, however, I have to acknowledge that we are not there yet in Angus South, because much of that effort is focused on the towns, and isolation and loneliness may well be even more acute in more rural parts. It is about a community supporting its members, but there is perhaps a role for Government in facilitating the delivery of more comprehensive networks and in ensuring that GPs, social workers and other agencies are pro-actively signposting anyone whom they identify as being socially isolated to the support that can be provided.

There are two highly successful befriending networks in my constituency, one in Carnoustie and the other in Monifieth. Having started in 2011 with a client roster of six people, Carnoustie Befrienders now has 22 volunteers making regular visits to 30 people in the town and surrounding villages who sadly do not have anyone, or at least anyone nearby. Referrals come from GPs, social work, neighbours and family members. I note that because, in my experience, that is not an absolute given—certainly in the case of GPs.

A little further down the Angus coastline we reach Monifieth, where the brilliant Monifieth Befriending Scheme currently has more than 40 clients matched with adult befrienders. What is particularly pleasing about the Monifieth group is the involvement of pupils from the local high school. In this year of young people, I want to

applaud the work that Monifieth Befriending Scheme is doing with secondary 6 pupils, with the assistance of the depute headteacher, Kathleen Ritchie. Those pupils support folk in care homes either by being partnered with one of the residents or by helping with group activities. Incidentally, the Monifieth Befriending Scheme works out of the local GP practice, which is a good example of collaborative and joined-up working.

Another group that is seeking to tackle social isolation in my constituency is Contact the Elderly. The organisation has volunteers who provide monthly Sunday afternoon tea parties. Why Sunday? It seems that Sunday has been identified as the loneliest day of the week. Nationally, Contact the Elderly has been operating for 52 years, and in Angus South those tea parties have been held in Carnoustie and in the more rural setting of Tealing.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Does Graeme Dey agree that we should recognise the fantastic work that the national rural mental health forum is undertaking with respect to the unique challenges presented by rural isolation, as he has mentioned all the rural communities in his own constituency?

Graeme Dey: Absolutely. I am aware of the significant work that Emma Harper refers to, and I look forward to hearing more about it next week when I meet our former parliamentary colleague Jim Hume, who has been leading on that.

A survey conducted by Contact the Elderly found that 90 per cent of guests said that they had made friends with volunteers and 81 per cent had made friends with other guests. That sounds like a pretty good success rate to me.

Sitting alongside all that, and also playing a vital role in tackling isolation, are men’s sheds, as the minister rightly pointed out. In my constituency, there are men’s sheds in Kirriemuir, Arbroath, Carnoustie and Monifieth. Having visited the latter two, I know of the great benefits that they provide. For many men, the suggestion that they should meet up with a friend for a coffee might not appeal, but when combined with an activity it is more likely to get a positive reaction from them. Joining a men’s shed has been shown to lead to users living healthier, happier and more connected lives.

In noting the work of the groups that I have highlighted, let me acknowledge the shortcomings. Those schemes do not cover every part of my constituency and certainly not every rural nook and cranny. Although work is being done to deliver a pan-Angus befriending service, we still have some way to go. I very much welcome this debate and the consultation. It is a conversation that we absolutely need to have.

In conclusion, I have to recognise that, although I have focused my contribution on efforts being made to tackle social isolation among the elderly, the problem impacts many other groups of all ages, one of which would be children with additional support needs and their parents. In that regard, there is perhaps an overlap between what the strategy sets out to achieve and the wider consideration of how we can best meet the needs of ASN youngsters. I wonder whether the minister, in closing, might comment on that issue.

15:30

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): We support the launch of the draft strategy this week and we are pleased that Scotland has taken the lead in tackling loneliness. The minister has delivered on an issue that Labour in Government would have delivered on too and I hope that we can work together to refine and execute the strategy. I welcome the minister's constructive comments regarding the shared responsibility that we all have.

Yesterday, the UK Government announced that there would be a minister to tackle loneliness; it is reassuring that this is one area on which all parties across this chamber and across Parliaments are now taking action, to tackle this growing social and public health problem.

Before she was murdered in 2016, Jo Cox's commission on loneliness led the way on tackling the issue and, as her husband Brendan said yesterday, we should be thankful that even though she is not here, her work is

"still making the world a better place".

My colleagues Rachel Reeves and Seema Kennedy, who now chair the commission, have highlighted just how extensive loneliness is across the UK. As Monica Lennon said, they found that 9 million people in the UK are lonely, the consequences of which cost the economy £32 billion every year.

The minister's draft strategy highlights equally worrying trends in Scotland. One in 10 people feel lonely often, three in 10 calls to Silver Line Scotland and to the national LGBT helpline are about loneliness, and eight in 10 people caring for their loved ones have felt lonely. Those trends undoubtedly fill us with concern, and they should also drive us to tackle the root causes.

Across Government, there are solutions: in social security, housing and local government, and also in health—mental and public—we can help to prevent loneliness or to spot it and intervene. I am particularly interested in the emphasis that the draft strategy places on the role of community. Our relationships with neighbours, loved ones and the

people whom we see every day can help to provide contact that meets our social needs.

Studies suggest that social isolation can interact with poverty and can lead to feelings of loneliness. We need to tackle the poverty that plagues communities so that communities themselves can tackle that loneliness.

There is an important question to be asked about how we in this chamber aid the making of connections. Surely we have the power to ensure that services are in place to help communities make those connections or create a setting in which we can reach out to someone. As Rachel Reeves said,

"When the culture and the communities that once connected us to one another disappear, we can be left feeling abandoned and cut off from society".

That is why we are asking Parliament to recognise the importance of community services that tackle loneliness and acknowledge that austerity-driven budget cuts to local authorities reduce their capacity to do that.

In North Lanarkshire, the likes of Cumbernauld Action for Care of the Elderly and Voluntary Action North Lanarkshire are doing great work to help to tackle loneliness, and the suicide prevention campaign that is run with NHS Lanarkshire, Albion Rovers and Motherwell, Airdrie, and Clyde football clubs is award winning. However, the finance secretary's budget settlement could make such work harder in the very near future. The council has had to cut £200 million from services in the past decade, and the decision on integration joint board funding for the year ahead is imminent.

Before I close, I want to pick up on a point that I touched on before: that eight in 10 people caring for loved ones have felt lonely. In two weeks, we will begin stage 2 consideration of the Social Security (Scotland) Bill. The people of Scotland will see its Parliament use new powers to create our own system to change the lives of disabled people and their carers, tackle poverty and reinforce the safety net. More than 30 per cent of working-age Glaswegians who are disabled or unable to work are experiencing loneliness and carers are feeling increasingly lonely, so I hope that the minister and I can discuss how the bill can begin to tackle that.

Contact a Family's 2011 report, "Forgotten Families", set out how disability in a family can cause loneliness through a combination of financial, emotional and practical pressures. Stigma and lack of services prevent families from being integrated, while low income restricts the freedom to get out and about. The report highlights how families struggle to find or access the support of other families in their situation while

trying to do their best by their children and loved ones.

I hope that the minister accepts that her amendment to uprate certain benefits could have afforded carers the same assurance; doing that would have matched the Government's commitment to annually uprate carers allowance in line with inflation. I hope that the minister and I can discuss a further amendment that I am working on to better reflect that policy.

15:36

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): There is a great deal of consensus in the chamber on this issue. I even agree entirely with Jeremy Balfour, particularly regarding what he said about Murdo Fraser and Facebook. I agree, too, with Mark Griffin, who said that the issue is cross-cutting—there are education impacts, housing impacts, planning impacts and transport policy impacts.

I am really glad that we are debating this important issue and that the Government is developing a focus on reducing social isolation and loneliness. Although it is clear that people and communities themselves have an important role in this, the Government's motion and consultation document make it clear that it, too, has an important role in creating the conditions for change, and they highlight a number of key areas, such as planning and transport, that are central to creating communities that connect people. I welcome the focus on that in the Lib Dem amendment, too. This is fundamental: we cannot build thriving communities that make varied social interactions a part of everyday life if we continue to design around the car. We need to make public transport more accessible and invest more in walking and cycling, which are vital to creating a community of which people feel that they are a part.

I live in Edinburgh, so I experience the benefits of a bus service that is managed locally for public benefit, but people in other parts of Scotland are not so lucky. In Glasgow, First Bus has hiked children's bus fares by 40 per cent and tried to increase fares for unemployed people.

On my way to the bus stop in the morning, I might hear a neighbour shout, "I saw you on telly last night—didn't agree with a word you said, mind!", as my daughter looks around askance. I moved house a couple of years ago and one of the people who I had met at the bus stop gave me a card that said, "I hope you meet some good bus stop people when you're further up the road." Those little connections are really important, which is why it is so important to invest in public transport and active travel.

I welcome the document that restates that the Government is committed to the national concessionary scheme, but we as a Parliament need to get serious about reregulating our buses and improving the concessionary travel offer so that it includes young people and people on low incomes.

As we all acknowledge, social isolation and loneliness affect people at all ages and stages of life and manifest themselves in different ways. I am deeply concerned that loneliness is increasing, because I see signs of it every day in my work. Sometimes, reaching out for assistance with a practical problem is also a way of reaching out for contact—for a chat—in order to get the feeling that somebody somewhere is on our side and that somebody somewhere knows that we exist. My staff and I are aware that we receive an increasing number of regular phone calls from constituents who seem to have little other social contact—we now recognise their voices. We do all that we can to help, but more and more constituents are turning to us in severe emotional distress, perhaps when they are struggling with a mental health condition. We will, of course, do all that we can to help them.

I do not know whether members saw a clip after the late news last night featuring a 71-year-old woman who was sharing her experience with a befriending service. My mum is 71. I challenge members to watch that clip, as I did, without feeling slightly choked. The woman herself was choked as she spoke about how much she looked forward to one phone call a week that is arranged for her by a service. Just before Christmas, members might have seen the Age UK video entitled "John's story"; if not, I urge them to watch it. It is very heartening that we are discussing this issue and that it is now on mainstream media. We have people like Jo and Brendan Cox to thank for that. Last night, we heard Toni Giugliano of the Mental Health Foundation speaking articulately on television. It is becoming part of our national discussion and also part of mainstream media, which can only be a very good thing.

Labour's amendment makes it clear that community services are crucial. The consultation document runs through a long list of individual initiatives and sources of funding that are welcome, such as the public library improvement fund, but we must protect what we have locally. The consultation document states that:

"there must be good access to appropriate community facilities and places to meet".

Protecting local authority budgets is fundamental to that. Many local services have turned to co-location, but that can sometimes be driven by pressure on budgets, and we have to ensure that

people have a wide range of community services and facilities to choose from.

I welcome Jeremy Balfour's highlighting of vintage vibes, which says:

"Good company never gets old."

With vintage vibes, participants can gather and giggle, join the stroll patrol if they fancy a walk or, if singing is their thing, there is vintage vocals. Many organisations are working very hard to combat loneliness and social isolation.

When I volunteered in athletics, I worked with three coaches who, I was well aware, had all suffered bereavements. I could see the difference that it made to those individuals' lives to get out, go down to the track, meet people of all ages and help them to attain their athletic ambitions, and do something that they were passionate about. Making it affordable and possible for those who want to volunteer to do so is incredibly important.

As well as considering the social fabric of our towns, cities and rural areas, and how we design our built environment and travel infrastructure, we must ask hard questions about how loneliness and social isolation relate to a culture that has become increasingly individualistic over past decades. There is a political dimension to that. As the Mental Health Foundation points out:

"our society prides itself on self-reliance",

which makes it very difficult for people to own up to feeling lonely. It prevents them from talking about it or reaching out for help.

I welcome the Scottish Government's acknowledgement that employers and businesses have a vital role to play here, too. People in Scotland and the UK work some of the longest hours in Europe, which keeps us away from our friends, families and communities. Let us support flexible working, be more open to part-time work and ensure that workload priorities are not isolating people. We have to work hard if we want to build a more connected society. We have to place greater value on protecting people's time away from work if we want such a change to happen.

I will leave it there, but I look forward to working with colleagues to build a more socially connected and less lonely Scotland.

15:43

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): Before I get into the body of my speech, I want to pick up on something that Kenny Gibson and Alison Johnstone raised, which is that, although loneliness predominantly affects older people, it can affect those of all ages.

I remember that when I was on the Equal Opportunities Committee, we did a phone-in on the radio as part of an inquiry. A number of young people called. The memory of one young professional man has stuck with me. His personal life had fallen apart, but he felt that he could not tell anyone at his work, so he would go there and then just go home and sit in the house. It is important that we also look at that aspect. We are talking predominantly about older people because, in percentage terms, loneliness affects them more, but we need to remember that it can affect everyone. Younger people sometimes find it much harder to speak to their peers about the situations that they have found themselves in. Presiding Officer, thank you for indulging me on that point.

As a former deputy convener of the Equal Opportunities Committee, I am very pleased to speak in this debate. I am very proud that the Scottish Government has launched the consultation on loneliness and isolation, which, as the minister mentioned, follows on from the recommendations of that committee. I also note a comment in the consultation document that refers to the committee's recommendations and asks, "How are we doing?"

I am being honest when I say that, given how many of the recommendations in the report have been enacted and the number of them on which work is on-going, I think that the Government is doing pretty well. Along with others, I will keep a watching brief on progress as the strategy makes its way through Parliament. I thank the minister and the Government for picking up on the work that the Equal Opportunities Committee did in session 4. The committee's convener, Margaret McCulloch, did a fantastic job.

The briefing from the Mental Health Foundation and Age Scotland raises some extremely important issues. In particular, it mentions the fact that a quarter of Scottish adults aged 65 or over experience depression when they are lonely, and it lists 12 recommendations. Members will be pleased to hear that I do not intend to read all of them out. Although a number of them have already been mentioned, I want to pick up on a couple of them. Monica Lennon spoke about the need for investment in community services, which are extremely important not only in keeping people out of hospital but in giving them a much better life and combating loneliness.

Annie Wells referred to the need to put social prescribing front and centre in primary care. That is part and parcel of the deep-end practices programme, and it is mentioned in the strategy. Another important recommendation that has been mentioned is that on tackling poverty and inequality in later life. People do not always realise that if someone has no money, they cannot go out

or heat their home. A number of older people experience that. It is extremely important that we tackle poverty and inequality in later life.

That marries with what recommendation 9 says about social inclusion for ethnic minority older people, including asylum seekers and refugees. It is much harder for people from an ethnic minority background to become involved, and we must emphasise the need to get such people more involved. We must not forget that they might be living in poverty and might be too proud to admit it.

Age Scotland's briefing, which is an excellent piece of work, mentions the triggers for loneliness, which include bereavement; moving home, perhaps to a place far away from family; children moving away, which has already been mentioned; and retirement. Evidence that the Equal Opportunities Committee took showed that men suffer most from retirement, because when they retire they can no longer see their group of friends. Sometimes they no longer have a reason to get up in the morning. That is why, as Graeme Dey mentioned, men's sheds have become so important for men who have retired. They can go along to their local men's shed and feel as though they are going to work.

There are numerous excellent initiatives. In my Glasgow Kelvin constituency, we have the fantastic GOPWA—Glasgow Old People's Welfare Association—which works throughout Glasgow, and friendship clubs such as the one in Townhead. We have line dancing and the Partick pluckers—I always have to be careful when I say their name. They are a group of older people who play the banjo. I always think that I am glad that I do not come from Falkirk when I mention them. We have art classes and designated walks in which many people get involved.

Community libraries are mentioned in the strategy. They have an important part to play, and we have an opportunity to widen their remit. I know the people who work in Hillhead library, who said:

"The majority of what we do is customer-led service. In a bigger sense, some of these people have nobody else to talk to, so they come in here. It is nice that they feel comfortable enough to come in and chat."

Community libraries have a big role to play.

We have a fantastic new initiative in my constituency called weekday wow factor. Members might have seen it on the television. I took part in it. As part of it, older people get to go on a zip wire, and they love it. I am too frightened to go on it, but they are not. They also go for trips on the Waverley and have weekly discos. They come in with their carers. Some of the participants are in wheelchairs, but they have more energy than I have. You can see the joy on their faces, because

taking part takes them back to when they were younger—when they were married, had children or whatever. It is wonderful to see the recognition on their faces, so I congratulate weekday wow factor.

It takes place in a nightclub in the afternoons. The DJ and the people who run the nightclub give their time for free. Carers bring people in wheelchairs and people with disabilities and none, and it is a fantastic day. If anyone ever wants a day out at a nightclub from 1 o'clock till 3, in Partick, get in touch and I will take you along to the weekday wow factor. There are loads of things out there and we have to make sure that we let people have access to them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I think that we should bring the wow factor in here.

15:50

John Scott (Ayr) (Con): Presiding Officer, I think that we have already got the wow factor in here with yourself and Sandra White. I may take a little extra time.

I welcome the debate and the many positive contributions that have been made thus far. I also welcome the hard work on the subject that was carried out by the Equal Opportunities Committee in the previous session, and the Government's report "A Connected Scotland", which is a good piece of work that clearly defines what needs to be done. Like others, I welcome Tracey Crouch's appointment as the UK Government minister to lead on loneliness, taking forward the good work of Jo Cox.

I start with the report. In her introduction, Jeane Freeman identifies that it is vital that we develop the principle of kindness. I could not agree more. In our own different ways, we are all here to improve the lives of our own special constituents. Kindness, delivered daily, is one very practical way of endeavouring to make life better for others.

As we all know, loneliness and social isolation are a growing problem. If I pick up the phone to speak to a constituent who has a problem, that in itself can help to solve the problem, because problems can, too often, be caused by loneliness and isolation. People may be unable to deal with their problems because they have no one to turn to.

Developing that theme of kindness, I believe that it is something that we in Ayrshire do well, particularly in South Ayrshire, which I know best. As Burns suggested, Sandra,

"gently scan your brother man,
Still gentler sister woman",

I am immensely proud of the strength of our close-knit and caring communities in Ayr, Prestwick and Troon, and the surrounding towns and villages.

Although I have no wish to appear complacent and perfectly well understand that much more could and should be done, I commend to Parliament the good work of organisations in my constituency that work daily to reduce the impact of loneliness and social isolation. Opportunities in Retirement in Ayr, which has 1,400 members, and OiR in Troon create communities with a huge range of clubs and activities that take place daily, from photography groups to chess to hill walking. I would be happy to discuss the OiR model with the minister if she is not already aware of it.

Voluntary Action South Ayrshire—VASA—supports many of our social enterprises, as well as organising community events, one of which I attended before Christmas in Ayr town hall. Several befriending groups support our communities, as do the dementia-friendly Prestwick and Troon groups. That dementia-friendly town model could easily be rolled out not just in Ayrshire but across Scotland.

Our Rotary clubs in Ayr, Prestwick and Troon all do huge amounts of charity work. I declare an interest as a member of Ayr Rotary club. Those are just a few of the many organisations in my constituency that give people a reason to get out of their bed in the morning to go and either benefit from the contact and services that those groups and others like them provide or help with the groups on a voluntary basis. For some people, a coffee morning can be the highlight of a Saturday. Our churches, often overlooked as community builders, are great meeting places. Troon old parish church holds a coffee morning every Saturday of the year, which is supported by its very own and very special group of people and not often enough by me. Between 500 and 600 people attend St Columba church in Ayr every Sunday to enjoy and benefit from the sense of community that is created by our minister, Fraser Aitken.

I know from a lifetime of community involvement in rural and urban Scotland about the problems that we have all defined in our different ways this afternoon.

I also know that the problem is not a new one. To see that, one need only think back 100 years to 1918 and to the lifetime of loneliness and isolation that so many women were consigned to after the loss of husbands, fiancés, fathers and brothers after the great war. A similar point applies to the very real losses and the hardship sustained by the Clydebank community after the second world war. I draw attention to those times to emphasise that loneliness and social isolation and their different causes are not a new problem—sadly, they have had to be addressed before.

In that regard, the good news is that, because the problem has long since been recognised, we have an opportunity to build on the caring and

voluntary infrastructure that is already in place. As there are many fit and active people of my age who are already retired but who are looking for worthwhile engagement in their communities, there is a huge opportunity for developing an even larger voluntary caring sector through a variety of models, but particularly the social enterprise model.

The Food Train initiative was piloted in South Ayrshire and North Ayrshire, but it subsequently became unaffordable in South Ayrshire, and it appears from Kenny Gibson's question to the First Minister earlier today that it is also unaffordable in North Ayrshire. It delivered exemplary front-line light-touch help to those who were looked after.

Rural isolation is a growing problem. The law of unintended consequences almost applies to the new drink driving laws, which are deterring country people from going to the local pub for even one drink. Rural bus services are in decline and winter weather makes the problem worse, particularly for the elderly.

As others have said, there is a growing problem of loneliness and social isolation driven by mental health issues and fuel poverty and in the deafblind community, too much of which goes unreported and unnoticed, and some of which is self-inflicted. I refer to social media, which in my view is making a growing contribution to loneliness and social isolation as well as mental health issues among the young. Too much time spent on Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and so on turns social media into antisocial media. Conversational and social interaction skills are no longer learned or developed, as young people can often communicate only through one of those platforms. A text message is no substitute for a phone call.

The constant need to check a screen, among ourselves—probably nearly everyone in the chamber will be on a screen of one sort or another in the next few moments—our work colleagues, our children and our grandchildren is already affecting the evolution of our species, and not necessarily in a good way. The day may yet dawn when class actions are brought against those companies and internet providers, when the long-term effects of internet damage to mental health and wellbeing, as well as physical health, are realised and evaluated. Kenny Gibson referred to that issue and, to my surprise, almost every other speaker has, too.

However, I digress, as that is a topic for another day. Today, I encourage the minister not just to note the two reports that I mentioned but to start making plans of action as to what is to be done. The Government will have our support on the motion at decision time and our support in future in this area of work. The sooner we get started, the better.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): There is time to digress. I am sure that everyone was devotedly listening to your speech and that no one was diverted and looking at their screens.

15:58

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): I, too, put on record my thanks to the Scottish Government for bringing a debate on such an important issue to the Parliament. The draft strategy and the launch of the consultation, as well as the decisions to include loneliness and social isolation in the fairer Scotland action plan, to set aside funds and to hold this debate, show that the Government believes that the issue is something that, finally, we can, should and must do something about. I thank the minister for detailing what has already been done. I commend the Scottish Government's rural division for its recent "Don't wrap up this Christmas" campaign, which aimed to tackle loneliness and mental health issues in rural areas.

As we have heard, it is not solely the elderly who experience the blight of loneliness, which can be found in all areas of society. It affects immigrants, bereaved people, those living with disabilities, those with a terminal illness, people in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex community, people from ethnic minorities and people with mental health issues—actually, it can affect anyone.

Due to the surge in the use of social media—or antisocial media, as John Scott has just called it—concerns have also been expressed about loneliness among younger people, after psychologists have found that spending more time online can increase feelings of loneliness due to minimised real-world interactions.

The human cost of loneliness and social isolation must not be understated. We know that loneliness can have a massive negative effect on mental health, and now the potential damage to physical health is also becoming apparent. I was pleased to hear Alison Johnstone mention Toni Giugliano from the Mental Health Foundation. He is in the gallery today, and I would just like to say hello to him.

The Mental Health Foundation and Age Scotland have identified loneliness as one of the leading public health challenges of our time. A contribution to the *BMJ* in 2016 highlighted that loneliness is associated with a 30 per cent higher risk of stroke and heart disease. Other research that has been conducted by charities indicates that being lonely can be as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, poses greater harm

than not exercising and is twice as harmful as being obese.

I am thankful that recent awareness of the issue has inspired people to act, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank some of them. Maimie Thompson at NHS Highland champions the reach out campaign, which was launched in 2016 and aims to combat loneliness and social isolation in the Highlands. The reach out campaign aims to make a difference to the lives of individuals who might be lonely and involved an online pledge for members of the public to display their commitment to help those in need of support. The campaign even inspired an 88-year-old woman who lives in Spain to make the kind offer of weekly correspondence via email to any Scots who feel lonely or isolated.

I would also like to give my sincere thanks to Kirsteen Campbell and her team at the befriending Caithness service. That project is run by Caithness Voluntary Group, which also aims to end loneliness in the community by supporting volunteers to make visits to those who require the service. It also carries out fantastic intergenerational work with schools and nurseries, where pupils visit people who do not get many visitors in hospitals and care homes.

The difference that the befriending Caithness service is making to the lives of its service users is huge. As we have heard from many other contributors today, people are enjoying socialising together: people are being brought together through the service from various areas, thus sparking conversation; and friends who have been unable to see each other due to mobility problems and other health issues have been reunited.

Befriendees have said that they are feeling alive again, they look forward to seeing each other, they are feeling healthy and they have increased confidence. People who felt that they could not go out in the past are now doing so. They are meeting others with their befriender and visiting the cinema and other places of interest. Meeting up with service users also makes a positive impact on the lives of the volunteers.

I have the pleasure of seeing some of the other work in the constituency at first hand, including that of Lindsey Tennent at the Brora village hub, the two primary schools in Wick that undertake visits and the young people who have worked towards their Duke of Edinburgh award through volunteering.

In a report that was compiled recently by NHS Highland on isolation, the evidence suggested that the intervention that supports people to become active participants in group activities that are rooted in their communities is one of the most successful ways of reducing loneliness.

Although the undertaking to end loneliness and social isolation can seem like an almost impossible task, it is something that each and every one of us can do something about. Even if we do not volunteer specifically with a befriending service, we can reach out more to those around us. We can engage with our neighbours or invite someone out for a coffee. Even the smallest of actions can have a positive impact.

I was also pleased to hear Alex Cole-Hamilton speak about ACEs and childhood trauma. That is a hugely important issue. I have a members' business debate on the subject next week and I look forward to his contribution.

My final thanks go to Jeane Freeman, the Minister for Social Security, for all her hard work and for taking this issue seriously.

If people have not already done so, they should read the document, take the time to respond to the Scottish Government's consultation, think about what can be done to help others and remember that we do not have to be alone to be lonely.

16:04

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I support the motion and the Labour amendment—indeed, there is nothing in the motion, the amendment or the strategy to which people would object. As we have seen from the many briefings from a range of organisations, such as Age Scotland, the Co-operative Party, the British Red Cross, Marie Curie and the Mental Health Foundation, there is support for such a strategy across the country; it is also clear that a lot of good work is being done in this area.

Yesterday, the UK Government announced the appointment of a minister for loneliness. There is consensus across political parties and civic society that social isolation and loneliness is a real issue in communities across our country. On that point, we are united, but I was very struck by the comments made yesterday by the chief executive officer of Food Train, a third sector charity in North Ayrshire, in *The National*:

“Without action this strategy is just words on a page.”

Food Train relies on funding from the local health and social care partnerships—the integration joint board. In the real world of Scotland today, many IJBs are reporting massive overspends and are facing real-term cuts to their budgets. They are struggling to fund the very care packages that people need to get out of hospital and to have security in their community, never mind funding community support groups.

A few weeks ago, I was struck by the comments of a health charity worker who was interviewed on the Scottish news. She said that the strategies and

the policies of the Scottish Government for the issues that that charity dealt with were brilliant. However, she went on to say that, on the ground, local authorities' budgets are being cut and they are not able to implement the strategies.

The key question is this: at what point does the strategy that we agree in this Parliament become little more than rhetoric and bits of paper gathering dust on shelves because there are no resources in communities to action the strategy?

To amplify that point, I refer to an interview in the *i* newspaper and *The Scotsman* on 2 January with the chair of the poverty and inequality commission, Douglas Hamilton. Speaking about the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, Mr Hamilton said that setting targets is commendable, but would be meaningless unless that is followed up by bold action. He said:

“There is a real danger of complacency setting in, with politicians and political parties generally, about tackling poverty. You get in a situation where almost everyone agrees. People come up from Westminster and say ‘It's amazing, the rhetoric's completely different up here, it's much more progressive’, but we don't have actions that match up to that.”

That is exactly what we need: action.

Jeane Freeman: I am sure that Mr Rowley will agree that it is precisely to respond to those comments and the need for actions to match our words that this Government has asked the poverty and inequality commission to look in detail, as part of its first detailed piece of work, at our child poverty delivery plan, which is a requirement under the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017. I am sure that, like us, he will look forward to what Mr Hamilton and his colleagues have to say once they have completed the task that the Government has set them.

Alex Rowley: I hope that the minister is not taking offence at Mr Hamilton's comments.

Jeane Freeman: Not at all.

Alex Rowley: Mr Hamilton's point is correct: we can have all the strategies in the world, but if we do not have the budget to fund local community action, nothing happens. That is the current reality; that is why we need action.

It is not simply a case of having words on a page, no matter how commendable those words are. Unless the strategy is followed up with real and meaningful action, the problems that we face as a society will not go away. For action to happen, we need resources that can be focused on the delivery of the strategy, and we need joined-up government at every level. From the evidence that we can see, I am afraid that all of that is not happening.

Priority 1 in the Scottish Government's draft strategy on tackling social isolation and loneliness states that we must "empower communities to lead". It says that we should do that by "Building cohesive communities" and "Investing resources". I could not agree more, but the reality is that resources are being stripped from local communities through sustained cuts to local services budgets and the cuts, in turn, are being passed on to third sector and community organisations. I am afraid that the rhetoric is not backed up by the practice.

Priority 2 talks about "tackling poverty" and "Addressing inequality", and the need to "Promote and improve health and wellbeing". However, we see that poverty is growing, inequality is widening and our health and social care services are in crisis. I recognise the £500,000 investment in a social isolation and loneliness fund, but it does not offset the millions upon millions of pounds that are being stripped out from local budgets across Scotland. How does that sit with the ambition of promoting and improving health and wellbeing? What can be lonelier than being stuck in a hospital bed waiting for a social care package and not knowing whether it will come?

If we are to be serious about tackling these issues, we need to start to address the chronic level of cuts to our local services and local community and third sector organisations, because those front-line services deliver the biggest impact on people's lives. Do not let it be said in years to come that the Scottish Parliament was brilliant at policy and strategy but a complete failure when it came to delivering.

16:11

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): To be fair, the previous speech was a little bit out of tone and step with the rest of the debate. We heard a lot of rhetoric about the budget yesterday. I will not take the bait on empty rhetoric and words without policies after Mr Kelly's statement yesterday in the chamber. We will leave that sitting there as gently as we possibly can.

A lot of members have drawn on good examples of best practice from their own constituencies, which they think could be rolled out across Scotland to develop connectivity and tackle loneliness and isolation. Like everyone else, I will seek to do that.

I will start with young people experiencing loneliness and isolation. Childline has said that, last year, it had 4,063 young people in counselling sessions in which loneliness was a huge focus of their problems and issues. It is worth noting that 73 per cent of those young people were girls.

I thought about what schools do and what schools in my constituency are doing that are examples of what we could do more of. The first time that I met the relatively new headteacher of John Paul academy, John McGhee, he said to me—we were not talking about loneliness; we were talking about attainment—that he was determined to look through the data for every child in his school and work out who was in a club, who was in a society, who took part in sports groups, who went on trips, who took part in active out-of-school activities, whether they were organised by the school or by the local youth club, and who did not take part in any of those things, because those young people are most likely to suffer in respect of attainment. I suspect that they are also quite likely to suffer from loneliness and isolation. That made me wonder, during the debate, whether our schools can help us to identify young people who are at risk of loneliness and isolation. I put that down as an idea, as the consultation asks us to come up with ideas that could be used to develop the strategy and to make it effective.

Next, I will talk a little bit about older people experiencing loneliness and isolation. I am really lucky in that Maryhill and Springburn have some amazing groups. I will not be able to mention all of them—I will miss lots of them out—but I will quickly name-check some. A lot of older persons groups are called Monday clubs because they meet on Monday at lunch time. There are such clubs in Summerston, Cadder and Lambhill. There is also the amazing alive and kicking project at Red Road, in Springburn. Every time that there is an election, every politician wants to go there because it is such an active ageing community. It is an important project to mention to the minister in relation to connectivity and getting away from isolation, because it has its own premises. It has a large hall with a kitchen and a stage, it runs its own shows three, four or five times a year and it organises trips. It is very well funded but it does a lot of fundraising, too. There is a template there that is, quite simply, outstanding.

We have heard a little bit about the role of planning in relation to tackling loneliness, connectivity and getting services in, and it is worth thinking about the alive and kicking project in that regard. The project has a certain future because the political will is there. However, when the Red Road flats were demolished and its building was in a poor condition, no one thought about relocating alive and kicking. The local authority was regenerating an area but it did not think about a key aspect of a key facility and an amenity for that area, which was wrong. That was not done through any ill will but through poor planning. It is a cultural issue not just in Glasgow—I am not singling out Glasgow—but around the country.

Monica Lennon: Does Bob Doris hope, as I do, that the Planning (Scotland) Bill will be an opportunity to rebalance the planning system with regard to people's rights not just at the start of the process but at the end? How can we work towards equalising rights of appeal, for example?

Bob Doris: I might not take up the cudgels on behalf of equalised rights of appeal, as that is a wider debate that we must have, but Monica Lennon is absolutely right about local place plans, for example, which feed into local development plans. I was going to say a bit about those, but I will move on to the next section of my speech, which is a little bit about local place plans.

For those who stay in Springburn and want to go out after 5 or 5.30 at night, when it is dark, there is nowhere to go. Everything is closed, and that is poor planning, which leads to loneliness, isolation and a lack of connectivity. We should ask all towns around Scotland where people can go after 5 or 5.30 pm. That is an important question to ask.

Alex Rowley: Will the member take an intervention?

Bob Doris: I can take an intervention. How much time do I have left, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is plenty of time left.

Alex Rowley: Regardless of whether it is due to Tory austerity, a failure by the SNP to stand up to austerity or a failure by Labour to offer an alternative to austerity, does Bob Doris accept that, right around Scotland, youth services are being cut and community learning and development departments in local authorities have shrunk through sustained budget cuts over the years? He asked where young people can go, and part of the answer is that the youth services that were in place when I grew up are not there for today's young people.

Bob Doris: I see that Mr Rowley has still got the tone wrong. In my constituency, the places where young people might go include Young People's Futures, in Possilpark, North United Communities Limited, in Wyndford in Ruchill, and Royston Youth Action. A plethora of such organisations exist—they always want more money, but they exist—and I support them.

Alison Johnstone mentioned the importance of someone receiving a phone call once a week. Another exemplar of best practice is the good morning service that is based in my constituency. Other ministers have visited the service in the past, and I would love it if Ms Freeman were to go along and see what it has to offer. That is not a formal invitation, but I make Ms Freeman aware that the service and I would love her to go along.

Every morning, the good morning service provides a friend on the phone for older people in the community. They do not necessarily talk about whether the older person was okay the night before; they talk about "Eastenders", "Coronation Street", "Big Brother" or whatever. It does not matter what they talk about; it is about the human connection every day for 365 days of the year, and it is hugely valued. On its website, it says:

"We want every older person in Scotland to have the opportunity to join our Good Morning community: to be connected, to be safer and to feel valued. If you would like the service in your area please contact your local councillors and MSP. Tell them about it."

I already know about it, as we have the service in our area, but I would love it to be expanded. Therefore, I am telling the whole Parliament about it and asking the Scottish Government whether it could build capacity in order to roll out such a service around Scotland.

In the Maryhill part of my constituency, one of the issues is not so much the range of activities that are available as people not always knowing about the activities. They are a bit "old school" in Maryhill, so the Maryhill activities directory—MAD—is launched every year. It does not matter whether it is a judo club, a pensioners forum, the bingo, active walking, cycling or art classes: it is all in there. The directory is up to date on classes, opportunities and childcare provisions for the entire year, and an app has been designed as well. There is sometimes a lot of stuff out there but we do not always get the connections right.

I have given just a few suggestions for how to take forward the strategy, and I have mentioned some good practice in my constituency. Thank you, Presiding Officer, for the opportunity to take part in the debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Clare Haughey, who will be the last member to speak in the open debate. We will then move to closing speeches. That is a red alert for any member who should be in the chamber.

16:20

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests, as I am a mental health nurse and hold an honorary contract with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

I have listened to the other speakers in the debate, and it is clear that we all agree that action must be taken to address loneliness and social isolation. I am sure that members will also agree that it has been, at points, a difficult debate to listen to. Indeed, at times it has been saddening to hear the different testimonies and experiences

regarding the effect that loneliness can have on our fellow Scots.

Having been a mental health nurse for over 30 years, I know that the devastating effect that loneliness and social isolation can have on someone's health is indisputable, and the problem seems only to become more prevalent. As we have heard, research shows that, in terms of mortality, loneliness is more damaging than obesity and that lacking social connections is as harmful to our health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Thankfully, as society changes, there is increasing acknowledgment that loneliness and social isolation should be treated as a major public health issue, particularly for their effect on a person's mental health.

It seems rather perverse that, in an increasingly connected world, our human interactions are reducing. Nearly 20 per cent of older adults in Scotland see technology as a cause of loneliness because it often replaces human contact. However, although loneliness is associated mostly with our elderly population, it permeates the whole of our society, across all age groups. Research that was commissioned by the Scottish Government and completed by NHS Health Scotland shows that 11 per cent of adults in Scotland often feel lonely and that a significant minority of children are vulnerable to social isolation because of bullying or poor peer support. There is no escaping the fact that loneliness and social isolation can lead to depression, stress, anxiety and a lack of confidence, so it is vital that we tackle the issue head on.

I thank the Mental Health Foundation and Toni Giugliano—who, I see, has joined us in the public gallery—for assisting me in preparing for the debate. I fully agree with their assertion that loneliness and social isolation are a serious public health issue and that the Scottish Government's commitment to developing a strategy on them is a welcome step forward. The Government's draft strategy is an essential platform to build on, so I repeat the call for all stakeholders to participate in the consultation before it ends, on 30 April. The publication of the draft strategy is a clear commitment from the Scottish Government that it is willing to show leadership to address the issue, but we cannot disregard the central role that communities play. Indeed, the Minister for Social Security says in the consultation document that

“the biggest impact can only be delivered if we enable communities themselves to lead this work.”

I have in my constituency an inspiring example of a person who is at the forefront of tackling loneliness and social isolation locally and who is dedicated to bringing communities together. My constituent Gordon MacLean is from Rutherglen and is a volunteer in, and the chairperson of, a

local organisation called grow 73. It is a community gardening group whose ethos is that, if people are brought together to grow fruit, vegetables and plants, the community as a whole will be able to grow, too. Gordon works closely with his colleagues Lynne and Eugenie, whose dedication, passion and drive have been instrumental in shaping the person that Gordon is today.

According to the research that was undertaken by NHS Scotland, 22 per cent of people do not feel a strong sense of belonging to their local community; therefore, we all have a responsibility to ensure that our communities are more connected and cohesive so that no one is left behind. In that regard, grow 73 holds a weekly Monday meet-up in Rutherglen that is open to all and consists of small walks or planting throughout a local park. A dedicated number of people turn up every week, of whom some are retired, some are in work and some are unable to work. Some families also come with children who are at school or even at nursery. Gordon is clear that their weekly event allows people the opportunity to meet up with others for meaningful social interaction that they might otherwise not have experienced.

In recognition of Gordon MacLean's commitment to tackling loneliness and social isolation, he was invited by the Eden Project to attend the launch of the great get together campaign, which was set up in memory of the late Jo Cox. Her family and some friends came up with the initiative, and now, in conjunction with the Eden Project's big lunch programme, they encourage communities across the UK to have lunch with their neighbours once a year in a simple act of community, friendship and fun. Following that example, Gordon and grow 73 held such an event at Overtoun park, in Rutherglen, which was a remarkable success and drew together people of all ages.

Communities themselves are best placed to ensure that people who may be at risk of becoming isolated or lonely can access the support that they need, and I welcome the Government's acknowledgement that communities should be the focal point in tackling the issue.

I take pride in the fact that, under the SNP Scottish Government, Scotland will be one of the first countries in the world to develop a national strategy to address loneliness and isolation. However, what gives me even greater pride is seeing in our communities people such as Gordon MacLean who are leading the way. Loneliness and social isolation should not remain a silent epidemic, so I ask people to speak out if they need help.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am disappointed that neither Kenneth Gibson nor Gail Ross is in the chamber for the closing speeches. That is disrespectful to the Presiding Officer and to the members who are in the chamber. I expect a note to my colleagues and myself explaining why they are not here.

16:26

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Thank you, Presiding Officer. I start by echoing Bob Doris in giving my thanks for what has been an excellent debate, and one full of consensus. I am grateful in particular for the tone that the minister set in her speech at the top of the debate, particularly when she sought to heap praise across party lines on both the newly appointed minister for loneliness at Westminster, Tracey Crouch, and the late, great Jo Cox, whose work, as Mark Griffin reminded us, continues to this day in much of what we have discussed this afternoon.

In my opening speech, I talked about the human condition and said that we are, in essence, a social animal. Certainly, there are those of us who enjoy our own company and who readily seek out space and time alone, but there is a massive difference between those who seek out the peace that solitude can bring and those who have loneliness thrust upon them. As the old French novelist Balzac said, "Solitude is fine, but you need someone to tell you that solitude is fine." Indeed, it is possible to exist among a sea of people and yet still feel totally and hopelessly alone. John Scott reminded us that that reality is ages old. He discussed the plight of women just after the outbreak of the first world war, but it has been a reality in the many hidden corners of our society for centuries.

The statistics speak for themselves. Some 200,000 older Scots go half a week or more without a visit or a phone call. Half of all 75-year-olds say that their main form of company is either television or a pet, and in any given year—this speaks to the ageless quality of loneliness—there are 15,000 children in the care of the state who grapple with attachment disorder, trauma and loss, only to have that isolation worsen still further when the day comes when they have to leave their placement and take up their first tenancy.

Although it is certainly possible to identify groups who are at greater risk of isolation, loneliness really does not draw any distinction across class, age or geography. People are lonely for many reasons and, as I said earlier, they often exist in plain sight.

We have heard many excellent speeches this afternoon. I was struck by the four questions that the minister posed in her opening remarks. To my

mind, the most important was the last: "What can I do?" We often hope that the machinery and apparatus of Government will, through the votes that we cast and the decisions that we make in the Parliament, somehow clunk into action and address the particular social issue of the day. However, on loneliness, perhaps above any other issue, we hold the key to at least part of the answer in how we treat one another and how we reach out to those around us.

Clare Haughey has just reminded us of the big get together weekend. That was one of the first times in a while that we in my small cul-de-sac of six houses actively sought out one other's company.

I particularly liked the range of examples of great local organisations and of the community spirit that is alive and well across the country that members have mentioned in the debate. Kenneth Gibson, Ruth Maguire and others told us about Food Train, which sounds an amazing initiative. I hope that the campaign to save it is successful.

I would particularly like to associate myself and the Liberal Democrats with Annie Wells's call for a national day on the problem of loneliness. We have to continue to fixate on the issue and remind ourselves about it every year.

In a typically excellent speech, Monica Lennon, as well as making some cheerful remarks about the Liberal Democrat amendment, made the important point about the need to craft our response to loneliness across every policy directorate in the Scottish Government. It is very easy to think that loneliness is the preserve of the Minister for Social Security, but every department will deal with elements of it. Monica Lennon also noted the importance of intergenerational interventions. I thank her for that. I am reminded of the co-location of nurseries with care homes for older people in other parts of the world. We have lots to learn from overseas.

I always enjoy Jeremy Balfour's speeches, particularly when he invokes the great Simon and Garfunkel. He delivered an eloquent speech in which he talked about the strain on GP practices of prescribing, given that a third of prescriptions would not be necessary if we could combat the isolation that brings people to the surgery in the first place.

Graeme Dey built on that by making important points about how GPs and other primary care professionals represent the first line in identifying those in our society who are lonely. People do not always come forward—Sandra White made the point that there is a stigma associated with loneliness. In many ways, we have cracked the problem of getting people to talk about and understand mental health, but we are still a step

behind when it comes to loneliness. There is still baggage associated with coming forward to say, “I am lonely”, or “I am isolated.”

Gail Ross made an excellent speech. I put on record my gratitude for her bravery over Christmas in talking openly in the national press about her own mental health. She reminded us that there are champions who are working for the rights and interests of people who are isolated.

I am very grateful for the collective support for the Liberal Democrat amendment. We have much to do in relation to the built environment and in ensuring that our newly built environment has communities rather than dormitories. We must also ensure that our older, settled communities are well served and maintained so that people’s social orbit is not limited by their fear of leaving their home and falling in the street.

I also welcome the consensus about traumatic life events, which can set in train a human response at a molecular level in which a course is set throughout a person’s life, bringing about many negative social outcomes.

There are many lofty social policy answers to the problem, but as we have heard throughout the debate, a thousand, seemingly tiny, acts of human kindness can move a mountain as big as the one that we face. They are needed now more than ever—there are significant pressures on mental health services, and national suicide rates rose by 8 per cent last year alone. There is an acute need for cross-party action.

One of the founding principles of the Parliament was to give a voice to those who struggle to be heard. This debate, the Government’s continuing work towards a strategy and the consensus that we have forged today go some way towards helping us to give comfort and company to those who are isolated.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: David Stewart will now make the closing speech on behalf of the Labour Party. I am sure that you will have no trouble filling seven minutes, Mr Stewart.

16:33

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Thank you for your confidence, Presiding Officer.

This has been an excellent debate with sparkling and well-informed contributions from across Parliament. Many members referred to the tragedy of the murdered Labour MP, Jo Cox, and the loneliness commission that was set up to tackle the issue that she cared about so passionately. As many members have mentioned, the commission’s recommendation that there should be a minister responsible for a national strategy to combat loneliness has been accepted

by the Prime Minister. Tracey Crouch, the Minister for Sport and Civil Society, will lead on loneliness and head up the UK Government’s work to tackle a problem that is believed to affect nine million people in the UK. As Gail Ross said,

“we do not have to be alone to be lonely.”

I have personal experience of loneliness and social isolation. In my early 20s—yes, I was young once—I volunteered with the Samaritans in my home city of Inverness. Many of the calls that I took on my day shift or overnight were from desperately sad and lonely people, some of whom also had physical and mental health problems. According to the joint Co-operative Group and British Red Cross report, “Trapped in a bubble: An investigation into triggers for loneliness in the UK”—I refer members to my membership of the Scottish Co-operative Party—people “mistakenly” perceive loneliness

“as an issue faced either solely or predominately by older people.”

On a personal level, I was inspired by my volunteering; I trained as a social worker, which led to a 16-year career as a front-line worker and middle manager, with specialised training on mental health.

Loneliness and social isolation have been well documented in the debate as affecting physical as well as mental health. As we have heard, they lead to greater risk of coronary heart disease and stroke, alcohol consumption and smoking, lower levels of physical exercise and a substantial increase in the chances of dementia among older people. On top of that, the chances of suffering from isolation and loneliness are greatly exacerbated by social and economic inequalities. As a result, tackling this public health challenge head on is absolutely key to building a better Scotland.

In my Highlands and Islands region, the likelihood of feeling cut off from society is not helped by the squeeze on public services. People who live in isolated rural and super-rural areas already have more limited access to support networks, family and friends, local groups or charities, and the situation is made worse with poor public transport links. Accessibility and affordability are key factors, but the withdrawal of more and more rural bus services and underinvestment in north Highland rail links only emphasise the region’s remoteness.

That said, like other members, I want to mention some excellent local charities whose objective is to mitigate isolation and loneliness. For example, Highland Hospice’s helping hands befriending service offers home visits to people with terminal illnesses. They match each person with their own befriender on the basis of their needs, with the

befriender able to offer social and practical help. The new well connected communities project, which is being trialled for four months in the Western Isles, is being supported by Support in Mind Scotland, the mental health charity, and the national rural mental health forum. Finally, across the Highlands and Argyll and Bute, Befrienders Highland offers befriending by phone, letter and email and in groups.

As I have said, I think that the debate has been excellent. The minister kicked off by reminding us of the major impact of loneliness and social isolation on health and wellbeing and the fact that that is not restricted to the elderly, and she commended the report by the Equal Opportunities Committee in the previous parliamentary session. She also referred—rightly—to the Jo Cox commission on loneliness.

Like others, I welcome the launch of the draft strategy on social isolation and loneliness. In a very good speech, Annie Wells said that she was encouraged by the national strategy, and she emphasised the importance of social isolation as an issue and its links as a major public health issue. She also made a valid point about technology replacing face-to-face contact in modern society.

Monica Lennon flagged up the promise on social isolation and loneliness in Labour's 2016 manifesto and, like others, talked about the Jo Cox commission. She also cited the figure of nine million for the number of people in the UK who are lonely and pointed out that, in this year of young people, we need more actions that target young people and make the links with good mental health.

Alex Cole-Hamilton, too, made a valid point about our looking forward to Christmas and new year as a high point in our social calendar when, for many who are socially isolated, it is a very negative time. He highlighted very well the links between loneliness and mental health. He also stressed the golden thread of volunteering and the important role that it plays in Scotland.

Kenny Gibson quite rightly said that tackling loneliness and social isolation is important if we are to have a better Scotland, and Jeremy Balfour got the best laugh in the chamber when he mentioned Murdo Fraser's constant appearances on Facebook. I am sure that that is correct—I have no personal evidence of it. Mr Balfour also made a valid comment about social prescribing and a key point about getting on well with one's neighbours.

Graeme Dey also talked about people in communities having a social connection with neighbours and made the valid point, which I would agree with, that it is crucial that we also have a strategy for rural areas. Finally, Mark

Griffin mentioned Jo Cox's work in Parliament and the commission's innovative work. I apologise to members whom I do not have the time to mention.

I welcome this positive and productive debate on building a connected Scotland to tackle social isolation and loneliness. Social isolation recognises no age, no class and no gender. Let us recognise the passion of Jo Cox's crusade against loneliness and the importance of her legacy, which lives on in her commission. All we need is the will to do and the soul to dare.

16:40

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I am pleased to close for the Conservatives in what has been a useful and positive debate. There have been some excellent contributions from across the chamber, a good deal of recognition of the extent of the challenges that we face, and some welcome consensus on what needs to be done and how we as a Parliament can make a difference.

As other members have done, I concur with the joint briefing that we received for today's debate from the Mental Health Foundation and Age Scotland, which states that loneliness is one of the leading public health challenges of our time, with more than 100,000 older people in our country now classed as chronically lonely. In an advanced, wealthy, developed society such as ours, that cannot be right, and it is something that this Parliament, and all parties, can play a role in solving.

Many members have focused, rightly, on the mental ill health that can be caused by social isolation and loneliness, which is a key trigger of depression and low mood and can be linked to a significant number of suicides, especially among elderly members of our communities. Loneliness puts individuals at greater risk of cognitive decline, and it is worth reflecting on the fact that a recent academic study has indicated that people who suffer loneliness have a 64 per cent increased chance of developing clinical dementia. Improving Scotland's mental wellbeing is inextricably linked with tackling social isolation, and we need to see strategies on both those issues align closely to complement and reinforce each other.

I was struck by research, highlighted by Channel 4 before Christmas, that starkly set out just how harmful loneliness and social isolation are to people's physical health as well as their mental health. The research showed that lacking social connections is as damaging to our health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, as has already been mentioned. Indeed, it is estimated that loneliness increases the likelihood of mortality by 10 per cent.

As a Lothian MSP, I shared the concern—and indeed surprise—of many fellow residents here in

Edinburgh when the capital was described as the loneliest city in the UK in December, as it was revealed that about 60,000 people in Scotland above the age of 65 would be spending Christmas day alone.

We clearly need to do much more, but we should be proud of some of the first-class work that has been highlighted during the debate, and I want to highlight the work that is being undertaken in Edinburgh and the Lothians. We should also commend the dedication and effort of all those who give their time as befrienders or volunteers in their communities, either formally or informally.

I was pleased to meet vintage vibes in Parliament recently. It is a fantastic, dynamic organisation that has created dozens of successful matches between older people in Edinburgh and volunteers. Ahead of Christmas, it ran a cosy Christmas campaign, launched by Gail Porter, to encourage people to send Christmas cards and information packs to isolated older people here in the capital. I must admit that I wrote mine at the back of the chamber during First Minister's questions just before the Christmas break, and I felt that it was the most productive FMQs that I had been involved in. Despite being a new project that has been operating only since April 2016, vintage vibes has already won Age Scotland's Patrick Brooks award for best working partnership and was a finalist for the Generations Working Together new intergenerational project award. I wish all involved in that initiative continued success as they plan to expand their services across Edinburgh and the Lothians in future.

Monica Lennon: We all congratulate the many charities and volunteers that we have name checked today. Does Miles Briggs also recognise the important role that volunteers at food banks play right across Scotland? We put a challenge to Jeane Freeman today to work across Government and look at the impact of all policy decisions. Will the Scottish Conservatives be writing to Tracey Crouch not just to congratulate her but to ask her to make representations to other new members of the Government, such as Esther McVey at the Department for Work and Pensions? We have to recognise the impact of in-work poverty and of benefits sanctions on people's mental and physical health and on how they feel in their communities, so I would be grateful if Miles Briggs could respond to that.

Miles Briggs: The debate has outlined that tackling social isolation is something that we all need to work on, not only in the Parliament but in our councils and at Westminster.

I will highlight the work of Contact the Elderly, which Annie Wells has mentioned. It is another brilliant charity working in my region that organises Sunday afternoon tea parties for small groups of

older people, aged 75 and over, who live alone. The charity offers regular and vital community links each month.

Health in Mind's equal access programme provides a similar service for people from minority ethnic communities, who can often experience language and cultural challenges. Its "our community navigator" projects in the south-west and south-east of Edinburgh help people aged over 65 find out what is on near them and how they can access the support that they need in a way that they want.

All of us in the chamber should do what we can to support those organisations and others like them and encourage constituents to volunteer for them so that they can build up their capacity and increase the number of people they are actively helping.

We believe that the Scottish Government should look at setting up a new community mental health development fund to help to increase the capacity for social prescribing, establish new groups and help to fund projects across Scotland. Health boards and local authorities could bid alongside such organisations and community groups.

Investment in social prescribing is an important part of the preventative health agenda and can reduce costs in our NHS. Some studies have shown that people accessing a social prescribing scheme reduce their visits to their GPs by 66 per cent, as Graeme Dey outlined. It has therefore been concerning to meet a number of GPs who have expressed to me some of their concerns in relation to the use of ALISS—a local information system for Scotland—in GP surgeries. ALISS is meant to help link individuals with organisations in their communities. Although it is very welcome, it is clear that the link workers have a lot of work to do to make it a system that will work across Scotland.

Although many groups and charities offer formal volunteering opportunities for members of the public, I think that we should all be sending out the message today that every single one of us can play a part in reducing social isolation—sometimes by taking very small actions that can make a huge difference. That can include checking on an elderly neighbour every now and again or asking them if they want to drop round for a coffee occasionally.

One of the programmes that I saw quite recently that I am really impressed with is the spare a chair scheme, which encourages people to make an offer to a neighbour to come round for Sunday lunch or dinner. One member mentioned earlier that they had seen that happening in their area.

I have a final point with regard to something that I think is missing from the strategy and from other

strategies that the Government has outlined; I hope that ministers will take this as constructive criticism. It is the issue of death. Death is a very difficult subject for many of us to talk about and for someone who is dying and who has been given a terminal illness diagnosis, it can be the loneliest time in their lives.

The excellent briefing that was provided by Marie Curie highlights the many challenges that people face. In many cases, individuals withdraw from their social structures, be that the local bowling club or something else; they can also withdraw from their families and friends. Sadly, many people with a terminal illness also feel that the disease or condition and the treatment that they are receiving can change their sense of identity. It is also important to consider the impact of bereavement on loved ones following a death and to think about the support that we provide. I hope that that is taken as a positive suggestion as we move forward with the strategy.

I very much welcome the debate, the tone in which we have discussed this topic and the positive speeches from across the chamber. I would like to close by paying tribute to the work of the late Jo Cox MP, which has been a theme throughout the debate.

I was interested to read an article by Jo's sister Kim in *The Guardian* yesterday—I can see from the Labour Party members' faces that they are surprised that even some of us on these benches read *The Guardian*. Kim wrote about how Jo felt profoundly isolated both when she went to university and when she became a mother and that that was what drove her to work towards tackling isolation and loneliness—a cause that she started work on as a new MP, setting up an independent cross-party commission. We have seen just this week how that is also starting to make a real difference.

I hope that for all of us in this chamber, Jo's legacy will be that we, too, dedicate ourselves to doing that work and that we in this Parliament commit today to playing our part.

16:49

Jeane Freeman: I thank members for their valuable contributions. I have taken extensive notes and we will follow up many of the ideas that have been raised. I also thank Toni Giugliano from the Mental Health Foundation and Derek Young from Age Scotland, who are in the gallery. I am grateful to both their organisations for the work that they do and I am grateful to them for taking the time to hear what we have had to say in the debate.

Annie Wells pointed quite rightly to our increasingly independent and transient lives. She

did not stop there but, importantly, pointed to a range of existing and potential new intergenerational work and ideas, which I will discuss further with her and her colleagues, and to the importance of measurement in our strategy—a point that I took on board. I am very happy to say that we will support the amendment in her name.

I take the opportunity, which I have not had until now, to welcome Monica Lennon to her new responsibility. I am grateful to her for her support and I look forward to taking up her offer of working together on this issue and others. In my opening remarks, I referred to the value of kindness. In that spirit, I say gently that I find it disappointing that in this debate Labour has again found it necessary to shoehorn in its one-trick party-political point, which is based on an inaccurate premise, and, by and large, missed the bigger and much more important point of the debate. I am unable to accept Labour's amendment.

Monica Lennon: Will the minister take an intervention?

Jeane Freeman: I am sorry, but I have a great deal to say.

Alex Cole-Hamilton made important points in his amendment and in his speech, which was eloquent as always, about place and space, which could easily have been ignored. I am grateful to him for doing that and I am happy to accept and support his amendment.

Mark Griffin raised the issue of carers, as I did. I am of course happy to discuss the points that he made and I welcome his offer to do so. Given that he raised the issue of carers allowance, I feel obliged to put on record that the first benefit that this Government will deliver is an increase to carers allowance. I am exceptionally proud that we are paying such attention to that.

Ruth Maguire and John Scott also mentioned kindness. Ruth gave us a lovely example of how children can offer kindness in all that they do. As she spoke, I was reminded of the time when my partner and I moved into our current home. On the bench outside our front door, someone had left a wee bunch of flowers with a note that said, "I'm your next-door neighbour. I'm really sorry that I couldn't be there today when you moved in, but I just thought I'd leave you this and I'll see you as soon as I can." That did not take much, but 13 years later I still remember it and I still want to replicate it as much as I can.

Each one of us should think about how we can replicate Kenny Gibson's excellent initiative of a door-to-door campaign in his constituency in a way that makes sense in our area in order to talk to people about the services that are available to them and check that they know about everything that is possible for them.

Jeremy Balfour spoke about us working together, which is an approach that I welcome, and about our individual responsibility. He and Miles Briggs mentioned Vintage Vibes, with which I had contact during its Christmas campaign. I did not write the Christmas card during FMQs—I promise Miles Briggs that we will not tell Ruth Davidson that he did—but I thought that it was a simple idea that it would be easy for us to follow through on.

Mr Balfour also spoke about the breakdown of communities and volunteering. Although everything that we have talked about has been important, we also need to ground ourselves in some of the positives of our country, one of which is that levels of volunteering have remained relatively stable over the past five years.

In 2016, 27 per cent of adults provided unpaid help. Youth volunteering has grown to 52 per cent. It is also the case that, in 2015, the Scottish social attitudes survey talked about how

“7 in 10 people in Scotland felt they belonged to their local area either ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’”

and 76 per cent said that they agreed with the statement,

“I feel that there are people in this area I could turn to for advice and support”.

I make that point because there is a very great deal that we have, and on which we can build.

As Bob Doris highlighted in his contribution, there are local initiatives across a range of organisations. Mr Doris pointed to work that was being done with others in a local school, and to the good morning phone call service. All of us, as individuals, can think about how we might take up such initiatives.

Finally, Graeme Dey and others mentioned tea parties. I have been fortunate enough to attend one. Aside from enjoying the excellent home baking that was provided, I was touched and impressed by how those who, as I said in my opening remarks, had come together for another purpose, found social connection and new friends. Mr Dey also asked about support for children with additional needs. I am very happy to take up the important point that he has made and to discuss it further.

Very many members—among them Alison Johnstone, Sandra White, John Scott and Clare Haughey—highlighted important local initiatives that are community driven and rooted in what their community needs. Gail Ross highlighted the rural campaign—and here I should mention the impressive campaign by the young farmers in my area and elsewhere across Scotland. I should also say that I could not agree more with Mr Scott that we in Ayrshire know how to do both kindness and

community initiatives. I recognise some of the ones that he mentioned, and there are, of course, others in my own area.

I also want to thank the many organisations who work so hard and have got the issue on to the public agenda as well as our own. There are too many to name, but they have worked closely with us to increase our understanding in the Government and to shape the direction of travel that is now seen in our draft strategy.

Monica Lennon: It is right that we pay tribute to such organisations, but what does the minister say to those that are worried about their funding, such as LEAP, in Clare Haughey’s constituency, which now expects a 15 per cent cut to its budget?

Jeane Freeman: I say that the Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities, who is sitting next to me, has protected our third sector budget. Ms Lennon herself signed off on a report from the Local Government and Communities Committee that recognised the numbers given by the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Constitution, who is sitting to my left. The premise that the Labour Party persists in pursuing is utterly inaccurate and misleading, and it really ought to stop now if it wants to represent the people of Scotland.

Let me continue with what matters in this debate. As I have said, there are too many organisations to name. We need their continued involvement, their support and their challenge to help us to realise real change and improvement. We need to hear from those with an opinion, an idea or a view, and we need all our partners to reach those people. I am very grateful to the many organisations that have already offered their help in holding events and discussions to get the dialogue going around the draft strategy.

I am delighted to have been able to lead what, by and large, has been a remarkably constructive debate. I am also delighted that the Scottish Government is the first Administration anywhere in the UK to publish a strategy that is aimed at reducing social isolation and loneliness. There are many triggers for loneliness and contributors to social isolation. I am grateful to Miles Briggs for reminding us, in his closing remarks, about those who receive a terminal diagnosis. It is an area of significant importance, and one that the Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities and I would be interested in discussing further.

Our draft strategy is a starting point. It does not claim to be a comprehensive overview of social isolation and loneliness in Scotland. We need to hear from people in communities, third sector organisations, public bodies and the private sector so that we can secure tangible and meaningful

change. We need to hear more from my parliamentary colleagues on the ideas that they have raised in the debate and from those members who have not been able to take part so that, together, we can show collective leadership.

We must act together. Loneliness and social isolation can affect any one of us. Tackling them will take all of us.

Decision Time

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S5M-09927.2, in the name of Annie Wells, which seeks to amend motion S5M-09927, in the name of Jeane Freeman, on building a connected Scotland: tackling social isolation and loneliness together, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S5M-09927.1, in the name of Monica Lennon, which seeks to amend the motion in the name of Jeane Freeman, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Rumbles, Mike (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)

Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Denham, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Freeman, Jeane (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Lyle, Richard (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 27, Against 76, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S5M-09927.3, in the name of Alex Cole-Hamilton, which seeks to amend the motion in the name of Jeane Freeman, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S5M-09927, in the name of Jeane Freeman, on building a connected Scotland: tackling social isolation and loneliness together, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises that social isolation and loneliness affect people of all ages and stages of life; believes that it is people and communities themselves that have a central role in building and maintaining social connections and supporting those who may be socially isolated; acknowledges that the Scottish Government has an important role to play in showing leadership as well as creating the conditions that allow people and communities to design and deliver solutions that best meet their needs; welcomes therefore the publication of the Scottish Government's draft strategy, *A Connected Scotland*, and encourages everyone to respond to this important consultation; recognises the need to find concrete ways of measuring and monitoring progress to best understand how the future strategy is working; welcomes the good work of a range of organisations from the third sector and elsewhere in tackling these issues, including the Campaign to End Loneliness and the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, which aims to highlight the fact that everyone can do something to help lonely people in the community; further welcomes the appointment of a new UK minister to lead on loneliness and continue the work of Jo Cox; believes that the planning decisions of local authorities can be driven by the pressures of demand at the expense of placemaking and social cohesion; considers that the way in which the built environment is established and maintained is an important factor in addressing social isolation and loneliness; welcomes that the draft strategy recognises that falls, and the fear of falling, are a common cause of social isolation, particularly among older people; recalls that the Parliament voted in favour of developing a national falls strategy on 2 March 2017, and urges the Scottish Government to explain how this is being progressed.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 17:02.

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