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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 1 May 2019

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

Portfolio Question Time

Education and Skills

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The first item of business is portfolio questions, and the first section is education and skills. Questions 1 and 8 have been grouped together.

Higher Education Research (Brexit)

1. David Stewart (Highlands and Islands (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of how research capabilities in higher education have been affected by Brexit. (S5O-03154)

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead): Given the strong international connections of Scotland's world-leading research base, the United Kingdom Government's chaotic handling of Brexit threatens to disproportionately affect Scotland's university research.

The total UK and Scottish share of horizon 2020 projects is already falling, according to the latest figures. If there is no deal, that could result in a loss of income for Scottish research organisations totalling an estimated £37 million, depending on the Brexit date.

Around a quarter of full-time research staff at Scottish universities are non-UK European Union citizens. There is already anecdotal evidence that fewer EU citizens are applying for research jobs in Scotland and that some of those who are based here are relocating back to their home countries.

We will continue to monitor closely the relevant data sources.

David Stewart: The minister will be well aware of the crucial role that the EU plays in research and development in higher education, such as through horizon 2020, which he has mentioned, Interreg and the EU structural funds. Does he share my view that EU funding has been key to the development of the University of the Highlands and Islands in my region, with great examples of that being the centre for health science and innovation in life sciences? What discussion has the Scottish Government had with the UK Government about accessing the UK's shared

prosperity fund to fill the huge research funding vacuum post-Brexit?

Richard Lochhead: David Stewart rightly highlights one of the institutions that will be most affected by Brexit in any shape or form. Indeed, it is fair to say that the University of the Highlands and Islands would potentially not exist if it had not been for EU funding. Just this week, another EU grant was awarded to the UHI—it was in the news just a couple of days ago.

I assure David Stewart that we recognise the devastating impact on the UHI of Brexit, should it go ahead. I raise the issue regularly with my UK counterparts. As he suggests, there is a need to ensure that any funding that is lost through leaving the EU is replaced by the UK Government, but we have yet to get that assurance—we have not had any guarantees along those lines. It is important that we get our share of UK research funds if we leave the EU. Of course, the solution is not to leave the EU in the first place.

Higher Education Institutions (Brexit)

8. Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what impact Brexit will have on higher education institutions. (S5O-03161)

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead): A lessening of access to European research programmes could see Scottish institutions lose, in some cases, up to a quarter of their total research funding, as I have just discussed.

A reduction in the number of European Union citizens coming to work and study at our universities, meanwhile, threatens our research excellence and the ability of institutions to continue providing certain courses. It could also lead to a loss of the multiculturalism that is absolutely vital to our campuses' success and the experience of our students in Scotland.

The Scottish Government continues to work tirelessly with the sector to protect our institutions from the damage that an unwanted Brexit would entail. We continue to make known to the UK Government the views of Scotland and those of our universities and further and higher education institutions.

Jenny Gilruth: A fifth of the funding for the University of St Andrews comes directly from EU sources. Has the Scottish Government undertaken any analysis of how a reduction in EU funding will impact higher education institutions' ability to provide a quality education and how that might affect local economies?

Richard Lochhead: St Andrews is, of course, one of Scotland's leading higher education

institutions. One of the reasons why it is doing well is its European collaboration and the research funding that it gets through the European research programmes, which Jenny Gilruth highlights.

As I said in my previous answer, we have looked closely at the potential impact on Scotland. We punch above our weight when it comes to securing horizon 2020 research funding—we are way above the rest of the United Kingdom in that regard—therefore we will be disproportionately damaged if we lose access to those programmes. At the very least, in any of the Brexit scenarios, should they happen, we will need to have full participation in the future horizon 2020 funding programmes. As I have said before, unfortunately for the University of St Andrews and the rest of our institutions, we have not had any such guarantees from the UK Government as yet.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask for shorter questions and answers for the supplementary questions.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): Brexit will also affect students from European Union countries who want to study at our universities. The United Kingdom Government has talked about three-year study visas. Given that Scottish undergraduate courses last four years, what is the Scottish Government doing to highlight to the UK Government the fact that a three-year visa system will simply not work in Scotland?

Richard Lochhead: It so happens that, today, I met the chairs of the university courts for a meeting. It is fair to say that the number 1 concern that they expressed to me, among many Brexit-related concerns, was the impact of the UK's immigration policy and the ludicrous and infuriating fact that the current immigration policy for students has been designed around the English degree, not the Scottish degree, which, as Gillian Martin highlights, takes four years. That is evidence—if anyone still needs it—that Scotland is an afterthought when it comes to UK policy making and its impact on Scottish further and higher education. That is disgraceful. A lot of anger has been caused among our institutions and, of course, our student population. We are making the strongest possible representations to ensure that, should we leave the EU, the subsequent immigration policy will take into account the distinctive nature of Scottish higher education.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The minister will agree that the best way to make all of this stop is to stop Brexit altogether. However, the most important thing is to maintain relationships between the European and Scottish universities. Has the minister had any discussions with education ministers in European countries about keeping those close relationships so that, when we stop Brexit, they can continue?

Richard Lochhead: Willie Rennie raises an important issue. We have discussed maintaining the relationships between European and Scottish higher education institutions, and we have lent our support to our institutions in that regard. The Scottish Government also has plans to reach out directly to the European institutions. I know that the UK Government claims to have done that, because, when we raised the issue at our meeting with the UK ministers, they said that they were in contact with the European institutions. The issue is high up our agenda and we will pursue it, because we absolutely have to protect those valuable relationships.

Developing the Young Workforce (Fife)

2. Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on progress with the operation of the developing the young workforce programme in Fife. (S5O-03155)

The Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills (Jamie Hepburn): We have seen good progress on the developing the young workforce programme in Fife. Collaboration between Fife College and local schools is ensuring that career education is central to the curriculum offer, supporting young people to identify their own skills and learn in a range of settings in their senior phase.

In addition, the DYW regional group has connected schools and employers. A significant partnership with St Andrews Links Trust is providing a wide range of programmes, including new opportunities through its pre-employment academy for young people at risk of a negative destination.

Annabelle Ewing: I am pleased to note that good progress is being made in Fife. Given that a key issue for the programme's architect, Sir Ian Wood, was the involvement of primary school children, can the minister provide an update on whether all primary schools in the Cowdenbeath constituency are now participating, so that pupils can be inspired from a young age by the wide opportunities of the world of work?

Jamie Hepburn: The short answer is yes. Developing the young workforce has had a strong focus on the Cowdenbeath primary cluster. For example, Kelty primary school has created a teaching resource folder to assist with embedding DYW in the curriculum; Benarty primary school meets local employers to co-design programmes, and is involved in engagement between industry and education; and Crossgates primary school runs a skills and enterprise academy programme. Further, in Cowdenbeath on 7 June, six primary schools in Annabelle Ewing's constituency will take part in the Greenpower Education Trust's

Goblin kit car race event, which involves pupils working with local engineering firms and small and medium-sized enterprises to design and build from scratch a car and race it. I am sure that Annabelle Ewing would be delighted to be there, if she is available.

Scottish Medical Schools (Graduate Employment)

3. **Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what proportion of graduates from Scottish medical schools go on to work in the national health service in Scotland. (S5O-03156)

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead): The Higher Education Statistics Agency's destinations of leavers from higher education survey shows that, in 2016-17, of those who were working six months after graduation, around 66 per cent of clinical medicine United Kingdom and European Union-domiciled graduates from Scottish higher education institutions worked for an NHS organisation in Scotland.

Miles Briggs: In July 2018, before Mr Lochhead became the minister, he said in *The Press and Journal*:

"We need radical interventions to effectively handcuff more doctors trained in Scotland at public expense to the Scottish NHS—at least for a set period of time."

I do not agree with the language that he used, but what progress have Scottish National Party ministers made towards developing a bonding scheme?

Richard Lochhead: I congratulate Miles Briggs's researcher on digging out those fantastic quotes from the member for the Moray constituency. Although the Scottish Government continues to consider other initiatives to address that issue, we have—as, I am sure, Miles Briggs is aware—taken a number of bold steps over the past couple of years alone. The medical undergraduate intake has increased significantly since 2007. There were 953 places in 2018-19, and up to 1,038 places have been scheduled for 2020-21. There has also been an increase in the intake of Scotland-domiciled students, from 485 in 2015-16 to 515 in 2017-18.

As Miles Briggs will know, we take advice and guidance from a committee of medical professionals on workforce demands and the number of undergraduates and graduates that are required in Scotland. Although we continue to consider taking more, we have already taken a number of bold steps that are set to make a material difference.

Schools (Subject Choice)

4. **Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on expert evidence presented to the Education and Skills Committee regarding a reduction of subject choice in schools. (S5O-03157)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Curriculum for excellence provides significant flexibility. Schools now have the freedom to design a three-year senior phase that includes a range of courses and qualifications that are tailored to meet the needs of young people who are at school.

Wherever possible, schools should ensure that young people can choose their preferred subjects in the senior phase, working with partners to do so. What matters are the qualifications and awards with which pupils leave school, not only what they study in secondary 4. Last year, a record proportion of pupils went on to positive destinations, including work, training or further study.

Finlay Carson: The cabinet secretary will be aware of the copious amount of evidence that has been presented to the Education and Skills Committee on the teaching of several levels of a course in the same classroom. Evidence suggests that that has substantial repercussions for subject choice and for a teacher's ability to prepare students, particularly in science subjects.

Can the cabinet secretary say how many schools are being forced to teach multilevel courses in science subjects in Dumfries and Galloway and the Galloway and West Dumfries constituency?

John Swinney: I do not have that information to hand. However, Mr Carson should know that multilevel teaching has been a feature of Scottish education for a long time. Indeed, multilevel teaching was around even when I was at school, which was not yesterday. It is therefore not a new phenomenon.

Every effort is made to meet the needs of young people in their subject choices. As we go through this debate, it is important that we take a whole range of evidence. Mr Carson cited evidence that the Education and Skills Committee has seen on the subject. He may also have seen the comments of another expert, Professor Mark Priestley of the University of Stirling. Yesterday, on the subject to which Mr Carson referred, he said:

"This is not new news. It is at least the third time we have seen a moral panic about curriculum narrowing, each one based on low level, superficial and sometimes flawed analysis of largely publicly available data. There is a need for a more nuanced approach."

I am interested in that approach and will take it forward in the debate this afternoon, to ensure that we meet the needs of young people in Scotland.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): The number of subjects that pupils sit is a matter solely for individual schools and headteachers to determine, and should not be a matter for local authorities.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that members should ensure that they have their information correct before giving misleading statements to the local press and therefore misleading the public, parents and teachers, and that all evidence should be considered in order to reach an evidence-based conclusion?

John Swinney: I think that there should be accuracy in statements that are made and in the detail that is provided. Although I am not sure what Emma Harper is referring to, I am sure that her points are well validated. It is important that we have an evidenced debate on the subject, because the future of young people depends on the way in which we consider that evidence.

Further and Higher Education (Student Support)

5. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what support it provides to young people from armed forces families when applying for further and higher education. (S5O-03158)

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Richard Lochhead): We are committed to supporting all students, including those who are from armed forces families.

Assuming that they meet the normal eligibility rules, members of the armed forces and their families who are ordinarily resident in Scotland can apply to the Student Awards Agency Scotland to fund their higher education tuition fees. That is in addition to potential living costs support through bursaries and loans, which may be available, again in line with well-understood criteria.

In relation to further education, members of the armed forces and their families who are ordinarily resident in Scotland can apply to their college to fund the cost of their tuition.

Jackie Baillie has rightly raised a number of issues that relate to constituency cases in correspondence with me, and we are actively looking into those concerns. I hope to be able to update her more fully in due course.

Jackie Baillie: As the minister knows, my constituent Abigail has lived with her grandfather in Scotland since June 2018. Her parents sold their home in England, as her father is being

transferred to Faslane. Scotland will be their new home, but her father is at sea for six months, so they have not yet bought a house locally. Abigail wants to study engineering, but she is being denied funding to go to college because she does not meet exactly the residency criteria. That seems desperately unfair and goes against the spirit of the armed forces covenant.

I am grateful to the minister for his letter an hour ago. Will he outline what further consideration is being given to the matter? It is clear that there is some urgency if Abigail is to go to college this year.

Richard Lochhead: I have asked my officials to look into that case in more detail.

I was keen to reply to Jackie Baillie before today's question to put her in the picture about what we are thinking. It is clear that there are different arrangements for further education and higher education. The further education issue is that there are no reciprocal arrangements with the other United Kingdom Administrations. Jackie Baillie will understand that we cannot do one thing while the rest of the UK does something different that does not support Scottish students.

I ask Jackie Baillie to rest assured that I am looking at the issue. It is clear that we have to look at the law and the regulations carefully.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Maurice Corry has a quick supplementary question.

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): What measures are in place specifically to help veterans who may need additional learning support? Does the Scottish Government think that more could be done to help veterans to succeed once they have a place in further or higher education?

Richard Lochhead: I assure Maurice Corry that the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans, Graeme Dey, is taking an interest in those issues, and I would be happy to update Maurice Corry on our planned conversations on what extra support could be made available for students from the armed services who have extra needs in further or higher education. I understand that some measures are in place, and I would be happy to write to Maurice Corry about them.

Scottish Qualifications Authority (Industrial Action)

6. Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the announcement that SQA staff are to be balloted for industrial action. (S5O-03159)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): That is, of course, an operational

matter for the Scottish Qualifications Authority, but I assure Daniel Johnson and Parliament that the Scottish Government is in regular contact with the SQA to monitor the safe delivery of the 2019 exam diet and to ensure that appropriate contingency arrangements are in place. I urge the Scottish Qualifications Authority and the unions concerned to continue their discussions to reach a resolution.

Daniel Johnson: The SQA is due to meet the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service again next week. What specific action will the cabinet secretary take to ensure that the concerns of staff are taken seriously by the SQA, especially given how long it took it to engage with the trade unions in the first place, and that the workforce's confidence in the leadership of that organisation is restored?

John Swinney: Some of the trade unions have been in agreement with the restructuring proposals that the Scottish Qualifications Authority has taken forward, so not all the trade unions are involved in the particular action that Mr Johnson has cited.

In general, effective and engaged dialogue to resolve such questions with the workforce is good and constructive practice. The Government's application of the fair work principles is consistent with that whole approach, and we expect the SQA to operate on that basis. I hope that the discussions that take place under the auspices of ACAS will be constructive ones that lead to a resolution.

On the SQA's leadership, Daniel Johnson may have noted this morning that an announcement was made on the appointment of Janet Brown's successor as the SQA's chief executive. I am delighted to congratulate Fiona Robertson on her appointment to that significant role in Scottish education.

Young Adults (Educational Support)

7. **Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it is seeking to improve educational support for young adults when transitioning from children's to adult services. (S5O-03160)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): The most recent statistics indicate that 94.4 per cent of all school leavers had a positive destination—including work, training or further study—within three months of leaving school.

We recognise the importance of preparing our young people for life beyond school, and a range of supports are available in schools across Scotland to help pupils with that. In addition, education authorities have specific duties to

prepare pupils who have additional support needs for their post-school transition. That preparation should happen no later than two years before the pupil leaves school.

Bob Doris: My constituent, Jennifer, who is turning 18, has physical and cognitive impairments and has been supported in special education throughout her time at school. Jennifer is considering taking a national qualification in skills for life and work at college, but has only recently been notified that she has an adult social worker, and they will meet shortly for the first time. It is unclear how Glasgow City Council will support Jennifer, including through self-directed support—which can be restrictive in Glasgow—although she has a major decision to make on her educational future.

How can we ensure that local authorities better support families in planning for transitions such as Jennifer's? She and her mother, Chrystal, feel that Glasgow City Council could have assisted far more and far earlier.

John Swinney: I am concerned about the details that Bob Doris has raised. I reiterate the point that I made in my previous answer: at least two years before a young person will leave school, there should be engagement to begin handling of transition arrangements, which I recognise are significant, in particular for young people with additional support needs who might also have disabilities.

We are working with a range of organisations, including integration authorities and social care providers, to ensure that our approach addresses circumstances such as Bob Doris has raised. I am happy to look at that specific case to see whether the Government can encourage any further interventions to ensure that Jennifer's needs are best addressed, and so that she can make the effective transition to a post-school environment.

Health and Sport

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask that thought be given to offering fairly short questions and answers, especially supplementaries, or we will not get through all the questions.

Fife Health and Social Care Partnership (Budget)

1. **Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what impact reductions to the Fife health and social care partnership budget will have on its ability to meet rising demand for social care. (S5O-03162)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): The Fife integration joint board budget has not decreased, but has increased by

£14.7 million this year, which takes the budget to a total of £511.7 million.

Fife integration joint board has reduced budgetary pressures by nearly £9 million since it was established in 2016-17. NHS Fife, Fife Council and the IJB need to continue to address the deficit, so together with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities we are engaging with them to systematically reduce the deficit in a planned way, without reducing capacity.

Willie Rennie: The demand for social care is rising, and there is a £15 million gap in the partnership's budget. As a result, the Leng resource centre and the St David's centre in my constituency are to close, charges have increased and complex and respite care packages are to be cut. What is the cabinet secretary going to do to prevent those things from happening?

Jeane Freeman: First, I will use accurate figures. There is not a £15 million gap. In the 2019-20 budget, there is an £8.5 million gap, which is, as I said in my first answer, down from the £15 million deficit budget that the IJB started with, and which was agreed by NHS Fife and Fife Council. Every year since 2016-17, the council and the health board have contributed to reducing the IJB's annual overspend, which seems to be a prudent way of bringing down a deficit that the IJB did not create, but which existed when the IJB was established. That is the approach that we are taking.

The Government and COSLA are trying to get the three parties—the IJB, NHS Fife and Fife Council—to agree that over a three-year period they will, for example, take a systematic approach to reducing the deficit that will not cost the health board or the council more money than they have annually, which will allow the IJB to operate on a sounder financial footing.

As for the increased demand, we provided, in the health budget that was approved by Parliament, an additional £160 million through local authorities for integration of healthcare and social care, to recognise the additional demands that result from the rising demographic challenge.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): What discussions have taken place between Fife health and social care partnership and the Scottish Government on the increase in social care service charges and its likely impact?

Jeane Freeman: Social care service charges are a matter for local authorities to determine; it is up to them to decide how they wish to allocate their resources to all their responsibilities. However, there is disparity across the country on the issue. Concerns about that have been raised directly with me and, I am sure, with other members. All that is being factored in to our

current review of adult social care, which will include leadership by people who are on the receiving end of social care in order to ensure that we find a better overall position and get a consistent standard across the country in delivery of, and charging for, social care.

Prostate Cancer

2. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government which national health service boards offer robotic-assisted prostatectomy as a method of surgery for prostate cancer. (S5O-03163)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): All NHS Scotland boards offer robotic-assisted prostatectomy on a regional basis across the three high-volume centres, which are in Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Glasgow.

Liz Smith: It has been brought to my attention that patients in NHS Tayside can access RAP as a method of surgery for prostate cancer only through an out-of-area referral. What assessment have ministers made of the outcomes for Tayside patients receiving surgery, and what discussions have they had with NHS Tayside on investment in that surgery?

Jeane Freeman: If by "out-of-area referral" Liz Smith is referring to the regional centres that I have mentioned, the situation is exactly as I set out in my first answer. A referral from NHS Tayside would be to Aberdeen, Glasgow or Edinburgh.

Of course, the decision to offer that procedure in that way is clinically led and driven, and is for clinicians to follow up with their patients. From our work that has been looking at the outcomes of different procedures, I can say that no issues have been raised directly with us with regard to that procedure. It is for NHS Tayside to determine, in conjunction with its own clinicians, whether additional provision should be made for patients in the NHS Tayside area. If that is the case, the board will, properly, bring that matter to us. That has not happened, although of course it might happen in the future.

Compensation for Workplace Injuries (NHS Grampian)

3. Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how much compensation has been paid to NHS Grampian staff in each year since 2016 for incidents or injuries in the workplace. (S5O-03164)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): The total amount of compensation claims made by staff since 2016 is £144,000. That breaks down to £16,500 in the first year; £30,823 in 2017; and £96,771 in 2018.

Peter Chapman: That is a significant sum, and it has risen year on year. The payments were made for a variety of incidents, including exposure to contaminated blood and violence at the hands of the public. The Government has presided over a staffing crisis for the past 12 years, with fewer employees being asked to do more and front-line staff working in demanding and stressful environments. Of course, the real issue here—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can you get to your question, please, Mr Chapman?

Peter Chapman: I am doing exactly that. The real issue here is that NHS Grampian has been consistently underfunded by the Government—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Could you get to your question, please?

Peter Chapman: —and I believe that it is high time that the region was given a fair share of resources. Does the cabinet secretary agree?

Jeane Freeman: I will not agree with factually inaccurate statements. First of all, there is no staffing crisis driven by lower than usual numbers of staff. In fact, staffing numbers across the board have increased in NHS Scotland. The member has heard me say that many times, but I am happy to send him the detail, yet again. Nor is NHS Grampian underfunded—we have been through that before.

I am disappointed that Mr Chapman did not get to the important point of the question, which is about the safety of our staff and the work that we do across our health boards to ensure that staff are protected and as safe as possible and that, where instances of violence, aggression or unsafe practice damage them, we take those seriously, review our policies to see where improvement might be made and make compensation when that is required. There is another way of looking at this, which is to see that the indicators are that we take the issue seriously.

All the work on policies and practice that we undertake to keep staff safe, including the increased work that is under way on mental health and wellbeing, is undertaken directly with the staff organisations and trade unions, which is exactly the right way to do it.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): How much compensation was paid to NHS Grampian staff in each year since 2016 specifically for bullying? Can the cabinet secretary provide those figures, perhaps in writing, for all Scottish boards? I am particularly interested in the figures for NHS Highland and NHS Tayside, where staff have persistently and over a long period expressed concerns about bullying.

Jeane Freeman: I do not have those figures available, but I am happy to provide Mr Stewart

with as much of that information as we hold centrally as soon as I can.

NHS Fife (Meetings)

4. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met NHS Fife and what issues were discussed. (S5O-03165)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): Scottish ministers and Government officials regularly meet representatives of all health boards, including NHS Fife. I last met the chair of that health board on 25 March.

Claire Baker: Is the cabinet secretary familiar with the improving the cancer journey service, which was initially piloted in Fife and then rolled out along with Macmillan Cancer Support and which involves partners from housing, health, voluntary and financial support services working together to support people with cancer? Figures from the Scottish cancer patient experience survey that were published yesterday show the need for more signposting for patients towards support and welfare advice and for health partners to have a stake in that, and they revealed that less than one third of people receive a care plan—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can you come to your question, please?

Claire Baker: What is the Scottish Government doing to support the sharing of best practice such as the ICJ service in Fife more widely?

Jeane Freeman: I am grateful to Ms Baker for raising that important question. As she knows, the survey was conducted by Macmillan Cancer Support, and the work that we undertake in the area is done jointly with Macmillan services. The survey also indicated that more than 90 per cent—I think that the figure was 95 per cent—of patients are satisfied with the care that they receive. However, significant improvements are required in relation to the information that people receive at the time of diagnosis and the capacity to go back, once people have absorbed the diagnosis, to ask further questions and get further information. With Macmillan Cancer Support, we will analyse the results of the survey and look at the specific areas where we need to make improvement. I hope to be able to update the Parliament on that shortly.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): The Fife health and social care partnership was due to meet last week to approve a new multidisciplinary model for out-of-hours services in St Andrews, but the meeting was cancelled, leaving communities stuck with the same contingency arrangements that they have had for the past year. Can the cabinet secretary provide an update on the reasons for that delay?

For how long will patients in north-east Fife have to travel for nearly an hour to attend out-of-hours appointments in Kirkcaldy?

Jeane Freeman: My understanding is that the Fife health and social care partnership is due to meet at the end of May, when it will receive a number of proposals on the delivery of services throughout Fife, including north-east Fife. As the member will recall, in the latter part of last year I specifically asked the integration joint board not to proceed with the proposals that it had at that stage because there was a significant degree of local concern about those proposals, including concern about the engagement on them. There were also specific requests to the health board from two local organisations.

I am not aware, therefore, of any reason why a more recent meeting has been cancelled. I understand that improvements have been made and that there have been significant discussions in north-east Fife, including with the university, that look to provide some answers to the concerns that local people had raised about the accessibility and delivery of service. There is increased use of paramedics, advanced nurse practitioners and so on. I am happy to ensure that the member has the detail of that but, as I understand it, it will be the end of May when the IJB considers all the proposals.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There are a further four questions and we will not get through them all. Cabinet secretary, I know that you like to give lots of information, which can be appreciated, but I ask you to truncate your answers somewhat. I know—it is difficult.

National Health Service Budgets (Patient Care)

5. **John Scott (Ayr) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to minimise the risks to patient care arising from warnings of budget deficits in NHS Ayrshire and Arran and other NHS board areas. (S5O-03166)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Jeane Freeman): I am not sure what evidence the member has to suggest that patient care is at risk.

NHS Ayrshire and Arran will receive a further £720 million. Its most recent result for the hospital standardised mortality ratio, published in February, is improved, even on the Scottish results. All of our indicators for patient safety show that NHS Ayrshire and Arran is doing better in some instances than the rest of Scotland, and Scotland is doing very well on those indicators. I am not really clear what the member's specific concerns are.

John Scott: Lewis Morrison, chair of doctors' union BMA Scotland, has said that his members

say regularly—indeed, it was reported in a major survey by 97 per cent of doctors—that inadequate resources are affecting the quality and safety of care. I have particular concerns about NHS Ayrshire and Arran. What will the Scottish Government do to help doctors to deliver better patient care in Ayrshire and throughout Scotland?

Jeane Freeman: I firmly believe, as does Lewis Morrison from the BMA, that the new general practitioner contract is a significant step forward in helping doctors, in particular GPs, to do the work that they need to do. If Mr Scott would like to bring me his specific concerns, I will look at them.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary advise the chamber what percentage of Scotland's resource budget is allocated to the NHS and can she confirm whether all Barnett health consequentials are assigned to NHS Scotland? If so, does she agree that any shortfall in NHS funding in Scotland is down to the austerity of Mr Scott's United Kingdom Tory Government colleagues?

Jeane Freeman: Health expenditure is the largest element of the Scottish Government's budget, accounting for 43 per cent of total Government expenditure—a rise from 37 per cent in 2010-11. This year, it will exceed £14 billion and our recently published medium-term financial framework sets out a proposal for further funding of £2.7 billion between now and 2023-24.

Mr Gibson is perfectly correct. In real terms, our budget will be cut by 6.8 per cent compared to what it should be, which is entirely down to the approach of the Westminster Government.

HIV Infection Rates (Glasgow)

6. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to research from Glasgow Caledonian University that suggests a tenfold increase in HIV infection rates among drug users in Glasgow. (S5O-03167)

The Minister for Public Health, Sport and Wellbeing (Joe FitzPatrick): I thank Anas Sarwar for bringing this important question to the chamber. I know that it will be appreciated by the people who are behind those figures.

I welcome the research from Glasgow Caledonian University and Health Protection Scotland on the causes of the outbreak of HIV identified in 2015 among people who inject drugs in Glasgow. The research was done in collaboration with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and is an example of the kind of joint working that has been vital to tackling the outbreak.

The most recent HIV figures, published yesterday, suggest that the outbreak is coming

under control, but there is no room for complacency. Prevention of HIV transmission remains a clear priority for the Scottish Government.

Anas Sarwar: I support the Government's calls for a safe injecting room in Glasgow to help to tackle the issue. Alongside that, I ask the Scottish Government to commit to a new drugs strategy that reflects the reality in too many of our communities across Scotland. Further, what urgent action will the Government take to tackle homelessness, which is identified as one of the key reasons for the increase in HIV infection rates?

Joe FitzPatrick: Both of Mr Sarwar's very important points are recognised in the new drugs strategy. We absolutely acknowledge that more must be done to tackle the harms and deaths associated with drug use.

The issue is complex, and that is why our strategy challenges our stakeholders and service providers to adapt to ensure that they provide a high-quality person-centred approach and that they better engage with and meet the needs of those who are most at risk as a result of their drug use.

The member is right to talk about the safe consumption facility. It is an evidence-based proposal that will make a difference and would save lives. I emphasise again that if the UK Government is not prepared to take action that will save lives here in Scotland, it should transfer the powers to this Parliament, where we can make those decisions to save those lives in Glasgow and elsewhere in Scotland.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): In September of 2017, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde closed the needle exchange within the city centre. That has been widely noted as being part of the increase in infection rates that we have seen. Does the cabinet secretary now think that that was a mistake?

Joe FitzPatrick: I will not take the promotion.

The member makes an interesting point. Obviously, the vision of the service within Glasgow Central station was not supported by Glasgow health and social care partnership, and it was a regrettable decision that those services were removed. Since then, we have been working with the partnership as it looks to address the wider issues, but specifically, I know that the service in Glasgow is now providing and developing outreach work, through which it is taking that service directly to those people who require it. That is proving more adaptable, because it is able to move to wherever it is required.

It was regrettable that that decision was taken. It was not within our control and we did try to reverse it. I know that the previous public health minister had a lot of engagement to try to turn the decision around. However, it is good to see that Glasgow health and social care partnership is working to find alternative provision in the area.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes portfolio question time. I apologise to Colin Smyth and Mark McDonald for not reaching their questions.

I also want to make an observation. In this particular portfolio, ministerial responses took a long time, although, in fairness, some of the questions asked for a lot of information and might better have been lodged as written questions. Members might consider that in future, so that we can make sure that everyone gets a fair shout at health portfolio questions.

We will move on to the next item of business when the main players are settled.

Subject Choice

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-17091, in the name of Liz Smith, on subject choice.

14:43

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I open the debate by reiterating our belief on the Conservative benches that Scottish education should be based on excellence and equity and that it can once again lead the world in delivering the highest standards. However, that will not happen until the Scottish Government changes its focus.

Scottish education was so admired around the world because there was universal understanding that good schooling was the key that could unlock so many different opportunities in life, never mind in employment. There was an expectation that everyone, irrespective of class or background and whatever type of school they attended, would have a good grounding in the basic skills and that poor standards would never be tolerated. Teaching was a highly valued profession, leadership was generally strong and good schools were seen as the central component to build strong communities.

In short, many schools in Scotland were synonymous with excellence, and they did not need endless edicts from local or central government telling them what to do, because aspiration was ingrained in their DNA. The Scottish Government knows that it can no longer make that claim of all-round excellence.

This Parliament has spoken many times about the evidence that we should be doing a whole lot better if we are to match up to our full potential, as identified by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in its most recent report on Scottish schools. It is our contention that we will not be able to unlock fully the potential that is undoubtedly there until we address the fundamental weaknesses in delivery of the curriculum for excellence, in relation to which the question of subject choice has become one of the most significant and pressing issues. It is causing considerable worry to parents, teachers and young people, and, of course, to the Parliament's Education and Skills Committee.

One of the other great attributes of Scottish education was the breadth of the curriculum, which was maintained not just in early secondary schooling, but in later secondary schooling, too. Indeed, that breadth, whereby young people could acquire national qualifications in a balanced group of science, social science and language subjects,

as well as in English and maths, meant that the Scottish system was seen as superior to the A-level system in England and to several other curricular systems elsewhere.

At its inception, 15 years ago, the intention of the curriculum for excellence was to build on that success, but also, rightly, to recognise that, in the modern world, society required a greater focus on skills and personal and social responsibility than had previously been the case. In other words, education should not solely be about knowledge-based learning in the abstract; it should also be about how that knowledge is applied. Young people should have as great an understanding of why they are learning something as they should of what they are learning. As such, one of the intentions of the curriculum for excellence was to widen subject choice, not to reduce it. In 2008, the Scottish Government's curriculum guidance made that principle abundantly clear.

No one could disagree that young people should understand why they are learning a particular subject or learning additional skills; the trouble is that the curriculum has completely lost its balance. As Professor Lindsay Paterson said in a recent article in *The Sunday Times*, the focus on core knowledge has been diminished. Our hard-pressed teachers have been so busy measuring "experiences and outcomes" and wading through the thousands of bits of paper that the education agencies have issued that they have had less time to get on with teaching what most people recognise as the core curriculum.

In the context of subject choice, the facts of what has happened have become increasingly clear over the past two years and the details are currently before the Education and Skills Committee. That said, concerns about the narrowing of subject choice were raised by Aberdeenshire schools as far back as 2013 and again in this Parliament by the Conservatives in 2015.

As the Parliament knows, the norm was for Scottish schools to offer eight subjects in secondary 4 and the subject choice column structure in the vast majority of schools was designed to do just that. We now know—thanks largely to the work of Professor Jim Scott—that the majority of schools in Scotland are offering only six subjects in S4. Those schools will undoubtedly offer other courses, too, many of which have a good pupil uptake and are highly educationally beneficial, but the fact remains that they are offering fewer core subject choices than they were previously. I will address the impact of that shortly.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Does Liz Smith not understand the

inherent contradiction in that last remark? At the same time as welcoming the fact that other curriculum choices and offerings are available to pupils in schools, she is bemoaning the fact that that has led to a reduction in the range of subjects that young people are ordinarily choosing in S4. However, that reduction applies only in one particular year, at a time when more young people are staying on at school for longer and so have the opportunity to take further courses.

Liz Smith: There is no contradiction whatever in what I said because, as the Education and Skills Committee was reminded this morning, the critical issue is not about the numbers; it is about the qualitative effect on the subject choices that young people can make. The concern that the Parliament is hearing about is that there has been a diminution of the core subjects that pupils not only want to but need to take—and that Scotland needs them to take for its economic benefit. That is the key point.

There is another fundamental point here—the growing inequity across the country. We know that 32 per cent of schools are still managing to offer seven subjects and 11 per cent of schools are still offering eight subjects, as well as schools in the independent sector. We know, too, that important evidence points to young people at schools in more disadvantaged communities generally being likely to be offered fewer subjects than those in the more affluent areas.

In evidence to the Scottish Parliament, the Royal Society of Edinburgh said that schools have “undoubtedly” cut the number of subjects that pupils can sit, and this has hurt the pupils from the most deprived communities the most. Marina Shapira of the University of Stirling said that the finding had been “striking”—namely, that there was

“a clear relationship between the rate of reduction in the number of subjects made by S4 pupils and the level of school area deprivation.”—[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee*, 19 September 2018; c 11.]

She was clear about the subsequent disadvantage to those in those schools—something which parents believe negatively affects the employability of some young people.

That inequity is unacceptable, because it fundamentally undermines a key strength of Scottish education. If the cabinet secretary looks carefully at *Official Reports* of the Education and Skills Committee, he will see that committee members—Labour, Liberal, Green, Conservative and Scottish National Party—are unanimous in our concern about that point.

The curriculum for excellence was also meant to provide greater autonomy for schools in curriculum development, but in many local authority areas

across Scotland, the local authority appears to have taken a one-size-fits-all decision about how many subjects are offered. I am sure that I am not the only member to have received communications from parents asking me where the fairness lies in schools in one local authority that takes a blanket approach offering only six subjects in S4, while in neighbouring local authorities, that is not the case.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I am slightly puzzled. Liz Smith seems to be arguing, on the one hand, for more consistency at a national level and, on the other, for more autonomy for individual schools. Will she explain how those tie together?

Liz Smith: Yes. The fundamental principles of the curriculum for excellence have not allowed the two to match up. Of course, we need consistency and core curricular subjects in every school; we all agree on that and it is demonstrated by all the evidence that is coming back. However, as things stand, the curriculum for excellence—with the principles that it was supposed to enshrine—does not allow for that to happen. As far as we are concerned, that is a major concern.

John Swinney: I do not understand a fundamental point about the Conservatives’ position. I agree with the Conservatives that schools should have much more discretion over curricular choice. That is one of the fundamental elements of the headteachers’ charter that I am currently implementing in Scotland, so I agree with that point about school empowerment. However, I do not understand how Liz Smith can complain about the product of that school empowerment when it leads to schools taking different decisions from each other.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can allow you a little extra time, Ms Smith.

Liz Smith: I will give the cabinet secretary the example that Terry Lanagan of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland gave us. Tavish Scott asked if it was it possible, in some schools, for youngsters to take the three sciences. Mr Lanagan said that, of course, it is possible for them to take the three sciences, but in a school that permits only six subject choices, if a pupil takes the three sciences—physics, chemistry and biology—plus English and maths, they can take only one other subject. Where is the breadth in that? That is one of the serious problems with curriculum for excellence.

John Swinney: Will the member take an intervention?

Liz Smith: Sorry, no—I have taken quite a lot of interventions.

There is a significant issue for the traditional value and ethos of the Scottish curriculum—namely, having a strong balance between science, social sciences and languages and maintaining real breadth at higher. If the cabinet secretary needs more evidence of that, perhaps he could look at what has happened to the uptake of modern languages and the issues with science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects, because those are issues that many of the people who give evidence to the Parliament complain about.

Of course, that also tells us that there is a huge imbalance between the broad general education—the name tells us something—and the senior phase. I think that it was Jenny Gilruth who, rightly, argued last week that young people have more subjects to study in the early years of secondary education, because of the three and three model, as opposed to the two, two, two model. I agree, but the huge problem is that in S4 they suddenly find that they have to drop down to six subjects, which, incidentally, has a knock-on effect on the timing of their subject choice decision.

What we are saying to the cabinet secretary is that effective choice, which has always underpinned the so-called gold standard of highers and advanced highers, is now being constrained. Clear evidence points to that, which should be a major concern for this Parliament.

There are three specific things that we have to deal with. The first is the strong suggestion made by Dr Alan Britton that there is confusion about the curriculum for excellence and that it remains unclear who takes ownership of the curriculum in Scotland. That ties in with the often-made point that broad general education is designed by Education Scotland and the senior phase is designed by the Scottish Qualifications Authority. There is a disconnect somewhere along the line, and we are all agreed that we must do something about that.

Secondly, there must be a debate about what the core curriculum should offer in schools. If we look at what schools abroad are asked to do, we see that there is a desire to ensure a strong balance between knowledge-based learning and skills development, with the former seen as extremely important so that young people can make a fully informed choice.

The third thing is teacher numbers, because it is clear that the number of teachers has been squeezed, which is having a detrimental effect on the number of subjects. The availability of teachers for certain subjects is not as good as it should be.

Education is many things. It is the foundation on which we base our hopes and ambitions for our children, as well as something that touches our deepest emotions. It is the prerequisite for economic wealth, the guardian of our culture, the vehicle by which we learn about our rights and responsibilities and the key with which we unlock many doors to the wider world. It is also supposed to be the SNP's top priority. How often have we heard in speeches or programmes for government that excellence and equity are the two principles that underpin Scottish education? How we wish that, in practice, they were.

Education is the most precious gift that we give to our young people but, for far too many of them, the current system of schooling in SNP Scotland is letting them down. The Scottish Conservatives believe that things could and should be so much better, so that Scotland can, once again, lead the world.

I move,

That the Parliament believes that Scottish education should be based on the principles of excellence and equity and that all young people, whatever their background, should be afforded the best possible educational experience at all levels of the curriculum; further believes that, while these principles are enshrined in the policy aims of the curriculum for excellence, the delivery of the new curriculum structure has exposed some fundamental failings with regard to subject choice, including the inequity that exists between schools in more affluent areas and those in more deprived communities, and calls on the Scottish Government to recognise the serious concerns, which have been expressed by teachers, parents, young people and academics, and take urgent action to address these failings in the delivery of the curriculum for excellence.

14:57

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): The purpose of curriculum for excellence is to provide young people with the skills, knowledge and experiences that will prepare them for life beyond school and enable them to fulfil their potential. We must support our young people to flourish in our modern, complex and uncertain world.

Curriculum for excellence was introduced after a major national debate on the aims and future of our education system. It represented a deliberate move away from an approach that prescribed the content of the curriculum to one that emphasised the autonomy of the professional teacher and the capacities and learning experiences of the learner. In short, CFE was predicated on the view that our teachers are best placed to know their learners and to work with partners to meet their needs and aspirations. They must have the flexibility to make the correct judgments about the journey of a young person.

Given all that, I am surprised that the debate has focused solely on counting the qualifications taken, with a particularly narrow focus on S4 in the three-year senior phase. Instead of looking at the bigger picture of what we are trying to achieve—and, in many cases, succeeding in achieving—it is being implied that the new system is providing our young people with fewer opportunities. I do not recognise that.

Liz Smith: It is not all about numbers, but about the nature of the choices that young people are afforded. That is the key point.

John Swinney: To be technically correct, there is a relationship between the numbers and the choices—of course there must be. I am about to come on to the question of the breadth of choice, to which due justice was not given in Liz Smith's speech.

When I wrote to the convener of the Education and Skills Committee in October last year, I was clear that any comparison of the current and previous systems needs to take into account the fundamental differences between curriculum design before and after the introduction of curriculum for excellence. Liz Smith did not refer to the fact that, in the broad general education phase, young people are entitled to study a wide range of subjects to a much deeper level, across the eight curricular areas, without the pressure of taking qualifications. That broad experience—which extends into S3, not S2—is one of the key differences that ensures that breadth is not lost. In the senior phase, young people have the opportunity to acquire a range of qualifications and awards over a three-year period—not a one-year period in S4.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I understand the point that the cabinet secretary is trying to make, but does he recognise that if pupils drop subjects in S4—particularly modern languages and STEM subjects—it is very difficult for them to pick them up in S5, and almost impossible for them to do so at advanced higher level?

John Swinney: I do not accept that that is pupils' experience. Mr Mundell's question suggests that when a young person leaves the broad general education phase they dispense with any bit of knowledge or skill that they ever acquired in it, which is a ridiculous argument to advance.

The guiding principle is that qualifications are taken at the appropriate stage for the individual young person over the three years of the senior phase, which represents an intended fundamental shift from the approach of the pre-CFE era.

In 2002, in the national debate that preceded the development of CFE, it was accepted that

because the system involved too much assessment, it offered too little to equip young people to handle a range of challenges in life. The intention was to create a new system that gave schools the flexibility to design approaches that reflected both their own needs and those of their young people.

The OECD recommended that change should be driven by the profession itself, rather than from the political centre. For me, that is a fundamental issue in the debate. The curriculum models have been developed by the teaching profession in consultation with education professionals around the country. Further emphasis is now placed on the autonomy of the teacher—a move that I fully support and which is central to the Government's empowerment agenda, which is intended to foster collaboration and create dynamic and innovative curriculum approaches.

Liz Smith rose—

John Swinney: If Liz Smith will forgive me, I will not take her intervention, because I still have a lot of ground to cover.

Focusing on the numbers of qualifications that are taken in S4 simply does not recognise that CFE enables our young people to achieve higher levels of knowledge and experience across a broader range of subjects by the end of S3. Nor does it recognise that more and more young people stay at school beyond S4 or S5. S4 used to be the end of a phase of learning that had the aim of learners accumulating as many standard grades as possible, after which many of them opted out of school. That is no longer how young people interact with our education system. They stay at school longer, engage in school-college partnerships, take up opportunities through the developing Scotland's young workforce agenda, and work towards a range of national progression awards. For all those reasons, a comparison between the number of standard grades that young people sat in S4 in the past and the current circumstances in Scottish education is misplaced.

Surely the comparison that matters is what young people achieve on exit from school. For example, last year, 62.2 per cent of school leavers left with qualifications at level 6 or better, which was an increase from 55.8 per cent in 2012-13.

Oliver Mundell: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

John Swinney: If Mr Mundell will forgive me, I will not. I still have some detail to cover.

Work-based provision for young people in the senior phase is growing. The proportion of school leavers who attain vocational qualifications at Scottish credit and qualifications framework level 5 and above has increased from 7.3 per cent in

2013-14 to 14.8 per cent in 2017-18. In 2018, 61,000 SQA skills-based qualifications, awards and certificates were achieved, which was an increase from 47,000 in 2014.

Above all else, we should celebrate the outcomes that are achieved by the education system. Last year, a record proportion of school leavers went on to positive destinations that included work, training or further study.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary confirm that he will do an analysis of what those positive destinations are? Far too often, they consist of insecure work, zero-hours contracts and no guarantee of any training.

John Swinney: I will be very happy to explore the substance behind the figures, but we should recognise the fact that young people are leaving school with more qualifications and going on to better destinations.

I recognise the importance of this debate and the need for us to consider a broad range of evidence, but I am perplexed about why we are having the debate today. The Education and Skills Committee has embarked on an inquiry into the topic and it has held only three evidence sessions. Some of the evidence that the committee has heard already is highly disputed.

Oliver Mundell: You have dismissed it out of hand.

John Swinney: No. It has been disputed by academics other than those from whom the committee has heard. It has been disputed not just by me, but by other academics.

The committee has not heard from professional associations or the chief officers of education at local level.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention on that point?

John Swinney: I will.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame): It will have to be brief. You have got only about a minute more, cabinet secretary.

Ross Greer: I will be very brief. Does the cabinet secretary accept that if we spent more time debating education in Government time, the issue, which has been in the public spotlight for years now, might already have been covered? *[Interruption.]*

John Swinney: What I cannot understand is why, given that we have an Education and Skills Committee process under way that is supposed take in excess of 20 hours to consider balanced evidence, because we need to have an evidenced debate on the subject, we are being asked today

to debate in 160 minutes something that the committee has planned to take at least 20 hours to explore in detail in its proceedings.

The motion offers no evidence and no solutions. Subjects are already chosen for the next year, so we could have waited until the Education and Skills Committee had deliberated in June and informed our considered opinion about how to move forward.

Subject to what I hear today, I intend to ask the Government to support the Labour amendment, because I think that it makes a reasonable point. I consider my amendment to be equally reasonable. It does not try to dodge the debate. *[Interruption.]* It does not. It just encourages us to look at the matter in an evidenced fashion and conclude what to do next, for the simple reason that that is what the people of Scotland would expect our Parliament to do. They expect us to listen to the evidence and come to a conclusion, not to have a debate that is anchored on a principle of political opportunism of the Conservatives, which is what we have today. *[Interruption.]* For the benefit of Sir Edward Mountain, I will tell him again: it is political opportunism of the Conservative Party.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary—*[Interruption.]* I am losing my voice.

John Swinney: I move amendment S5M-17091.4, to leave out from “the delivery of the new curriculum” to end and insert:

“it is necessary to be assured that this is the case, particularly in relation to subject choice and how this is applied, especially in areas of deprivation; notes the Education and Skills Committee inquiry is underway on this subject but it has not yet heard from a range of witnesses, including representatives of the professional associations, Directors of Education, local government and the Scottish Government, and believes that the Parliament should return to consider this matter when the committee has had the opportunity to review the full range of evidence and its report is available.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I say to members that because they were drumming on their desks, I could not hear what Ross Greer said. If I cannot hear what is said, the official report cannot hear it, so please do not keep that habit going. I understand passion, but do not drum on the desks so loudly, because I cannot hear what members are saying.

15:07

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): It is quite usual in Opposition debates for parties to start by acknowledging the importance of the debate even if they are about to disagree with the substance of the motion. Today, the Government is taking a rather different approach, as we have just heard, with an amendment that says, in essence, that we

should not be debating subject choice in our schools at all—at least, not today.

I hear the argument that the Government is simply respecting the work of the Education and Skills Committee and our inquiry into the topic, which is on-going—the Government is moved, no doubt, by its profound principles on due parliamentary process and balance. However, I am afraid that I do not buy that, for the very good reason that Parliament has now been asking it to take the issue seriously for four years. Some of us have been talking about it for a lot longer than 160 minutes, that is for sure.

It was back in May 2015 that Kezia Dugdale raised Dr Jim Scott's analysis, which showed a fall in both enrolment and attainment in the new national exams. I elaborated on Dr Scott's work in a Labour business debate that month, and Ms Dugdale raised it again with the First Minister in early June that year. The Government's response then was to deny that there was a problem, to rubbish the research and even to suggest that Dr Scott, who is a respected educationist and former headteacher of several schools, did not really understand schools or exam statistics. Here we are, four years on, and the evidence of Dr Scott, who is now Professor Scott, has built, year on year.

The general trend is for schools to offer a maximum of six national subjects in S4—at most, seven—as opposed to the norm of eight standard grades under the old system, and there has been an average 17 per cent decline in overall take-up by national subject. A small proportion of that decline is to do with pupil population, but it is largely driven by a reduction in subject choice.

In the arts, we have seen a decrease of around 40 per cent in the number of enrolments in art, design and technology and music between 2013 and 2018. In the humanities, there has been a 12 per cent drop in the number of students taking modern studies—in which the exams are today, I think—a 35 per cent drop in the number of history enrolments and a 35 per cent drop in the number of geography enrolments. In languages, there are now 41 per cent fewer enrolments in German compared with 2015, and there has been a 61 per cent reduction in the number of French enrolments. In STEM subjects, the number of enrolments is 23 per cent down in biology, 28 per cent down in chemistry and 22 per cent down in physics, which is my old subject.

Indeed, Professor Scott is now telling us that some subjects are likely to disappear from the curriculum altogether—most notably, certain modern languages. He has been joined, in the ensuing four years, by colleagues such as Professor Mark Priestley and Dr Marina Shapira, who have demonstrated that the average number

of national 5 entries per student dropped from 5.8 in 2013 to 3.7 in 2016—a 37 per cent decrease.

Those figures show the reality of the curriculum narrowing in terms of the subjects that pupils can choose as the new senior phase has been implemented.

We have also heard from the likes of Reform Scotland and the Royal Society of Edinburgh, which have presented evidence of the narrowing of our school curriculum and subject choice. Organisations that promote the teaching of subjects such as Gaelic and geography have sounded alarm bells about what they see as an existential threat to their subjects. In the survey that was carried out by the Education and Skills Committee, 76 per cent of parents said that their child had not been able to take the subjects they wanted to take because of the restrictions of the curriculum.

The Government's defence has changed over the four years, and it is now largely founded in outcomes and increased higher passes. We have heard about that from the First Minister on a number of occasions when the topic has been raised. However, it is not good enough to think that our schools are succeeding solely on the basis of the success of the ablest and highest achieving pupils.

John Swinney: That is not the only statistic that the Government has used. I talked about the vocational SQA qualifications that have been achieved. I cited highers, but I also talked about positive destinations. A range of indicators suggest that young people are leaving Scottish education with better outcomes than they left with in the past.

Iain Gray: I am afraid that, like my colleague Johann Lamont, I am never going accept destinations as a positive indicator when they include young people being exploited on zero-hours contracts. I am sorry, but, if the Government wants to use that statistic, it needs to fix that situation soon.

Professor Scott is clear that those who leave school with national-grade qualifications are the ones who are suffering most from all of this, and Reform Scotland shows that schools in deprived areas are likely to offer a narrower curriculum. The Deputy First Minister said that what matters is what pupils leave school with. Perhaps he should pay attention to the figures showing that the percentage of pupils who leave school with no qualification at all, although small, is increasing again after years of a falling trend.

That is not about just S4 or the impact on national exams. On the other side of the attainment gap, the evidence already presented to the committee shows that, although those pupils

who were doing five highers are still doing five—why would they not? The ablest pupils always find their way through—they are finding their choice of subjects restricted by the narrower S4 choices preceding highers. They are committed to taking too few subjects too young, which leaves them without the broad formal education of which Scotland has always been so proud.

The evidence that there are unintended consequences of curricular and exam reform at play here is overwhelming. Nevertheless, the Government has refused to listen for four years now, and its amendment would simply kick the can down the road for another day—again.

Our amendment offers a sensible way forward. I am pleased that the Deputy First Minister accepts that, because it is also four years since the OECD report “Improving Schools in Scotland” recommended a further evaluation of CFE implementation, particularly the senior phase. That report is always prayed in aid by the cabinet secretary, so he should have no problem at all in accepting our amendment, as he said he will do. That will allow us to move the debate forward after far too long.

I move amendment S5M-17091.2, to insert at end:

“; believes that such action should include an evaluation of how the curriculum for excellence is actually being implemented in schools, as recommended by the OECD in its 2015 report, *Improving Schools in Scotland*, and considers that, although the senior phase was outwith the remit of this report, how the senior phase operates within the curriculum for excellence should be a priority for review.”

15:15

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Yesterday, we discussed the inequality that is emerging in instrumental music tuition in schools. That same issue of inequality is playing out with subject choice.

From the information that we have, it seems quite clear that pupils in our most deprived communities have fewer subjects to choose from than young people in the most privileged postcodes. Whatever way that is presented, it is an inequality. It is another example of poverty and the economic situation of both their family and their community defining the life experience of young people in Scotland.

Research by *The Times* in 2017 found that, on average, pupils in some of the most deprived communities were being offered a choice of 17 highers, whereas for pupils in the least deprived communities, which are often just a stone’s throw away, the average offer was 23 highers to choose from. I welcome the fact that we are getting more

working-class Scots into university, but we will not make the progress that we all want to make—and we will not make it last—if that gap exists at the level of the qualifications that students need to get a university offer.

I welcome the fact that a greater variety of qualifications and other experiences are available. The aim is not to get every young person through five highers in S5, but there is a danger that—this appears to be the view of some people—if we explain away the reduced offer of highers in deprived communities by pointing to the other options, we will entrench inequality and maximising the higher offer in deprived communities will never be the goal, because other options exist. I do not think that that is anyone’s intention, but it appears to be creeping in as a way of explaining away the inequality.

I mention the research in *The Times* from 2017 because the data that we are relying on, whether it is from *The Times*, Mark Priestley, Marina Shapira or Jim Scott, is independent—it is gathered and published by journalists and academics—and therein lies one of the key problems that we have when we are discussing subject choice. Education Scotland has flatly refused to acknowledge that there is, or even might be, an issue here, and it is not producing data to back up its assertion. The Government’s education agency is burying its head in the sand.

If Education Scotland were to produce data showing that there is no pattern of pupils in more deprived areas being offered fewer highers, I would be the first to welcome it, but right now we have data showing that the opposite is the case and nothing more than assertion from Education Scotland. If the Government were to instruct its education agency to gather the data, that would be a welcome first step—it would cut out the time-wasting exercise that we are currently engaged in, whereby Education Scotland claims that there is no problem.

One of the key issues that many schools face is the shortage of specialist subject teachers. We have discussed the challenges of teacher recruitment and retention a number of times, and we know that the problem is most acute in rural communities and deprived communities, which, in turn, only deepens existing inequalities, as schools in such communities are simply unable to offer the same subjects as schools in other areas. The core issues undermining the recruitment and retention of teachers are pay and workload. That is nothing that we did not already know. However, last month’s pay agreement will deliver a significant rise—a restoration—after a strong trade union campaign that saw one of the largest rallies ever organised by a single union when 30,000 people marched through Glasgow. That partial restoration

of pay should go some way towards tackling the recruitment and retention problems and, in turn, the restrictions on subject choice that many schools face, but it is only part of the picture.

One of the core purposes of curriculum for excellence is to give schools the freedom to choose the best way to teach their pupils—which, again, is something that we all signed up to. That flexibility extends to the number of subjects that can be taken at national 5. We have seen schools offer anything from five to eight nat 5s, but there does appear to be a trend. Schools in the most privileged areas—the highest achieving schools by traditional academic standards—are often offering eight while many others have settled on six. That raises a host of issues. It is incredibly confusing for young people and their parents, and it leads many people to believe that their children are missing out on the opportunity to study more subjects for no reason other than their postcode.

To some extent, confusion is inevitable. Curriculum for excellence is supposed to give pupils the chance to engage in greater depth by taking, say, six national 5s compared to eight standard grades. However, the combination of a still very new system and one in which there is flexibility across the country was inevitably going to generate concern, and there is still some way to go in explaining curriculum for excellence to parents. The Government should consider how, in conjunction with local councils, it can do that.

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): This morning, the Education and Skills Committee was told by Eileen Prior, the director of Connect, that the number of nationals that are taken will not have any impact on whether a young person goes to university, because highers are the gold standard of Scottish education. Does Ross Greer recognise that?

Ross Greer: I am just about to turn to the potential for the two-year higher in the system.

As I said, there is, clearly, structural misalignment in the system—in fact, Jenny Gilruth has ably brought that up in committee in recent weeks. The SQA states that each national 5 course requires 160 hours for completion. However, that is not possible for someone who does eight courses in one year, as the Educational Institute of Scotland and others have repeatedly highlighted. One concerning effect of that, in some cases, is the start of study towards national 5 in S3. That, in essence, mirrors the two-plus-two-plus-two model of the previous system, and it takes S3 out of the broad general education phase of the curriculum—which, again, was not an intended outcome.

There is a way in which eight subjects can be studied without those contradictions: it involves

taking the two-year pathway across S4 and S5, which curriculum for excellence provides for. Not all of those eight courses would need to lead to qualifications, although they absolutely could. Although that approach would not work for every pupil—most obviously, those intending to leave before S5—it is an option that a few schools have embraced and that appears to be working. We would all benefit from greater study of that approach, preferably led by Education Scotland, although it again appears to be a trend that is directly related to the socioeconomic background of the area. Education Scotland needs to acknowledge that and explore the matter further.

The principles and priorities of curriculum for excellence are the right ones, but something is not working. Rather than prescribe a solution, the motion simply asks the Government to acknowledge the serious concerns that have emerged. I hope that the Government can see fit to swallow its pride and do just that.

15:22

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank Liz Smith for bringing the debate today—I mean “today”, because I cannot be the only constituency MSP who has in the past week, while choices have been made by pupils and parents across Scotland, been asked to intervene with a local school on choices. I was asked to intervene with a school in Shetland on behalf of a person who wanted to take a vocational route into work, but was having difficulty because the choices in the columns that he was trying to work in were limited.

I am afraid that I do not understand Mr Swinney’s attack on the rest of us for what I see not as political opportunism, but as us simply doing our job. The other thing that is puzzling me is that, having attacked everyone for bringing forward and speaking in a debate on subject choice, Mr Swinney will accept Iain Gray’s amendment, which asks for the review for which many of us have been arguing for some time.

John Swinney: Will Tavish Scott take an intervention?

Tavish Scott: If he wants to explain the absolute contradiction in his position, the cabinet secretary is more than welcome to do so.

John Swinney: I was arguing that the committee is engaged in an evidence-gathering process, and that it is advisable that we hear all that evidence. The point that Iain Gray has raised is a perfectly reasonable one to advance. However, I do not see the point in having a debate today on a motion that has offered absolutely no positive solutions, when a committee process is currently under way.

Tavish Scott: I do not accept that analysis, not least because—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Swinney chunters away on the front bench. The thing about this Government is that it has been in power for so long that anyone who dares to suggest anything different gets put down and accused of political opportunism. That is the position that Mr Swinney is now in. I think that he needs to raise his game a bit. When parents come to talk to me about the fact that I have talked about subject choice in Parliament because that is what I should do as their representative, I will say to them that Mr Swinney's response is that I am guilty of political opportunism. When I say that, I think that they will reply, "You're doing your job; it's about time he remembered what his is."

The introduction of curriculum for excellence is one of 22 major education changes in Scotland since the second world war. Experts say that it takes a decade or more for reform to work and to be properly assessed for effectiveness. I see no evidence that the introduction of curriculum for excellence was designed to reduce the choice of learning for young people. However, the evidence now, in 2019, is unambiguous. Therefore Parliament, the Government and schools need to know what the consequences of narrowing subject choices in S4 are for a young person's learning.

In assessment, the importance of different routes into work, informal and formal qualifications and the offering of vocational courses and experiences is essential—a point that I entirely concede to the cabinet secretary. This is not a debate about why Scots cannot sit three highers in S5 to qualify for medicine or veterinary studies at the University of Edinburgh, important though that topic is. It is a debate about understanding what is going on in schools and whether we need to alter the course of the education supertanker. Nobody is arguing today for a 90 degree swing of the wheel, but it seems that some change is necessary.

If nothing else, I cannot see why we would not want to have seven rather than six subject choices in S4 in Scotland's 348 state secondary schools, and nor do I see why—Ross Greer rightly raised this—why 160 hours need to be delivered in one learning year, which sounds to me like a dash to learn. There is also the reality that in many schools across the country that is not happening.

Seven subject choices would create space in young people's learning for languages including Gaelic, for STEM subjects, for computing science and, given that Parliament debated tuition yesterday, for music—all of which are in worrying decline across Scotland. That is surely the answer to Mr Swinney's earlier intervention on Liz Smith's speech, too.

However, to make that change alone, I entirely accept that the education secretary and schools need to know what the unintended consequences of narrowing subject choice are. That is why Iain Gray's amendment is—in my view—entirely right. The education secretary has often rested on the 2015 OECD report as his justification for various educational initiatives, which is reasonable. It is therefore important in this case to reflect on the significant recommendation of the OECD on

"the need to evaluate how CfE is actually being implemented in schools and communities and for this to be done on an all-Scotland basis, not only in particular local authority areas."

The OECD also proposed that

"research ... can make a clear contribution in helping to innovate schools as learning environments, especially in secondary schools in deprived areas."

That latter point is essential, because the cabinet secretary's premier education adviser is Education Scotland. It is worrying that Mr Swinney did not cite Education Scotland as a basis for not having the debate today. It gave two and half hours of evidence to the Parliament's Education and Skills Committee some weeks ago. It did not offer any concrete details, statistics or numbers on what is happening across Scotland's secondary schools on subject choice. The contrast with Professor Jim Scott could not be greater: he said in great detail what was happening. If the Government wishes to take issue with that, it has every right to do so, but Mr Swinney did not mention any of that analysis in his speech today.

On teacher numbers, Education Scotland said:

"It is not our responsibility to know about teacher numbers in each school"

On the impact of deprivation on subject choice, it said that its evidence

"does not indicate that." —[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee, 3 April 2019; c 11, 25.*]

However, it did not cite any evidence to support that. On the reason behind the fall in the number of pupils who are taking languages, it said twice that it does not have any statistical data. We therefore wonder what it is up to. I believe that the education secretary would be greatly supported if his premier organisation—which is responsible for advice to him, as the person who is responsible for education policy in Scotland—did its job. The trouble at the moment is that not many of us know what that job is.

15:28

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): Today is perhaps the most important day in the Scottish Qualifications Authority exam diet, because today is when the modern studies exams

are being sat. I would, therefore, like to start by taking the opportunity to wish every pupil in Scotland who is sitting a qualification in national 5, higher and advanced higher the very best of luck. To their teachers, I say that we value your dedication and commitment to our young people, and we thank you for your public service to education.

I know that members will be shocked to learn this, but I studied my standard grade qualifications some 20 years ago. At the Education and Skills Committee event in Dunfermline on Monday, Iain Gray bravely—and mistakenly—told me that I must have only seven standard grades, because I was not as bright as my youngest sister, who studied nine. In fact, when I was 13 years old, Moira and John Gilruth were told by my careers adviser that I was good at science—in particular, the adviser's subject, which was of physics.

Iain Gray: To be fair, I note that Jenny Gilruth revealed that her sister is a physics teacher and so is clearly smarter than her. [*Laughter.*]

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Iain Gray for that. As a former modern studies teacher, I beg to differ.

My careers adviser suggested that perhaps I might like to become a doctor and so should study physics and chemistry, because—the adviser said—biology is the easy science and I could pick it up in S5. Moira and John were delighted with the prospect of a Dr Gilruth, so it was science for me. Except that it was not. I promptly dropped both subjects at the end of S4 and chose instead to crash higher history.

In 1999, the offer for everyone at my secondary school was seven subjects. By the time Katie Gilruth came along three years later, the offer was up to eight. By the time the baby—who turned 28 on Monday—came along, pupils were being offered nine subjects. All three of those pupils, who were educated by Fife Council, with three different subject offers, went on to study five highers.

There has always been variation in the number of subjects that have been offered in S4. Suggestions that that is new are simply not true.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Jim Scott's analysis shows that no state schools in the Highlands, Moray, Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen city offer eight subjects in S4, but several in the central belt do. Does Jenny Gilruth think that it is acceptable that pupils in the north-east are disadvantaged purely because of where they live?

Jenny Gilruth: Unfortunately for Liam Kerr, Jim Scott also said—in the same committee meeting—of schools that are offering six, seven or eight qualifications that

“assuming that the child manages to carry forward five subjects, they will be able to get five highers.”—[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee, 24 April 2019; c 7.*]

Therefore, pupils are not being disadvantaged, and Liam Kerr is being misleading in saying that they are. He is trying to suggest that the variance is new, but that is not true.

In this job, I have over the years come to understand that it is really important to consider the views of different generations in Parliament. Yesterday, I learned from my colleague Gordon MacDonald that when he was at school the so-called academic pupils were offered eight ordinary grades, and the less academic were offered six. I will forgive Iain Gray's slur on this occasion, because he assumed that we still set subject choices according to ability, but that has not been the case for many years.

As the only member who has ever actually delivered a national qualification or had to write a departmental timetable as a faculty head to accommodate SQA hours allocation, I welcome the debate. The fact remains that, if all the teaching hours that are available in one year—that is, 160 hours for the exam requirements to teach each subject—are added up, it is nigh-on impossible to deliver more than five subjects, or perhaps six at a push, in one year. Again, that is not new.

Pupils in Scotland's schools have been sitting national qualifications since 2013. The first exams took place in 2014, which was five years ago. My job title as a secondee at Education Scotland in 2012 was “national qualifications development officer”. That was seven years ago.

The senior phase is meant to be about depth in learning. Broad general education offers pupils the opportunity to study a wide range of subjects before they specialise in S4. In his evidence to the Education and Skills Committee last week, Professor Jim Scott told us:

“to be honest, the most able pupils will cope in any system: if they are given only six or seven qualifications to work for, they will use the time well and will probably prosper in that system.”—[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee, 24 April 2019; c 7.*]

To turn Professor Scott's argument on its head, I say that it seems that the least-able pupils will not cope in any system. A system that forces all pupils to study eight or nine subjects will not allow everyone to prosper. Where is the equity in that?

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Jenny Gilruth: No, thank you. I have taken two interventions already.

Perhaps Eileen Prior of Connect put it best when she said at the Education and Skills Committee this morning that a focus on numbers means that we take our eye off the ball. This is about all our young people doing the best that they can do, which has to be about the best pathways for every young person and not about “badge collecting”, as a headteacher put it to me recently.

I do not want to go back to standard grades. That system let down too many young people and put undue pressure on pupils’ mental health. It forced many people to take subjects until the end of S4. Curriculum for excellence is rooted in personalisation and choice. Curriculum for excellence celebrates the achievements of all our young people—not just those who take five highers. Curriculum for excellence has delivered a record number of exam passes. Curriculum for excellence has increased positive destinations. Curriculum for excellence is narrowing the attainment gap.

It is nothing short of political opportunism for the Tories to come here today to debate an issue on which the Education and Skills Committee has not even concluded its inquiry. I will take no lectures from any MSP on the subject, because not a single MSP has ever taught it.

Before I conclude, I must refer to Iain Gray’s and Tavish Scott’s amendments, which directly reference the 2015 OECD report entitled “Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective”. The OECD said in 2015:

“A context of criticism ... could lead to a public and political debate that misses many of the most important pillars and achievements of CfE. All this would likely unnerve teachers, with negative impact on morale and on the carefully-built union consensus. We think it is important to avoid this negative scenario.”

Here we are, however, and I am thoroughly depressed by content in this afternoon’s debate that has focused on politics over any form of pedagogy or commitment to getting it right for every child.

Curriculum for excellence and all its ambitions and achievements have certainly bypassed a few members in the chamber. Maybe it is time that they went back to school.

15:34

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): What is most galling is that we are once again seeing the SNP Government and its back benchers crying crocodile tears about being dragged to the chamber to answer for their shameful and woeful record in educating our young people, which is the task that their First Minister claims is her Government’s number 1 priority. SNP members want to talk about political opportunism, so why is

the Government so keen to avoid discussing and debating education in the chamber in Government time, given that it can magically find 90 minutes for a party-political broadcast on independence? It is little wonder that parents, teachers and pupils the length and breadth of Scotland can see for themselves what the Scottish National Party’s real priority is. It is certainly not to give young people more choices.

There can be no doubt that the SNP cuts to teacher numbers and Nicola Sturgeon’s flawed reforms have limited choices and opportunities for our young people.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Oliver Mundell talks about cuts to teacher numbers. He will be aware that it was shown recently that there are significantly more teachers per pupil in Scotland than there are in England, under his party’s Government.

Oliver Mundell: There we have it. Whenever things get tough when it comes to the SNP’s record of the past decade, SNP members look somewhere else for diversions and use smoke-and-mirrors tactics. The truth is that Scotland is missing thousands of teachers, and that there are now no teachers in some subjects in some schools, which means that young people cannot take the subjects of their choice. Young people are being disappointed because limited choice means that they are not able to pursue their ambitions, to fulfil their potential or to go on and study the subjects that they want to study at university. That is not acceptable.

What is most alarming is that opportunities appear to be most limited in our most economically deprived communities and in rural and remote communities outside the central belt. Given that the Government claims that it wants to deliver an education system that is based on excellence and equity, it is a downright disgrace that pupils who are going through the Scottish education system today will be worse off than previous generations. When expert witnesses come before the Education and Skills Committee and talk openly about a generation of pupils who have not received the choices in education that they deserve, alarm bells should be ringing for us all.

If the situation had been created by some kind of unforeseen accident, it would, perhaps, be forgivable. However, the truth is that concerns have been raised consistently over a number of years: the issue has come up not just today, but has been raised in Parliament time and again. What is more, a succession of SNP ministers have attempted to reassure Parliament that narrowing of subject choices either would not happen or—which is worse still—is nothing to worry about. The facts, however, tell a different story.

It seems to be particularly perverse that curriculum changes that were designed with the intention of expanding choice and widening the breath of education have resulted, for many young people, in exactly the opposite, at the time in school that will have the biggest impact on where pupils go next. In the past, the norm was for S4 pupils to sit seven or eight courses. The statistics show that half of schools are offering just six subjects in S4. In deprived areas, just one in ten schools offers the choice of 12 advanced higher. In contrast, in the most affluent areas, seven in 10 schools offer 12 or more. That cannot be right, and it is happening on the cabinet secretary's watch.

The SNP's new defence appears to be that Opposition parties are doing down teachers and young people. It claims that we are not pleased that pupils are leaving school with qualifications, and that we are failing to recognise the SNP's successes and achievements. I say loudly and clearly that that is absolutely not the case. In fact, I will go further and commend the young people and teachers who are having to work twice as hard to realise the pupils' potential and to access opportunities within a system that no longer works in their best interests.

What is more, the concerns are being raised not just by Opposition parties, education academics and the real experts on the front line—the teachers in our classrooms—but by young people themselves, who are asking where their subject choice is. Year after year, the cabinet secretary and his Government have chosen to ignore those voices, and have instead presided over a decline in subject choice and in the opportunities that are available to the next generation of Scots.

Like Ross Greer, I would feel a lot more confident about the SNP Government's ability to address the growing problem if ministers would stop burying their heads in the sand and instead admit for once that they might have got things wrong. Until they do, I will make no apology for raising these issues in the chamber—as my Conservative colleagues have been doing, in some cases for a decade.

15:40

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): I read recently in *The Guardian* how

"The former education secretary has watched as class sizes have gone up, schools have fallen into disrepair and teachers have covered for cleaners."

That is education in England. The Tories have no answer to Scottish education

Less than 12 months ago, we in this Parliament were debating subject choice on a motion brought to the chamber by Liz Smith on behalf of the Conservative Party. Today, we are debating the

same issue in the middle of an Education and Skills Committee inquiry into this area, which only began just before the Easter recess and has not yet heard from teachers, local authorities, the SQA or the cabinet secretary. Indeed, we heard from parent representative groups only this morning.

Given that third-year pupils have already chosen their subjects for S4, why are we having this debate now instead of waiting until June, when we could have a more informed debate based on the committee's report and recommendations? Could it be that there is going to be an election in the next few weeks and the Tory party, having dropped to third place in the polls, hopes to make political capital out of an important issue for parents and pupils?

As I said, this morning the committee heard from parent groups, and two issues came across strongly with regard to concerns about subject choice. First, schools have significant autonomy in structuring secondary education and, in many cases, they have failed to communicate to the parents of their new year groups how pupils will progress through the school, starting from the broad general education to the senior phase when examinations take place. Joanna Murphy, chair of the National Parent Forum of Scotland, said that parents do not understand the system, lack basic information on curriculum for excellence in the senior phase and try to relate what is currently happening to their own school experience.

Jenny Gilruth: Does Gordon MacDonald agree that we might need an education campaign for MSPs, who, perhaps like parents, do not seem to understand that we now have a different examination system and that things have changed since they were at school?

Gordon MacDonald: Absolutely. I would support any education campaign to raise awareness of curriculum for excellence throughout the general population.

There is a need to explain to parents what has changed and how it will benefit young people's education, as schools cannot make decisions in isolation. Back in 2013, on the eve of the introduction of the senior phase into Scottish schools, the BBC said that, previously:

"students studied for seven Standard Grades but local authorities have consulted with schools and parents' groups and six Nationals is likely to be more common. One part of the thinking behind this is that it can free up the timetable to help students study topics in more depth".

It also highlighted:

"what really matters is the number of qualifications a youngster has when they leave school—not how many they have at a particular point. They might study more Nationals after S4."

We need to get that across to parents.

My second point relates to the presentation of subject choice to S3 pupils. The traditional column approach has always caused issues for young people, even back in the 70s when I was at school. For example, pupils had to choose either history or geography, could do only two sciences and so on. That, to me, is what lies at the heart of the problem of subject choice—timetable methodology. The committee's survey of parents found that the timetabling of subjects, particularly the use of the column system, was the frequently cited cause of a pupil not being able to take all the subjects that they wished to study.

Despite that, a majority of pupils surveyed by the Scottish Youth Parliament agreed that they were able to take all the subjects that they wanted at school. Connect, which was formerly the Scottish Parent Teacher Council, highlighted in its submission that there are different approaches to timetabling that better meet the needs of young people. It suggested that pupils should be

“free to select their choices and rate them by preference”

and that subject teaching should then be

“matched to demand and a flexible approach adopted to class and year structures so that different levels may be taught together, with young people from different year groups.”

The important point is to give pupils as much free choice as possible in subject decisions throughout the senior phase, whether that is in S4, S5 or S6. As Joanna Murphy, chair of the National Parent Forum of Scotland stated, it is about what qualifications pupils leave with, not the order that they take them in.

Scotland's school leavers have higher achievement levels and more of them go to positive destinations than at any time during the previous 20 years. In 2006-07, 71 per cent of pupils got a level 5 qualification—a credit in the old standard grade—or better. Although we cannot make a direct comparison, last year, 86 per cent got a level 5 qualification or better. For highers, we are again unable to make a direct comparison but, last year, 62 per cent of school leavers left with a qualification at level 6 or better, which was up from 42 per cent in 2006-07. Back in 2009, 22 per cent of pupils got five highers or more; last year, the figure was more than 30 per cent.

There has been concern for years about the attainment gap between pupils with different backgrounds. Education Scotland in its evidence to the committee highlighted that the attainment gap between rich and poor at higher level is at an all-time low, a record number of school leavers are in higher education and the number of school leavers from the most deprived areas in higher education has gone up by eight percentage points since a decade ago.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must conclude there, Mr MacDonald.

Gordon MacDonald: Okay—thank you.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you very much.

15:47

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): Here we are in another education debate with our Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills again taking a troubling but increasingly common approach in listening to the arguments: he holds the line, seeks to shoot the messenger and quotes carefully selected statistics to make a case. The kindest construction that I would use to describe that is that he is largely in denial about many of the areas of concern about the education experience of too many of our young people. I say in all seriousness to colleagues across the chamber that belligerence is not a substitute for being accountable for our responsibilities.

This is another education debate in Opposition time. I have lost count of the times that I have asked the cabinet secretary to use Scottish Government time to debate fully the range of issues in education. I hate to think that political opportunism has meant that we have not had those debates in Government time.

I will explore some of the evidence that has been given to the Education and Skills Committee and which has been heard elsewhere about the perhaps unintended consequences of decisions on subject choices and of the local pressure on resources, notably teachers and support staff, for some of the most disadvantaged young people in our education system. We heard troubling and compelling evidence from Professor Jim Scott that the way that the curriculum for excellence is being implemented means that the system is less fair for those who are most disadvantaged and that they are paying the price of less equity because of deliberate choices by Government, Education Scotland, local authorities and schools. It is simply not good enough to try to shrug off that evidence.

We have heard evidence of routine greater use of multilevel teaching in classes, increased need and a lack of provision to allow young people to travel to college and other schools to access particular subjects. Subject choice is more restricted. That is not necessarily about just the number; it is also about the range of subjects. For me, the most concerning issue is the increase in the number of young people who are leaving with no external examination qualification whatever.

All of those things that have been highlighted impact disproportionately on the poorest and most disadvantaged young people in the system.

Decisions that are now being played out disproportionately impact on those who are already disproportionately battling inequality and injustice. We know, for example, that 75 per cent of looked-after young people leave at the end of S4. In what way is a curriculum that requires a young person to be there for S4, S5 and S6 to access all of its benefits tailored to the needs of looked-after young people? It is not tailored to their needs at all. Does the cabinet secretary share my concern that Education Scotland has not only done no equality impact assessment on the choices being made, but continues blithely to argue that there is no cause for concern?

I have to be honest. It is the complacency and defensiveness that gets to me—the “Nothing to see here” and “They would say that” approach. All this, while alarm bells are ringing and serious figures in education with no political dog in the fight are expressing their concerns. Education Scotland gives advice to ministers, inspects its own work and does not consider that teaching a class with advanced higher, higher, national 4 and national 5 pupils in the same room presents any difficulties whatever. The most advantaged children are not being taught in those circumstances; the most disadvantaged are. That is unacceptable.

I get that many people simply resist change and misunderstand the decisions that are being made on the curriculum. I hear the pushy parents’ explanation that we should not focus just on qualifications—that it is not just about the exams. Even if all of that is true, there is still some truth in the problems that we are discussing today. The problem, which is deeper and cannot be wished away, is that there are fewer subjects, a narrower range of choices and further disadvantage of those who are most vulnerable.

The easy bit for the cabinet secretary is to delete the concerns in a parliamentary motion. It is a great deal harder to delete the consequences of his choices from the life chances of young people across Scotland. The cabinet secretary says that we must wait until the inquiry completes its work. Well, I seriously hope that when the cabinet secretary sees the evidence, he will stop trying to explain it away. He needs to listen, understand and act. Instead of testing the evidence against his own view, he should acknowledge that there may possibly be things going wrong in the system that he did not intend but which are having direct consequences for many of our young people.

This is not just about the timing or the parliamentary process—reasons that the cabinet secretary has flung in to justify not supporting the motion. This is an issue of the responsibility of serious Government to confront and respond to what is happening in the real world at its hand. It is

not good enough to respond with cheap points about process. We have to look at what people across the country are saying about the possible damage that we are doing to the future of far too many of our young people.

15:52

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): As many members have said, the Education and Skills Committee is in the middle of taking evidence on this topic, so I have to wonder why the Conservative Party has decided to have this debate at this time.

I was not going to use the next bit of my speech, but I thank Oliver Mundell for giving me the opportunity to do so. For the Tories to shed crocodile tears about inequity is ignorance at best and sheer hypocrisy at worst. If that was not the case, the debate would be about the causes of poverty and a call for this Parliament to urge Westminster to scrap some of its more damaging policies and grant this Parliament all the powers that it requires to deal with the problem in its totality.

Oliver Mundell: It is absolutely outrageous to make that kind of point. Does James Dornan not accept that giving people an inadequate education—an education that is not as good quality as the education received by their peers in more affluent communities—will have an impact on their life chances?

James Dornan: Yes. I would agree with that point if I thought that it was the case. At First Minister’s question time last week, the First Minister was right to point out that a record number of young people are leaving school with five highers or more and that the attainment gap between the richest and the poorest is narrowing. That is thanks to policies such as the pupil equity fund, which allows headteachers to use a financial settlement to suit their establishment’s particular needs, instead of having a blanket rule of practice with no flexibility. It is work like that that will truly allow headteachers to prioritise the needs of pupils in their area, taking into account socioeconomic backgrounds and particular social challenges.

The SNP Government is absolutely committed to the needs of vulnerable children and there are clearly some young people who will need more targeted support than others, for example those coming from a care-experienced background. The Government has already recognised that that demographic may need further investment of £33 million from the attainment Scotland fund, which will offer targeted initiatives, activities and educational resources aimed at improving the educational outcomes for that disadvantaged group of young people.

Johann Lamont: Will the member take an intervention?

James Dornan: I will.

Johann Lamont: I am grateful. Does the member recognise the argument that I was making? It is not about what the Tories are doing at Westminster, although I condemn their project in terms of the cuts to public services. The danger is that what we are doing now through some of the choices that have been made around the curriculum for excellence is—whether unintended or otherwise—amplifying inequality in our communities. We need to address that, because kids in the communities that we represent who are disadvantaged are being disadvantaged more by the choices that are being made.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give your time back Mr Dornan. It was a long intervention.

James Dornan: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I would be happy to agree with Johann Lamont if we had gone through the process that we are in the middle of. If, after the committee's debates and discussions, she were to come back with evidence that proved that, it would be very difficult for us on the SNP benches to say otherwise. I am not saying that the speeches that others have made have been for political reasons, but today's motion has been brought for nothing but political reasons. There is no other possible reason for it.

I can see that some of my Conservative colleagues want me to talk specifically and solely about subject choices, but having served as the convener of the Education and Skills Committee for some time, I am more than aware that a child's education is not quite so one dimensional, which is another reason why I am so surprised that Liz Smith has brought this debate at such an early stage, before she has heard the vast bulk of the evidence. She has heard time and time again that the education of children in different socioeconomic areas is complex; the rest of us know that too.

In a debate last year, I had the joy of sharing some stories about young people who had achieved outstanding results in their exams, but what surprised me about many of the stories was the element of cross-establishment working between schools in my Glasgow Cathcart constituency. Many kids travel between schools to participate in various subjects, with excellent outcomes. Schools benefit from offering a well-attended subject, and pupils are able to utilise the flexible approach to study the subjects that are most suitable to their needs.

In 2017, one such pupil in S4 attended Holyrood secondary for her higher Italian and King's Park secondary for her higher English for speakers of

other languages, while being taught higher Spanish and national 5 maths at her own school, St Margaret Mary's. That is the point of curriculum for excellence; it is about a tailored educational system that has a flexible approach to learning.

I do not dispute for a minute that some parents may have concerns over six subjects being offered in S4, but I repeat the First Minister's words from last Thursday: higher education does not simply finish in S4, and a wide range of subjects are open to pupils as they progress through S5 and S6. As the cabinet secretary said earlier, the broad general education has been improved up to S3. What matters are the qualifications and awards with which pupils leave school, not just the subjects that they study in S4. While the Government has promised to monitor the Reform Scotland report and the Education and Skills Committee's review, it is absolutely right that we know that education does not end in S4.

The evidence says that more young people are leaving school with qualifications, with five highers or more and going into positive destinations, including university.

I want to take a minute to examine the wording of the Tory motion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have exactly one minute.

James Dornan: The motion refers to the "inequity that exists between schools"

in more deprived communities. I represent a constituency that has a number of those more deprived communities and, on a recent visit, the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Professor Philip Alston, visited a school in Glasgow and asked the children, "Who should help the poor people?" He was answered simply by one child, "The rich people." A boy, John, was in the garden and said, "I got hungry because I was smelling other people's food. The most unfair thing is that Government knows what families are going through and it decides not to do anything about it." That is a perfect example of the inequity that exists between schools in more affluent areas and those in more deprived communities and which clearly affects educational performance.

I say to Scotland's Tories, do not insult this Parliament by telling us how to educate the poor, tell us how you will fight alongside us to ensure that those children are not poor in the first place.

15:59

Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con): I thank my colleague Liz Smith for bringing the debate to the chamber. It is so important, because

the options that are available to Scotland's children as they progress through school are sadly narrowing.

The curriculum for excellence was introduced with the intention of improving the Scottish education system, which was renowned internationally as one of the best. Unfortunately, evidence has shown that the CFE's implementation has been lacking in accountability, communication and credible management. What is worse is that, so far, the response from the SNP and Education Scotland to that evidence has been utter denial.

In recent years, there has been a narrowing of subject choice for children in the senior phase of their education. On average, pupils who enter S4 now take fewer subjects than they did before the curriculum for excellence was introduced. It is abundantly clear to most members in the chamber what effect limiting their horizons can have on a child.

How has that happened? Part of the transition from the old system to the new one involved changing the structure through which education is delivered. Previously, under the two, two, two system, children in S3 and S4 could take a breadth of subjects before focusing on their highers in fifth year. Now that we have switched to the three, three system, with the first three years providing what is known as a broad general education, we face problems. Evidence that has been submitted to the Education and Skills Committee highlights the disjointedness between the first three years and the new senior phase. The SQA has said that its qualifications, which start in S4, require 160 hours of teaching per subject for pupils to pass. Previously, it was possible for that time to be split over two years, but schools are now cramming those 160 hours into one year, which means that the number of subject slots has been squeezed down from seven or eight to six and even, in some cases, five.

I have heard members say that we are focusing too much on S4 and that subjects are available throughout the whole senior phase. I say to them that the idea that a child who got a flavour of Spanish in S1 to S3, but who was then forced to drop it because there were only six slots in S4, would somehow pick it up again later in the senior phase is totally unrealistic.

Dr Allan: I can understand why there is a debate about many of the issues that Alison Harris is talking about. However, can she clarify whether she is calling for more regulation from the centre of what schools do, or less?

Alison Harris: We are calling for a review of the structure.

I want to turn to a particularly worrying development. We have heard increased reports of multilevel classes. Science teachers, for example, have pointed out that, despite the stark differences in content between the national 4 qualification in physics, the national 5 qualification in physics and the higher physics qualification, they are often expected to teach all three in one class time slot.

At last week's meeting of the Education and Skills Committee, I asked the panel whether courses were built to sustain that kind of learning. William Hardie highlighted the impracticality of teaching what, in some cases, are very different courses in the same class and expecting the same quality of education, Dr Alan Britton said that no teacher would choose to do that and Professor Jim Scott said that the extent of tri-level teaching was worrying. However, when Education Scotland was asked about the issue, when it gave evidence to the committee, at one point its strategic director said that children could receive the same educational experience in a multilevel class as they would in a same-level class. I find that response quite surprising.

That brings me on to the final section of my speech. The reduction in subject choice for Scottish children upsets me, but what really angers me is the frank denial by the SNP and Education Scotland of the seriousness of the issue. In the same committee meeting that I have just mentioned, Education Scotland suggested that the narrowing of subject choice was in fact a deliberate decision, so that children could focus on a depth of learning, but educational experts have made it very clear that that narrowing is an unintentional consequence of the curriculum for excellence.

Similarly, in responding to Ross Greer on the sad reality that some children have to travel from one school to another to take certain subjects, Education Scotland's strategic director claimed that the motivation that travelling to another school to take such a class provides more than makes up for missing any other activities, such as sport, drama and music. That very statement is a shameful denial of the problems.

At last week's First Minister's question time, the denials kept coming. The First Minister was questioned on the topic of subject choice nine times by five different MSPs from across the chamber and, in each answer, she repeated the same statistic, irrespective of the question.

The SNP is acting as though there is no problem. There is a problem. I speak for parents, teachers and educationalists around Scotland: we need to address this head on. No more denials, deflections or downright ridiculous excuses. Let us address the problem before we fail a generation.

16:05

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): There is a lot on which we can agree today—that

“education should be based on ... excellence and equity ... that all young people ... should be afforded the best possible education at all levels”

and that

“these principles are enshrined in the policy aims of the curriculum for excellence”.

Those points all appear in the motion and are not amended.

Our focus today is on subject choice. The Conservatives want young people to have as wide a choice as possible in each school. That is a narrow topic and, although they are entitled to debate it, I will also make some wider but related points on the issue of school pupils and subject choices. The number of subjects that are available in a school is important, but so is the question of what those subjects are. We must ask how and why pupils choose subjects or would like to choose subjects that are not available.

As a society, how much should we try to influence pupils? How much should their choice be completely free?

The Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee, of which I am a member, is concluding an inquiry into the construction sector. Prior to that, we published a report on the gender pay gap. In both those inquiries, it has been blatantly obvious that we are not attracting enough women into STEM—science, technology, engineering and mathematics—subjects and are not attracting enough men into childcare and primary teaching. Efforts have been made to change that, but success has been limited. For whatever reason, pupils are still choosing careers that follow traditional gendered lines and that is reflected in their subject choices at school. We are all struggling to know how to change that.

The SQA tells us that, at higher level in 2017-18, 90 per cent of those doing engineering science and 84 per cent of those doing computing science were male, and 97 per cent of those doing fashion and textile technology and 97 per cent of those doing childcare and development were female.

Families, peers and teachers have an influence on the choices of school subjects and careers that our young people make. Frankly, we need our schools sometimes to challenge the assumptions that are around our young people and which they pick up from elsewhere. We all know some of the wrong assumptions that are floating around: that construction always involves being out in a muddy building site; that engineering is a very physical job and better for boys; that medicine and law are better jobs than engineering; that, in an ideal

world, everyone would go to university; and that the best people do not go into construction. Those are all wrong assumptions and they must be challenged.

Johann Lamont: I agree with John Mason that we must challenge those assumptions. If the evidence to the Education and Skills Committee concludes with a view that confirms Professor Jim Scott's position—that the most disadvantaged are now more disadvantaged than they were before—will John Mason act to get the Scottish Government to address that problem?

John Mason: That is hypothetical. One of the points for debate today is what the Education and Skills Committee will come up with as a conclusion.

By way of example, one of the big challenges in my constituency, which, as members know, is quite mixed, is parental involvement. One of the schools that are doing good work in that area has used some of the extra pupil equity funding money to involve families. When families are more involved in education, that makes as big a difference as other things.

My main argument is that this is wider than just the number of subjects; there are a lot of other factors.

Oliver Mundell: Will the member take an intervention?

John Mason: I will speak a little more and then let the member in.

To continue my theme, recently, during Scottish apprenticeship week, I visited an excellent company that provides electrical and other services in my constituency. I met two very able apprentices—one older and one younger. It was particularly interesting listening to the younger apprentice when he spoke of his experience at school—I do not know which school he attended—where the emphasis seemed to be on going to university and where the impression that was given to pupils was that everything other than university was second rate.

We need to help our young people understand that such thinking is wrong. We use the term “positive destinations”, which is meant to include a range of destinations but, in practice, we sometimes send out the signal that academic destinations are best. However, the roofer who fixes my tenement roof is just as important and valuable as a lawyer or accountant. If 100 per cent of our young people went to university, that would be a failure for us as a society. Each young person should of course have an equal opportunity to go to university no matter their background, but it is not the right path for every young person.

It is good that we have a tradition of a broad general education in Scotland. I studied Latin up to fourth year and chemistry up to fifth, but neither appears to have done me much good since. The only subject that I enjoyed at school was maths, but I guess that it would not have been healthy for me to study only that, and I was forced to study other subjects.

As a society, we have a responsibility to encourage our young people into sectors in which there are likely to be skills shortages in the future and, preferably, in which there are good pay and career opportunities.

I studied accountancy at university because I wanted to become an accountant. I did not choose the subject in some random way, although I did not know much about it, as accountancy was not available as a subject at my school.

I agree that the number of subjects that are available for an individual young person to choose from is important, but it is only one angle on the topic of subjects and choices. We need to take a much wider look at the question of which subjects are being chosen and why, and we need to consider whether those are the best subjects for the individual young person and for society as a whole.

16:11

Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I echo Ross Greer's call for more time for this debate. The cabinet secretary's point about the stage of the committee process is beneath him. The evidence that the committee heard was so stark and shocking that it shows that the Parliament is fleet of foot to be looking at what has been learned. If the cabinet secretary wanted to devote a whole week of parliamentary time to this important topic, I am sure that that would be welcomed.

I am as concerned as any Opposition member about the narrowing choice of subjects at S4 level in schools. I was quite taken with Jenny Gilruth's speech in which she gave us her family history on that issue. If I heard correctly, she said that she and her sisters were offered seven, eight and nine choices of subjects, but she then told us that she was satisfied that pupils are now being offered six choices. If I understood her correctly to say that not many of us understand the education process as she does, can she tell us why state schools in some of the most affluent areas of Scotland offer pupils the opportunity to study seven or eight qualifications?

Jenny Gilruth: I made the point that there has always been variation in the system, going back to standard grades 20 years ago.

On deprivation, we need to look at a broader range of qualifications. For example, in a speech in the Scottish Government debate yesterday, Daniel Johnson told us that he supported

"the wider definitions of education"—[*Official Report*, 30 April 2019; c 46.]

and Iain Gray said that it was not all about exam passes. Will Jenny Marra listen to her Labour colleagues?

Jenny Marra: I do not disagree with anything that they said. Presiding Officer, I hope that I get that time back.

The disparity that we see nationally is worrying. It simply cannot be right that pupils in wealthier areas of the country have a greater range of choices than those in other communities.

Schools are clear that they offer a limited range of topics because that is all that they can afford with the staffing and resources that they have. The cut of more than 3,000 teachers in Scotland since the SNP came to power is one of the Government's greatest failings.

My city of Dundee has been hit hard by teacher cuts. Since 2009, when the SNP took control of Dundee City Council, we have lost 183 teachers in total, with more losses to come, and 160 of those teachers—a massive number—have been lost from our secondary schools. Things are so bad that schools struggle to recruit teachers for core subjects such as English, maths and science. Further, in a city that is already struggling with attainment, the SNP is planning to cut a further £3 million from the education budget. On top of that, teachers are under further pressure because of the move to the almost universally unpopular faculty heads management structure. With schools being placed under such pressure, the last thing that our pupils need is a restriction in subject choices.

In my region, the city of Dundee really needs the opportunities that are offered by a good, solid education. In a survey that was conducted by the Reform Scotland think tank, five of Dundee's eight secondary schools confirmed that they offer only six subjects in S4. The three schools that did not respond to the survey have offered the same choice of six subjects over the past few years. Then we discover that it is the policy of the SNP-led Dundee City Council to offer only six subjects. Therefore, when the cabinet secretary talks about supporting headteachers and variation, I say to him loudly and clearly—I hope that he is listening—that those options are not available to pupils, parents, schools or headteachers in Dundee because the council has clearly said that its policy will be to offer six subjects in S4 right across the city. Its S1 to S6 curriculum guidelines state:

“The senior phase model that we have adopted as a city allows for vertical and lateral progression ... Pupils can study a maximum of 6 subjects at National 4 and 5 in S4”.

We should be under no illusion: such a restriction limits pupils’ choices and outcomes. I repeat my earlier point: I do not understand the SNP’s assertion that a narrowing of the curriculum is good, when we can see the most affluent areas of the country offering their pupils the opportunity to take seven or eight qualifications in S4.

The submission that Professor Jim Scott of the University of Dundee gave to the Education and Skills Committee was quite striking. His initial research indicates that, in an environment in which only six choices are allowed, the average number of qualifications attempted is only five. That is worrying and it is a point that is yet to be addressed in the debate. Children who have ambitions to study medicine or engineering are being left with no choice but to give up the benefits of arts subjects and to start specialising early in order to gain the qualifications that they will need for their chosen careers.

As Professor Scott said in his submission, any significant reduction in the uptake of modern languages, expressive arts and the STEM subjects has the potential to impair the academic, scientific, cultural and business-related capacity of Scotland. Every member in the chamber knows that today’s debate is about education, but we should remember that it is also about our wider economic capabilities. We know that our children are being offered limited subject choices not because the Scottish Government believes that that is right—although today’s debate might contest that—but because it is too set in its ways and too arrogant to look objectively at the situation that is in front of us. The cabinet secretary must act now to turn around the collapse in budgets, the crisis in recruitment and the narrowing of subject chances and life choices that SNP mismanagement is inflicting on our schools.

16:18

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Presiding Officer,

“I rise to speak somewhat dismayed at some of the arguments that are being used in the chamber this afternoon. I served on the Education and Culture Committee in session 4 of the Parliament, and much of what has been discussed today was raised in evidence at that time.”—[*Official Report*, 23 May 2018; c 34.]

That was the opening of my speech in last year’s debate on this subject. I am even more dismayed that we are still talking about the same issues, and that understanding of curriculum for excellence does not seem to have made its way through to some parts of the chamber.

In 2012, Terry Lanagan of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland told the Education and Culture Committee:

“The new system is not about going for eight or nine qualifications in one year—it is a continuum of learning. Those are not just words: the new qualifications will—and do—build on the experiences and outcomes in broad general education.”

It was always the intention—and it was the aim of the work that was done following criticism of the previous system—that the approach should be about the depth, and not the breadth, of learning that should exist for young people. Although I agree that the evidence shows that the number of subjects that a pupil can take has reduced in certain areas, I have yet to see evidence that that causes young people any disadvantage. I will use the evidence that the Education and Skills Committee has already heard to demonstrate that.

However, first I return to what has been said in the past. Terry Lanagan also said:

“The two plus two plus two versus three plus three issue is a ... false dichotomy. Broad general education goes up to S3, but that does not mean that there is no choice before that stage—indeed, personalisation and choice are an entitlement in curriculum for excellence.”—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 28 February 2012; c 795-6.]

One of the criticisms of the previous system was about the two-term dash to highers. Curriculum for excellence offers pupils an opportunity to go straight to higher courses or to start in S3 their work for national 4 and 5. That is the whole basis for adapting and personalising the system to young people.

I heard the comparisons with the private sector, but pupils at some private schools did not even sit standard grades, as they went straight to highers. There have always been differing views on how the issue should be taken forward.

The most important comment that I want to highlight was made by Larry Flanagan, who said:

“if, at the end of this, all we have done is replace the exams, and we have not changed the pedagogical approach in schools or what year youngsters make their future choices, we will not have achieved curriculum for excellence.”—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 25 February 2014 ; c 3614.]

Curriculum for excellence was supported by all parties in the Parliament.

I want to say a little about the evidence. I am a little concerned that we are having this debate when we are only part of the way through our important committee inquiry, because the implication could be that people have made up their minds before all the evidence has been heard. It is really important that we listen to all of it, so I want to balance some of the things that have been said about the evidence.

Dr Shapira was mentioned by both Liz Smith and Iain Gray. I absolutely agree that there is a narrowing and that it has been linked to Scottish index of multiple deprivation areas. However, when Dr Shapira was pressed on what evidence there is of disadvantage to young people, she said:

“The question is ... do we have evidence that the narrowed choice has a negative effect? Overall, we will have to wait and see, and ... look at the trends in a couple more years’ time.”—[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee*, 19 September 2018; c 47.]

Although I get and probably share the concern of the members around the chamber who have mentioned the issue, I have yet to see how we are disadvantaging our young people, especially given the context of increasing university and college admissions, which were up by 4 per cent last year. The information on attainment and leaver destinations shows that 92.9 per cent of our pupils are in positive destinations, and that figure has gone up, too. I share Labour’s concern about zero-hours contracts being counted in those destinations, but they account for only a small percentage of our young people’s positive destinations.

I turn to some of the other evidence that has been given. Alastair Sim of Universities Scotland said:

“An individual’s ability to present a good range of qualifications is core to university entry. One of the good things about curriculum for excellence, and something that resonates strongly with what we are trying to do at university, is that through the experience of curriculum for excellence pupils develop the broader attributes that I referred to as well as subject knowledge. That helps to create people who have a rounded expertise as well as subject knowledge. I ... support that intention.”—[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee*, 3 April 2019; c 45.]

Universities are looking for experience that is not just about what pupils have achieved in terms of a certain number of qualifications. It is about the bag of qualifications that they leave S5 or S6 with in the final stages of curriculum for excellence.

We have heard a lot about opportunities and choices. Joan Mackay talked about creativity in CFE and gave an example of pupils attaining HNC qualifications, which are at a higher level, at Dundee and Angus College, freeing up a computing science teacher to develop more courses to meet more youngsters’ needs. That is an example of the advantages that exist.

Although I share the concerns, I remain to be convinced that the problem that members have highlighted exists. I look forward to concluding our committee’s work in the area.

16:24

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): Is it not a somewhat extraordinary situation when the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills says that Parliament should not debate education? Education should never be off limits for members in this chamber. It is the job of Parliament to debate serious issues, and this is a serious issue. If was not a serious issue, the Education and Skills Committee would not be looking at it and we would not have lodged the motion that Liz Smith lodged for the debate today.

In March 2013, the commission on school reform, on which I was lucky enough to sit, published “By diverse means”, a detailed document that was a serious attempt to suggest ways in which we could improve Scotland’s educational performance. However, nothing has happened since then to improve the country’s educational performance.

Our paper started off with two quotes.

“By diverse means we arrive at the same end”,

and:

“Never tell people *how* to do things. Tell them *what* to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity.”

In other words, trust people to do a job and allow them to do it in different ways.

It was clear then, and it is clear now, that the education system in Scotland is too uniform. That is why the Scottish Conservatives have been arguing for years that we need greater diversity in the system, and to empower headteachers properly. Curriculum for excellence was meant to take the shackles off. It should have led to greater choice, not less.

Last week, subject choice was brought up several times at First Minister’s questions and, frankly, the First Minister floundered. I looked around the chamber and spotted Mike Russell on the front bench. He is a very bright man, obviously well educated, and I could not help wondering whether a young Mike Russell going through school now would emerge with the breadth of knowledge that the current Mike Russell has. I doubt it. The same could be said for other equally well-educated members, such as Liz Smith, Iain Gray and many others. We have a narrowing of the curriculum and we have kids being taught subjects at different levels in the same class. No one can possibly argue that that is a good thing.

We have already heard about Professor Jim Scott’s evidence. He said that the narrowing of subject choice was like a virus that

“spread ... round the north of Scotland”

with

“outbreaks in the south and south-west”.

He warned that we are

“in danger of creating a generation of people who have not had a good experience in education.”

He also said that he found it

“difficult to tell”

the Education and Skills Committee

“that anything in this is improving.”—[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee*, 24 April 2019; c 2, 17, 5.]

Professor Scott identified five areas in which Scottish education is struggling: modern languages; information and communication technology; arts; technologies; and science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects. There is a postcode lottery throughout Scotland and within authorities.

I asked the council in South Lanarkshire, where I live, for the figures—

Dr Allan: Will the member take an intervention?

Graham Simpson: No—I will give the figures for South Lanarkshire, which is an SNP council.

The number of choices offered at S4 goes from nine at Stonelaw high school, to eight at Trinity, St Andrew’s and St Bride’s and Holy Cross, to seven at Calderglen, Calderside, Duncanrig, Larkhall, Lesmahagow, St John Ogilvie, Strathaven and Uddingston, and down to six at Biggar, Carluke, Hamilton grammar and Lanark. That is all the high schools—and it is quite a range .

I should sound a word of caution here, and the cabinet secretary may agree with me. Although Stonelaw shows nine choices and in theory a pupil could access nine national qualifications, that also captures activities such as the Duke of Edinburgh and saltire awards that pupils can do within the timetable, whereas Hamilton grammar school shows only six choices, which does not reflect the wider range of options available.

Nevertheless, we have to ask why a kid at Biggar should not have the same opportunities as someone at St Andrew’s and St Bride’s in East Kilbride—or perhaps the question is why they do not have the same opportunities. Teacher shortages are a large part of the problem, as Jenny Marra said. We do not have enough people to teach across the wide variety of subjects that could be offered. We have known about that for years, yet it seems to me that nothing has been done.

Last week, the First Minister trumpeted exam results as evidence that curriculum for excellence is working. She was kind of missing the point, because is it really working? The percentage of youngsters leaving school with no qualifications declined across almost all authorities from 2009-

10 to 2012-13, but, unfortunately, as Iain Gray said, the opposite is true since the introduction of curriculum for excellence. The least able appear to be suffering the most under curriculum for excellence.

I thought that Aberdeenshire Council summed up the situation quite well in its submission to the committee. It said:

“Clearly, limitations in subject choice restrict the choices a pupil can make and can lead them into choosing subjects in which they have little interest. This can affect their motivation and overall attainment.”

The Scottish Parliament information centre paper for this week’s committee meeting confirmed that. Restricting subject choice leads to kids sitting subjects that they are just not interested in. That can affect them for the rest of their lives, and that is why the debate matters.

16:30

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I think that we all agree that Scottish education should be based on the principles of excellence and equity, and it is of course important to be assured that that is the case.

The cabinet secretary and colleagues have made observations about the timing of the debate—not about debating education but about the timing of this specific debate. Choices have already been made for next year and the Education and Skills Committee’s inquiry is not finished. Those are facts.

Viewers of this debate might wonder whether the sensible and respectful way to proceed would have been to let the committee do its job and have a more informed debate in June, once the inquiry has finished. The Education and Skills Committee has yet to hear from and, crucially, question a range of important witnesses, including representatives of the professional associations, directors of education, local government and, indeed, the Scottish Government.

In everything that we do in this place, we must properly consider and scrutinise evidence. I sincerely hope that we can have the opportunity to return to this matter when the committee has done its job and had the opportunity to review the full range of evidence and its report is available to all of us.

The purpose of the curriculum is to provide our young people with the skills, knowledge and experiences that will prepare them for their lives beyond school and provide them with the best possible opportunities to fulfil their potential.

Under curriculum for excellence, there are no set notions about the number or types of qualifications taken at each senior phase. The

guiding principle is that qualifications are taken at the appropriate stage for the young person over the three years of the senior phase. It is for schools to make decisions about the best model for their young people and, of course, that will lead to variation.

National guidelines encourage flexibility and enable schools to consider alternative approaches that best meet pupils' needs. That is right. For example, that might include following courses at college, through consortium arrangements with other schools and through digital learning.

Our focus must be on the whole school experience, the range of qualifications that are achieved and the destinations of young people when they leave school.

Responding to the committee, one local authority reported that

"The greater flexibility of the timetable has been matched by increasing option choice: alongside traditional courses, schools now offer wider achievement opportunities ranging from vocational qualifications to leadership and employability awards, many of which are also certificated, and courses offering different types of work related learning."

Importantly, it also stated:

"While the curriculum offer has been changing, examination performance has held up, continuing to improve steadily as before."

That matters. The qualifications and awards that young people leave school with matter—it is not just about what they study in S4.

Johann Lamont: Does the member share my concern that an increasing number of young people are leaving with no qualification whatsoever and that it will be disadvantaged young people who are suffering most?

Ruth Maguire: If that were the case, I would share that concern—of course I would.

The percentage of pupils who get qualifications at level 5 and above is up. The percentage of pupils who leave with highers is up. The wealth-related attainment gap for higher level is at an all-time low. A record number of school leavers are in higher education. When we look at attainment when pupils leave school, we find two things: attainment overall is up since 2009-10 and the gap between the most and least deprived is narrowing.

Curriculum for excellence has transformed learning experiences for children and young people across Scotland. It recognises that children are unique and empowers teachers to create learning that makes sure that every child gets the support, stretch and challenge that they deserve. It is the right approach for Scotland.

Liam Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Ruth Maguire: No.

The OECD has endorsed Scotland's curriculum, saying that it rests on

"a very contemporary view of knowledge and skills and on widely accepted tenets of what makes for powerful learning."

The curriculum for excellence has gone through a significant period of initial implementation, which brought with it a period of intensive change, in particular for secondary schools. The priority now should be to allow the new curriculum to bed in, to make appropriate adjustments but to avoid the type of wholesale curriculum change that would simply increase the workload for teachers.

As I said, we all agree that Scottish education should be based on the principles of excellence and equity, and we need to be assured that that is the case. Let us do that the right way. In everything that we do in this place, we must properly consider and scrutinise evidence. I repeat my hope that we can have the opportunity to return to this matter when the Education and Skills Committee has had the opportunity to review the full range of evidence and its report is available to all of us.

16:35

Iain Gray: Ruth Maguire and Clare Adamson talked about the choice and personalisation that the curriculum for excellence allows. That is a good thing. I am very much in favour of choice and personalisation in our schools, and I have been for a long time. Decades ago, I was sitting in a school in Mozambique, speaking to a colleague who was a Soviet teacher, and he asked me how our schools were organised. I knew how Soviet schools were organised. Every pupil followed exactly the same course and subjects as every other pupil in the year. In fact, across the entire Soviet Union, on any particular day, they would all be studying the same page in their textbooks, and, in order to move on to the next year, they had to pass all their subjects. He explained that to me, which I knew, and I explained to him that, in the schools in which I was used to working, pupils studied the same courses for a couple of years and then, after that, they chose their own personalised curriculum. He looked at me and said, "That is just not possible." He thought that that was a degree of personalisation that was just impractical and that you could not run or organise a school on that basis. I tried to convince him that it was possible, but could not do so.

I was struck by the differences between the two systems, although, in a sense, they had similar objectives. Both were seeking to deliver the

principle of equality. The Soviet one did so by giving everyone the same course, and the Scottish one did so by allowing individuals to create the curriculum that suited them. I know that I favoured the Scottish approach and was proud of it, even though I could not get my colleague to understand why it worked. Indeed, later, when I returned to teaching in a Scottish school, I was part of improving the system further with regard to personalisation, when we introduced the standard grades, which were very much a teacher-led innovation. Nobody is really arguing against any of those principles, and the curriculum for excellence is supposed to improve things in that regard.

We have talked a little bit about the evidence that the Education and Skills Committee has already received. Jenny Gilruth mentioned that, on Monday, we held focus groups with teachers and parents in Dunfermline. Mr Allan and I participated in a striking focus group with around 10 teachers. It was clear that they did not feel that they were in the lead with regard to what was happening in their schools. Some of them talked about their subjects being pushed out of the curriculum. Part of that was because of the creation of more options for the young people in their schools, but it was also because of the narrowing of the number of choices that pupils could make. They spoke particularly vociferously about the consequence that has come about because of the three-year senior phase, which is more multilevel teaching.

Earlier today, in education questions, the Deputy First Minister said that, in his day at school, there was multilevel teaching. That is absolutely true. However, I say to him that there is a big difference between general and credit classes being taught together, with the chance of young people moving between the two levels, and what is happening in schools now. In many instances, according to those teachers, that involves four-level teaching, with national 4, national 5, higher and advanced higher all being taught at the same time in the same classroom, in a class of up to 30 pupils. That is a different animal altogether.

John Swinney: Mr Gray has generously reduced my age significantly, because I was not in the system when general and credit were going through; I predate that time.

We must also reflect the point that Mr Dornan made about the range of options that are now available for collaboration between schools to deliver a broader range of advanced higher opportunities for young people, where the number of young people in individual schools simply cannot justify the creation of a specific course in an individual school. However, the curriculum offer is still there for young people.

Iain Gray: As I said, that was the teachers' experience of what is happening in their schools. I do not want to lose time for that intervention.

The biggest difference that the teachers described was in the curricular structure in their schools, which was about far more than just the fact that some schools offer six, some seven and some eight subjects in S4. The truth is that a number of those schools are still working to a two, two, two model. Most of them said that pupils made their course choices at the end of S2, not at the end of S3. One described their curricular model as two plus one, two plus one.

It was clear that those teachers did not feel that they had had any part in the design of those structures, which were management led and involved decisions that—in their view—constantly changed. That did not leave them feeling empowered, but rather embattled. They did not feel any more empowered than the teachers in Dundee who Jenny Marra spoke about, where the curricular structure is imposed across the local authority from the centre.

I accept that that evidence was from a small group, but it was powerful and it reflects other evidence that the committee has heard. Earlier today, during portfolio questions on education and skills, the Deputy First Minister tried—I think—to characterise concern about these issues as “moral panic”. This afternoon, he has certainly characterised it as “political opportunism.” It is not. Hearing these stories from our schools creates a moral and political imperative—not a panic, but an imperative—for us to listen and respond, and to do that in a serious way. That is all that the motion and amendment ask this evening, and that is why they should be supported.

16:42

John Swinney: On the point that Iain Gray made latterly, my reference to “moral panic” was a quotation from Professor Mark Priestley—an informed commentator who has been cited extensively in the debate and on this question. I cited Professor Priestley because I felt that it would help us to conclude that we need to consider the issue seriously.

I have said that I am perfectly willing to consider the issue. However, I do not think that we can do it justice in an afternoon debate—especially not when the Education and Skills Committee is taking evidence taking on the subject which, as we have heard in speeches today, covers disputed territory about the right way to proceed. I will talk about a number of different areas of disputed evidence in the course of my summing-up speech.

Liz Smith: Notwithstanding that, will the cabinet secretary acknowledge that parliamentarians are

on record raising serious concerns in the chamber about this very issue in 2008, 2013, 2017 and 2018?

John Swinney: I know that there was broad political support for the design of curriculum for excellence.

We were also reminded by Gordon MacDonald, who read from a BBC report from 2013, of the curriculum model that is being challenged today, which is a combination of particular subjects and a broader general education. As I have consciously stressed to Parliament, that model has been deeper and more extensive, and has been delivering more breadth to young people in Scotland, as was envisaged at the time of the creation of curriculum for excellence. It is therefore not a particularly surprising point.

I will touch on a few issues that have emerged in the debate. The first is the question about whether there should be prescription from the centre or local discretion. I think that colleagues know that I am very much on the side of local discretion. I found it odd that Graham Simpson talked through and almost attacked the notion of local distinctions among the schools of South Lanarkshire. He seemed to criticise such distinctions' existence.

Oliver Mundell: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

John Swinney: Allow me to finish my point.

If we are to have a system that empowers schools—that is very much what I want, and it is what I thought the Conservatives wanted—we must be prepared to tolerate distinctions and differences among individual schools. Otherwise, we will end up not quite with the model that Mr Gray talked about in his Mozambique example, but edging towards that, instead of having a system of school empowerment and teacher agency. I want to ensure that that is at the heart of our reforms.

Oliver Mundell: Does the cabinet secretary recognise that there are differences between schools because people have made choices, and that there is a pattern in which it looks like there are differences between schools that are based on parental income and disadvantage? Is that not worrying?

John Swinney: That is worrying, and my amendment seeks to acknowledge that point. That is part of the evidence that I am concerned about; I want to explore that, and I am doing so. As a Parliament, we need a considered debate about the issues, and we need to decide where we are sitting. That is why I want to wait for the Education and Skills Committee to report. We have to decide

how far we are along the line towards prescription or local discretion.

The accusation has been made that the curriculum has been narrowed. That is not the case by design, because we have seen the creation of a broad general education that covers a more extensive part of the school experience for young people, and in which they have the opportunity to study subjects across eight curricular areas to a deeper level for a longer period than they could have previously. That will create timetabling challenges for schools with the expansion of opportunities through school and college partnerships, the developing the young workforce agenda—which every member in the chamber supports—and the national progression awards. When I go to schools, they explain to me that some of the initiatives are creating much better destinations for young people who are from backgrounds of deprivation than the range of opportunities in the traditional subjects would ever provide.

Finlay Carson: Pupils and parents in Galloway and West Dumfries would like to know quite simply whether a reduction in pupil subject choice in S4 increases or decreases choice in S5 and S6, choice in further education and, ultimately, choice in pupils' preferred career pathways.

John Swinney: I do not think that it affects those things one bit, because we are talking about a three-year senior phase in which young people have the opportunity to select a number of subjects to ensure that they have good and strong leaver qualifications.

The ultimate test is what our young people leave our education system with. On every measure, we have reason to be confident about what our education system is achieving. We have seen an increase in the number of highers—I was criticised earlier for talking about that increase, but it is noteworthy—and an increase in vocational qualifications. The number of school leavers who have attained vocational qualifications at SCQF level 5 and above has increased from 7.3 to 14.8 per cent. We have also seen a significant increase in the number of young people who are choosing to stay on longer at school to ensure that they have opportunities to take part in deeper learning.

In the debate, we must recognise that there are significant issues on which we have to decide. Do we want to leave it to educationists to decide on those issues and questions at local level? Is that where the priority should lie? Should educationists take those decisions, or is Parliament suddenly going to start to prescribe? We need to be clear about that. In my view, we should empower our schools to enable informed decisions to be taken. I do not understand what the rationale would be for us to prescribe.

We have to recognise that there was, in the foundation of curriculum for excellence, a change to how the education system operates and how it is perceived.

The comments that Gordon MacDonald and John Mason made reflect the fact that we need to educate and inform the wider community about the outcomes that are achieved in our education system. I am committed to engaging with people on that issue, and we will do so when we receive the information from the Education and Skills Committee.

The Government will engage actively to ensure that our education system meets the needs of young people and delivers on their expectations and those of their families.

16:50

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

This debate on the important subject of subject choice has been helpful, and I am grateful to all the members from across the chamber who have contributed to it.

As a number of members mentioned, subject choice is an issue that has been highlighted in recent weeks, both in last week's Reform Scotland report entitled "National 4 and 5s: The accidental attainment gap", and in evidence to the Parliament's Education and Skills Committee.

The first point to make is that it is absolutely clear from the evidence that there is a problem that we need to address. We have heard that from Professor Jim Scott of the University of Dundee; from Keir Bloomer, who is one of the authors of curriculum for excellence; from Marina Shapira of the University of Stirling; from Alan Britton of the University of Glasgow; from the Royal Society of Edinburgh; from the parents organisation, Connect; from the Royal Scottish Geographical Society; from the Scottish Association of Geography Teachers; and from one in three schools that responded to the Education and Skills Committee's survey. Therefore, I do not think that it is credible simply to dismiss all that evidence and say that there is no problem.

What was disappointing about much in SNP members' speeches was that they seemed to deny that there is any problem that needs to be addressed. That prompted a well-deserved scolding of the cabinet secretary by Johann Lamont. She was right to do that, because if we look at the evidence we can see that there is a problem, and we should be debating it.

The Reform Scotland report told us that although most state schools previously allowed pupils to take seven or eight standard grades, based on their individual ability, the majority of

schools now offer only six subjects in S4. In a few schools, the figure is as low as five. As Ross Greer said very fairly, what is most concerning about the statistics is that the lack of choice impacts most on pupils who are from disadvantaged backgrounds. In the most deprived areas, just one in 10 schools offers 12 advanced highers or more, whereas in the most affluent areas seven in 10 schools offer that range of subjects. Oliver Mundell talked about the contrast between schools in urban areas and those in more rural and remote communities.

Why does that matter? There are a number of consequences of the reduction in subject choice. It means that pupils are not able to access subjects that they want to study. A nationwide survey that was presented to this morning's Education and Skills Committee meeting reveals that 56 per cent of youngsters in Scottish schools were denied the opportunity to study their chosen subjects from national 4 level onwards. The key subjects that were being denied were modern studies, French, history, human biology and politics.

I have certainly had experience—as others will have had—of being contacted by parents in my region who are very concerned that their youngsters cannot access the courses that they want to study. That does not just knock the confidence of the pupils involved; it also means that they are unlikely to fulfil their potential, which is a point that was made very powerfully by Graham Simpson.

One respondent to the survey said:

"I wasn't allowed to take modern studies and another social subject so I had to take art instead, which I hated."

Another respondent said:

"I was forced to take Spanish (a course I have no interest in) and miss a class I really enjoy."

The evidence tells us that pupils are being let down by the current approach.

There are also significant falls in the number of courses that might have the greatest economic impact. The research shows that, between 2013 and 2018, there was an overall decline of some 3,500 entrants at national 4 and national 5 levels in the sciences, a decline of about 5,000 in social sciences and an incredible decline of about 17,000 in languages. I have sat through many debates in the chamber on the economy and on exporting—indeed, the First Minister launched a new initiative on exporting this morning. In every one of those debates, we talked about the importance of exporting and the need for pupils in our schools to learn modern languages in order to grow that export potential. What do we see? There has been a drop of 17,000 in the number of pupils who study modern languages, which is damaging our country's future economic potential.

What we are seeing is a wide variation across Scotland—a postcode lottery, as Reform Scotland has put it. Some local authorities, for example East Renfrewshire Council, allow children to sit eight or more exams, but in other areas, including East Dunbartonshire and Dumfries and Galloway, we have seen a decline, even over the past three years, in the number of courses that are offered, with most schools offering only six.

We are also seeing the issue that was identified by Alison Harris—multilevel teaching, with teachers having to teach different year groups or levels at the same time. In his evidence to the Education and Skills Committee, William Hardie of the Royal Society of Edinburgh stated that that is a particular problem when it comes to science. Professor Scott, too, said that that “should be a no-no” in the sciences.

So, what has gone wrong? Keir Bloomer puts the blame firmly on the interpretation of guidance on curriculum for excellence. He says:

“One of the purposes of CFE was to broaden pupils’ education, but instead the way in which it is being implemented is narrowing it significantly.

There is ample opportunity for pupils to combine practical and academic options when they are enabled to sit nine, eight, or even seven exams, but when we narrow it down to six or five there is very little room for manoeuvre.

Someone attending a school which allows only a low number of exams to be sat and who leaves after fourth year will find themselves with fewer qualifications than other leavers; those going on to study Highers have a smaller pool of subjects from which to choose.”

That, he concluded, is

“the unintended consequence of ill-conceived advice”,

and he stated bluntly that it

“is the hallmark of poor management.”

That answers the point that the cabinet secretary made earlier in the debate and again more recently. Of course schools should have autonomy, but the problem is that at the moment they are struggling with interpreting the curriculum as well as the information that is being passed down to them, which is not sufficiently clear. Jenny Marra made the important point that because it is often councils that determine the number of subjects, the schools themselves have no autonomy. I am sure that the cabinet secretary will agree that that is unsatisfactory.

John Swinney: Will Murdo Fraser share with Parliament which areas of curricular guidance should be improved to assist schools in delivering the subject choice that he is talking about?

Murdo Fraser: That is precisely why we are calling for the mid-term review of curriculum for excellence to be brought forward. That would allow us to study what needs to be improved, in

particular. That is precisely what Keir Hardie has been calling for—

John Swinney: Not Keir Hardie. [*Laughter.*]

Murdo Fraser: Yes, Keir Hardie is somebody else altogether. I meant Keir Bloomer.

Keir Bloomer’s concerns were echoed by William Hardie of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in evidence to the Education and Skills Committee last week. He referred to Education Scotland’s new guidance in 2016 on how the broad general education and senior phases knit together, and stated:

“even the new guidance is unclear about the extent to which learning in the broad general education phase can prepare young learners for progression to national qualifications.”—[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee, 24 April 2019; c 2.*]

When one of the architects of curriculum for excellence says that there is a problem with how it is being interpreted, and when we see clear problems with the guidance that is being issued, it is time that the Scottish Government paid attention. After all, this matters: it matters to parents, it matters to pupils and it matters to our economy.

In her submission to the committee, one parent, Alys Rodwell, said that she was concerned about the knock-on effect on the success and employability of young people in the country for years to come. She said:

“Unless there are changes the standing of the Scottish Education System will continue to fall in comparison with the rest of the world.”

Professor Jim Scott put it bluntly when he said:

“We are in danger of a whole generation going past who have not had a good experience in education.”

So what needs to be done? It is time that the Scottish Government took the advice of experts and carried out the delayed mid-session review of curriculum for excellence, as Professor Scott has recommended. Quite simply, what we have at the moment is not fit for purpose, and if we continue with it, too many of our young people will lose out. Indeed, that is precisely the point that is covered by Iain Gray’s amendment, which calls for the evaluation to be brought forward. I am glad that the Scottish Government has accepted that point and will support that amendment—as we will—because that is precisely what we need to do.

We do not accept the claim that we heard from Mr Swinney at the start of the debate that we should not be debating the issue now and that it should be punted into the long grass. It is not a new issue—we have been talking about it for years. If Parliament cannot debate issues that matter to parents, pupils and teachers across Scotland, what is it for? What is the point of it? It

was unwise of Mr Swinney to say at the start of the debate that it is about political opportunism, although he used a more emollient term towards the end. Parliament needs to highlight the real concerns that people have about education, which is precisely what we have been doing this afternoon.

In the debate, all the Opposition parties have come together to raise concerns from different political perspectives on the route that we are going down. I sincerely hope that if, at decision time, the motion is agreed to with the Labour amendment, the Scottish Government will listen to Parliament. I hope that the Government will stop burying its head in the sand and start agreeing to take action, because that is what Scotland's pupils deserve.

Business Motions

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S5M-17114, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 7 May 2019

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Age of Criminal Responsibility (Scotland) Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 8 May 2019

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Social Security and Older People;
Finance, Economy and Fair Work

followed by Scottish Labour Party Business

followed by Stage 3 Debate: Health and Care
(Staffing) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

6.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 9 May 2019

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Ministerial Statement: The Scottish
Government's Response to the Sturrock
Review

followed by Portfolio Questions:
Environment, Climate Change and Land
Reform

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: Vulnerable
Witnesses (Criminal Evidence)
(Scotland) Bill

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm Decision Time
Tuesday 14 May 2019

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 15 May 2019

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
Rural Economy; Transport,
Infrastructure and Connectivity

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 16 May 2019

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions:
Justice and the Law Officers

followed by Scottish Government Business

5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, in relation to any debate on a business motion setting out a business programme taken on Wednesday 8 May 2019, the second sentence of rule 8.11.3 is suspended and replaced with "Any Member may speak on the motion at the discretion of the Presiding Officer",

(c) that, in relation to First Minister's Questions on Thursday 9 May 2019, in rule 13.6.2, insert at end "and may provide an opportunity for Party Leaders or their representatives to question the First Minister", and

(d) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 6 May 2019, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S5M-17115, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of

the Parliamentary Bureau, on a stage 2 timetable for a bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Transport (Scotland) Bill at stage 2 be completed by 28 June 2019.—[*Graeme Dey*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S5M-17116, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Justice of the Peace Courts (Sheriffdom of South Strathclyde, Dumfries and Galloway) etc. Amendment Order 2019 [draft] be approved.—[*Graeme Dey*]

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): We come to decision time. I point out that, if the amendment in the name of John Swinney is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Iain Gray will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S5M-17091.4, in the name of John Swinney, which seeks to amend motion S5M-17091, in the name of Liz Smith, on subject choice, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 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)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Freeman, Jeane (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 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)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (Ind)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)

McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (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)

Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 62, Against 63, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S5M-17091.2, in the name of Iain Gray, which seeks to amend motion S5M-17091, in the name of Liz Smith, on subject choice, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S5M-17091, in the name of Liz Smith, on subject choice, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Ballantyne, Michelle (South Scotland) (Con)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Bowman, Bill (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Cameron, Donald (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Peter (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Corry, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harris, Alison (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)

Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lindhurst, Gordon (Lothian) (Con)
 Lockhart, Dean (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Mason, Tom (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (Ind)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (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)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Elaine (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Tomkins, Adam (Glasgow) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wightman, Andy (Lothian) (Green)

Abstentions

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 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)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Freeman, Jeane (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 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)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ross, Gail (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 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 64, Against 0, Abstentions 61.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament believes that Scottish education should be based on the principles of excellence and equity and that all young people, whatever their background, should be afforded the best possible educational experience at all levels of the curriculum; further believes that, while these principles are enshrined in the policy aims of the curriculum for excellence, the delivery of the new curriculum structure has exposed some fundamental failings with regard to subject choice, including the inequity that exists between schools in more affluent areas and those in more deprived communities; calls on the Scottish Government to recognise the serious concerns, which have been expressed by teachers, parents, young people and academics and take urgent action to address these failings in the delivery of the curriculum for excellence; believes that such action should include an evaluation of how the curriculum for excellence is actually being implemented in schools, as recommended by the OECD in its 2015 report, *Improving Schools in Scotland*, and considers that, although the senior phase was outwith the remit of this report, how the senior phase operates within the curriculum for excellence should be a priority for review.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S5M-17116, in the name of Graeme Dey, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Justice of the Peace Courts (Sheriffdom of South Strathclyde, Dumfries and Galloway) etc. Amendment Order 2019 [draft] be approved.

Nursery Funding (Deferred Entry to Primary School)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The final item of business today is a members' business debate on motion S5M-15976, in the name of Fulton MacGregor, on the give them time campaign. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the aims of the campaign, Give Them Time, which has been set up by parents in Coatbridge and Chryston and across Scotland to share their experiences of applying for a further year of nursery funding for their child to defer starting P1; understands that the campaign's national survey found that only 19% of parents knew about the legal right to defer children born between September and December, compared with 80% knowing that children born in January and February can be; notes the view that this demonstrates a need for further awareness raising; acknowledges the reported inconsistencies experienced by parents who wish to defer their children in terms of local authority responses and provision of nursery funding; notes that deferment should be the decision of the parent or legal guardian, and notes the call for local authorities to implement the law in Scotland as it stands and for them to support all parents who choose to defer their four-year-olds.

17:06

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I thank my fellow members across all parties who signed the motion. I also thank the give them time campaign, some of whose supporters are in the gallery, for their tenacity in highlighting the issue of deferment for children who are four at the start of the school year and for their hard work and determination to ensure that those who choose to defer their four-year-olds are given the support that they deserve and should be entitled to. Any member across the chamber who is on Twitter will have had at least some contact with the campaign team.

I pay particular tribute to the campaigners from my constituency, Coatbridge and Chryston, who first raised the issue with me and invited me to the campaign launch event in Edinburgh at the end of last year. I express the campaign's thanks to Maree Todd, who facilitated a meeting late last year following the launch, and to John Swinney for his responses to my questions in the chamber a month or so ago. Those interventions are very much appreciated by those in the gallery and further afield, and are regarded as crucial contributions in moving the debate to where we are now.

Give them time is not a political organisation, nor is it affiliated to any political party. The campaign has two simple principles and objectives. The first, as stated in my motion, is

this: deferment of a four-year-old child should be the decision of the parent or legal guardian. It is that simple. That is the law in Scotland under the Education (Scotland) Act 1980. It should be noted that, while individual members of the campaign have their own views, give them time is not directly involved in debates about the age at which a child should start school or what sort of early years approach should be taken, although I have had many positive conversations about the Government's play-based approach. In its essence, the campaign is much more straightforward than that: a parent should decide whether their four-year-old should start school. There is no argument made by the campaign that there should be deferment for all four-year-olds as standard; indeed, far from it. There is a general consensus that a majority will continue to send their children when they are four, if eligible to do so.

Why is this an issue, if it is already law? Simply put, it seems that the vast majority of people in Scotland do not know that it is the law. A national survey carried out by give them time showed that, on average, 19 per cent of parents knew about the legal right to defer September to December-born children, compared to the more than 80 per cent who knew that January and February-born children can be deferred. Local authorities are clearly not highlighting that for children born before January, and there are examples even of staff who do not know the law on the right to defer.

I admit that I fell into that category. Until I met members of the campaign, I was not aware that children born between September and December could be deferred. I am in the position in which it will not impact on me anyway, as my children will be five and a half years old and five years and three months old respectively when they start school. However, it shows that there is a real need to highlight the issue more broadly. I hope that the Government, local authorities and MSPs who are here can work together to do that. That is the first aim of the campaign.

I will move on to the second aim and principle of the give them time campaign. We have established that, at present, if you decide to defer entry for a child with a January or February birthday, they will automatically be entitled to an additional year of funded pre-school education, which takes so much pressure off parents at what is a crucial time.

Unfortunately, for those children who are born between late August and December, the approach across local authorities to providing another funded year is not consistent. If parents choose to defer entry for a child with a birthday in that period, they will not automatically be entitled to another year of funded pre-school education. Parents can

apply to their local authority for an additional year, but the place will be offered only at its discretion. That is ultimately holding many parents to ransom.

Families are often put through rigid, time-consuming and stressful processes that include collating information from various professionals such as the nursery, speech and language therapists, social workers, and many others, which uses up valuable time, resource and expense, only for a panel to then refuse the deferral request and for an appeal process to start.

A council panel rejecting the recommendations of those who are often its own professionals would seem to be somewhat ironic, but it does happen. Equality issues are also likely to be at the core of the appeal process, with more affluent families being able to put resources into challenging decisions, and ultimately getting more favourable outcomes on a more regular basis. That is not consistent or fair, and I am aware that my colleague Rona Mackay will pick up on some of those points in her contribution.

There are wide variations in how local authorities approach the additional year of funding. For instance, Falkirk Council is held up as an example of good practice. However, inconsistency on a matter of such importance as our children's start to their formal education is not acceptable. It is totally against the very idea of getting it right for every child and of child-centred practice to even threaten to take a child out of provision in which their parents feel that they are safe and thriving—never mind carry out that threat.

It is those very experiences that led to the formation of the campaign. Parents and carers with similar experiences used the power of social media and the internet to come together and seek change. Improved consistency across the country is what we need and that is the second principle and aim of the campaign.

How might we go about achieving that? I encourage every MSP in the chamber to write to their local authority education department and ask that its policy be changed to one that ensures that all children whose parents choose to legally defer are given continued, funded nursery provision for that year. Considering the amount of investment and time that is going into the 1140 hours of free childcare and the relatively limited uptake that is predicted for deferment of late August to December-born children—around 1100 children it is anticipated—that should be a very achievable goal. Indeed, if we use data from the 2017-18 local government benchmarking framework, there may actually be a small saving for councils.

Helpfully, the give them time campaign will write to MSPs over the coming days with a template letter that members can use if they so wish. It will

include information on encouraging councils to raise awareness of the right to defer and on changing the policy on funded nursery care.

However, it may be that councils are reluctant to change policy. Failing their willingness, I suggest that members write to their council leaders or group leaders, as appropriate, and ask them to introduce a motion to the full council.

I am pleased to say that in North Lanarkshire Council, SNP Councillor Allan Stubbs has made such a proposal, and I have been informed that a Fife councillor has done likewise. Those proposals, like the motion, are very much about a cross-party and non-party-political issue, and I would be surprised if any councillor of any persuasion would not back such a motion were it in front of them.

I also encourage the Government to raise awareness of the issue and further discuss with COSLA how consistency can be promoted Scotland-wide. I welcome COSLA's response and briefing for the debate.

Finally, by having the debate, by raising awareness of the legal right to defer when a child is four, and by strongly encouraging councils to adopt a more child-centred approach to the issue through funded nursery placement that is in line with the Scottish Government's progressive policies, we can make the necessary changes to ensure that the give them time campaign is a success and that no child in Scotland will ever be denied deferral if their parent or guardian has decided that it is the best thing for them. *[Applause.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I ask those in the public gallery to desist from clapping—or from booing, if they do not like what they hear.

We move to the open debate. I ask members to keep their speeches to four minutes, please.

17:15

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I commend Fulton MacGregor for securing support to bring this important issue to the chamber for debate, and I join him in thanking the campaigners and congratulating them on the clear success that they have had in moving it up the political agenda. I also pay tribute to them for the broad consensus that they have built and for helping us, as politicians, to understand what is going on in our areas and what the legal position is.

Like Fulton MacGregor and, I suspect, many other members, I was surprised to find out about the huge variation that exists across the country. This is the third debate that I have taken part in in two days in which variation between local authorities with regard to education has come up.

That variation is hard to justify, because parents have the same legal rights regardless of where in Scotland they live. When it comes to education, the legal expectations are the same for all young people. It is expected that decisions will be taken with the child's best interests at heart, rather than on the basis of arbitrary policies. It is worrying that, in many local authorities, there seems to be a lack of understanding of what the law is and of what best practice looks like. It is also worrying that parents do not understand their rights. The fact that only 20 per cent of parents knew about their legal right to defer their child starting school should give us all cause for concern.

I was struck by a number of the quotes from parents in the briefing that was provided for the debate, which show that they were given no guidance and that they found the process bewildering. In almost all cases, parents are the leading experts on the education of their children and, as such, they should have had their rights respected and their case listened to, but that did not happen. They received no formal guidance or information and there was no communication with them. They felt that the decisions that were made were predetermined, despite their being made to jump through a number of hoops, which does not sound good at all. That is backed up by the views of many nursery teachers and people who work in early years.

The information that has come forward is surprising when we consider that many of the parents who are most affected by the issue are reluctant to cause a fuss—they would rather try to navigate their way through the system. They do not always want to speak out about the poor experience that they have had, because they are concerned that they might lose their funded entitlement.

As Fulton MacGregor has said, we must think about the impact that failure to defer has on the education of the young people concerned. I know that the minister has previously spoken out on the issue. If we do not get things right for children at the start of school and do not make sure that they are ready and equipped to go into the slightly more formal educational setting of primary 1, we will set them up for a difficult educational experience right the way through primary school and sometimes into secondary school, which will make things more difficult for them later in life.

Some of the issues that we are discussing are difficult to fix, and local authorities do not always jump just because members of the Scottish Parliament write them a letter, but I believe that there is a duty on all of us to push the issue and to make sure that parents and local authorities work together in the best interests of the child.

17:19

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I am grateful to my colleague Fulton MacGregor for bringing the debate to the chamber and I congratulate him on enabling this important issue to be discussed.

When a child starts school, it is one of the most important milestones in their lives and those of their parents. Being sure that the time is right for that child is a hugely important decision that is never taken lightly. We know that children develop at different rates and that the early years are the most formative of their lives. That is why deciding on the right time for a child to start school is vital.

The concerns of the give them time grass-roots campaign group are transparency, awareness and—I would add—fairness. As Fulton MacGregor said, only 19 per cent of parents know about the legal right to defer the school start date of children who were born between September and December, but 80 per cent know that the school start date of children who were born in January and February can be deferred.

My son was born in December—albeit 23 years ago—and he went to school at the age of four and a half. I had no idea that he could have waited until he was five. No information was communicated, so I did not think about it. I am not sure whether the same rules applied then, but that is of no consequence. This is 2019 and parents should have all the important information available to them at such a crucial time.

On local authorities' websites, the explanation of the process is, in the main, woefully inadequate. Some staff who advise parents on deferral do not even know about the legal right to defer the school start date of a child who was born between mid-August and December. That is not to blame the staff, as it is about the leadership of the council and appropriate training. It is incumbent on council officers to ensure that policy and legal information is easily available and easy to understand on their authorities' websites.

My local authority, East Dunbartonshire Council, says that people have the right to apply for a deferral for children who were born between September and December, but it does not guarantee funding—only that the request will be considered by the early years community assessment team. That creates much uncertainty and anxiety for parents, and I intend to write to ask the council to look again at that policy.

That brings me on to an important point regarding equity and fairness. Local authorities' processes for dealing with funding requests for the extra months of nursery vary widely and it appears to be another postcode lottery. Some authorities are much more likely than others to fund a further

year of nursery for a child who was born between mid-August and December. Furthermore, when a further year's nursery funding request has been rejected, some councils allow parents to finance a child to remain in a local authority nursery, but others do not. That is despite the fact that, if the nursery is not at full capacity, no extra cost to the authority should be incurred. That is where the question of equity arises. If an authority refuses to fund parents for the extra months, parents who can afford to pay will, more often than not, do that, but parents who cannot afford it have no choice. That does nothing to narrow the attainment gap that is the Scottish Government's—and I believe everyone's—priority.

Of course, as Fulton MacGregor stated, the process itself can be flawed. Decisions are often made by panels that consist of people who do not know the child involved, and the opinions and professional judgment of the people who know the child best, such as the early years staff and, of course, the parents, are often given little weight. The solution is that all children whose school start dates are deferred should have a further year of nursery automatically funded. That would level the playing field. As Fulton MacGregor said, we are transforming our level of early years care with record amounts of funding, so that should be achievable across the board in Scotland.

The Scottish Government believes in getting it right for every child. Let us all work to encourage local authorities to do the same.

17:23

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in the debate and I congratulate Fulton MacGregor on securing time for it. The motion is widely supported by members across the chamber, and I hope that the debate provides insight and maybe even some solutions to the situation that many parents face.

We have legislation in Scotland that is clear that a child does not have to start school until they are aged five. However, we also have the practice of children starting school at age four if their birthday is between school commencement and December. Parents whose child is four in January or February have the choice to defer their child's entry. Through the give them time campaign, we hear that the policy is being applied differently by different local authorities and that some parents whose requests are accepted are not being provided with a nursery place for an additional year.

There are a number of issues. I exaggerated the word "defer", but the legislation says that a child does not need to register with a school prior to their fifth birthday, so why is their entry seen as

delayed when it follows the legislation? I also exaggerated the word "additional" when talking about an additional year at nursery, but the reality is that children who start school at four typically have the least time at nursery, because they start in the January that follows their third birthday. That means that they have one and a half years at nursery rather than two, so they are the youngest in the school year but have less pre-school education.

A parent could decide that they want to defer, having gone through what some describe as a bureaucratic and difficult assessment, only for the education authority to decide that it cannot support deferral. Although, legally, that child can still wait a year before starting school, the education authority does not need to provide what it sees as an additional year of nursery provision.

We should not forget that a child who starts school at the age of four will start high school at 11, when they will be almost a whole year younger than others at a challenging time in their education as they enter a period of exams, increased stress and adolescence. The debate about the high school starting age is as relevant as the debate about the primary school starting age.

I cannot help but feel that some of the tensions could be resolved if there was clearer information for parents—although I note that COSLA has briefed us that it has agreed to a consistent approach—and, importantly, if there was discussion at an earlier stage. When a child turns three and a parent is offered a January nursery place, there could be an initial discussion with the parents about options. Perhaps parents could be offered the opportunity to delay the start of nursery for a younger child until the August intake, so that they could receive two full years of nursery, as the majority of children do, and start school at the age of five.

A few years ago, we had the campaign for a January intake for three-year-olds, but that was principally because those children got only a year of nursery, given that they were admitted to school at the age of four. Parents could be given an informed choice as to whether to accept a January intake if it meant that their child would start school at four. There would obviously need to be a bit of flexibility, as a child's development is not entirely predictable, but both parties would be more informed.

I recognise that this is not an aim of the give them time campaign, but there is a parallel discussion about the right age to start school. We have one of the lowest starting ages for formal education in Europe, and I am convinced that the age of four is too young. Many parents accept the situation because our culture puts that expectation on young children; because there is a lack of

affordable childcare for parents and school can make working easier; because nursery does not meet the needs of all children; or because parents do not know that they have the right to defer.

There is a lot of evidence that children benefit from longer in a play-based setting where they learn important social and educational skills outside a formal classroom. Much is made of primary 1 being play based, but the evidence to support that is questionable—and that is before we talk about P1 testing.

I am always a supporter of a fairer funding deal for local authorities, but the issue does not appear to be governed by funding. In many cases, there is available space in a local nursery to enable nursery provision to continue. Parents should not have to self-finance, which excludes lower-income families from taking the decision to defer.

I support the provision of better information and more meaningful discussion for all involved in the decision. I support the aims of the give them time campaign and hope that the issues can be resolved.

17:27

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I thank Fulton MacGregor and the excellent give them time campaign, whose work has ensured that a fully transparent, consistent approach that puts the child at the centre of decisions to defer entry to primary school is being debated in the chamber this evening. I am wholly supportive of the campaign and its aims.

The campaign is necessary because too many families have experienced and are experiencing needlessly difficult and stressful situations that, despite the best efforts of all involved, can be very unsettling for parents and children. A child starting primary school should be a really exciting experience that everyone in the household looks forward to, but some of that excitement can be lost when there is a concern and a feeling that the child is being asked to attend school before they are ready.

The excellent briefing that we received from the give them time campaign noted that only 19 per cent of parents know about the legal right to defer children who were born between mid-August and December. Why is that the case? I was also astonished to learn that not all staff who work in the area are aware of that legal right. It just shows what happens when we do not know our rights. I give all credit to the campaign, because it has already succeeded in raising awareness of the legal right to defer. More people will become aware of it, and that is important progress, because if we do not know what our rights are, we cannot act on them.

Scottish Green Party policy is that children should start school at six, but I realise that we are not debating that this evening.

I appreciate that the primary 1 experience has changed to a play-based one, but we should remember that it still takes place in the school setting, where there are specific requirements and timings, the day is a certain length and the rules apply to everyone in the building. In Scotland, not all children of what is currently considered to be school age are ready for that experience, as the people who look after them closely will know. Therefore, let us do all that we can to ensure that people know that they have the right to defer school starting dates for children who are born between mid-August and December.

We know, too, that some local authorities are more likely than others to fund a further year of nursery for a child who was born between those dates. Across the country, processes for dealing with such funding requests vary. We have learned—Rona Mackay highlighted the point—that when a further year's nursery funding request has been rejected, some councils allow parents to finance their child remaining in a local authority nursery, while others do not. Of course, some parents can afford to fund such an option, while others cannot. Such a situation is simply inequitable and, frankly, we cannot have it.

Members will know that I whole-heartedly support greater devolution of powers to local authorities, but when it comes to the wellbeing and education of our youngest citizens we must ensure that the very best practice is in place, is accepted and is available to all our children. The best practice is that all parents and carers know about the legal right to defer children's school starting dates, and that all children whose starts are deferred automatically have a year of nursery funding. Implementing such practice must surely mean that we would be getting it right for every child.

Through the campaign's briefing to members, we have heard about local authorities having issued generic letters of refusal. Such an approach does not consider individual cases; a template response, which consists of a uniform, cut-and-paste rejection, simply is not good enough.

I am running out of time, Presiding Officer, so I conclude by thanking the give them time campaign for its briefing. The point cannot be put better than the campaign does when it says:

"We want our children to thrive—not just cope."

17:31

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): I congratulate Fulton MacGregor on securing the debate and on doing so much to help the give them time campaign. However, the greatest congratulations must go the campaign itself, which, in a short time, has created very effective mobilisation. Like other members, I was not aware of the issue until it was brought to my attention by my constituents who had been caught up in decisions that had been made by my local council—with which I disagree. Some of those constituents are in the public gallery this evening.

The campaign has been a very effective user of social media and of direct communication with members of the Scottish Parliament. It has also produced a very clear briefing for the debate, so it has already done a great deal of good work.

Other members have described in some detail the key issues on deferral of children's entry to school: the postcode lottery of decision making that exists and—prior to that—authorities' very poor communication with parents and the low level of understanding that parents have of the possibility of deferral. However, there is a danger that we overcomplicate the picture. The core issue is that a national policy contradiction exists. It is right that we should press our councils to be more accepting of parents who defer their children's entry to school. However, there exist two national policies that seem to contradict each other. One is that parents have a legal right to defer their child's entry to school if the child is aged four. The other is that three and four-year-olds have a legal right to receive funded hours of early years education in nurseries. We all support those two policies. However, it makes no sense that a family's exercise of one legal right takes away the other—that is not logical.

Mr MacGregor mentioned the replies that he and I received from John Swinney when we asked questions of him about the issue. If I am honest, I felt that the reply that I received was quite unsatisfactory, because Mr Swinney said that such decisions must be based on what is best for the child. He made it clear that what he meant by that is what is considered best for the child by professionals and, I guess, one of the panels of councillors that has been mentioned. However, the right to defer is an absolute right for parents—it is their decision.

Afterwards, I thought about the logic of Mr Swinney's position. If he was saying that only the panel and the professionals can decide what is best for the child when it comes to funding for nursery, that is an argument for saying that they should also be able to decide on deferral. I do not think that that is what he was suggesting, as I think that he wants parents to be able to defer.

The only logical position and solution is to change the law and to protect the right to defer and the right to funded hours at nursery. The issue of communication about the right to defer would still be there, but the issue about the postcode lottery and the process that families have been put through would disappear.

A legislative vehicle to do that should be coming up, because I think that we will have to legislate for the 1,140 hours entitlement. That would be a perfect opportunity to get us out of this illogical position and to give parents the right not just to defer but to have their funded hours at nursery. If the minister could tell us tonight that she will do that, that would be a tremendous success.

17:36

Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I, too, thank Fulton MacGregor for lodging his motion and securing time to debate this important subject.

As Alison Johnstone said, this stage in a child's life can be one of the most stressful for parents and carers, even if not for the child, and making the right decision is not always obvious or easy. Parents can receive conflicting information and views on what is best for their child, but what is best for the child should be paramount and all aspects of the child's development should be taken into account. As Rona Mackay said, that is absolutely what getting it right for every child is about and those principles must be adhered to by all local authorities.

The debate is about parents who want to defer their child's entry into P1. My case was not yesterday, and it was the other way round. There are only 17 and a half months between my son and my daughter, who has a February birthday. The primary school was adamant that her entry should be deferred for a year, not because they had any evidence that Kirsty would not cope but because they had had a boy in the same situation in the previous intake who definitely had not coped. They did not want to repeat that experience, notwithstanding that girls at that age tend to grow up more quickly than boys. Kirsty had been going to a nursery on the days when I had council business and, more important, had been looking over her brother's shoulder at the reading and writing that he had been doing. Eventually, with the nursery staff's supporting comments, Kirsty was allowed to start school and, at the first parents' evening, the school was gracious enough to admit that I had been right.

It was always in my mind that, at some later stage, Kirsty might struggle and have to repeat a year, which would also have had its difficulties. However, on that I was the one who was wrong.

She did not need another year and is now the proud owner of a first-class honours degree in business management and French from the University of Glasgow and is working in Paris. I use that example to illustrate that there is not one size that fits all; GIRFEC must apply to every child and there should be no difference in schools or local authorities. There is no doubt that an extra year has crept into education over the years, but that is a debate for another time.

Before I close, I will mention the importance of smooth transitions. They are most often referred to in the context of the transition from primary to secondary, but they are important in all transitions, including the one from nursery to primary. The Scottish Youth Parliament and child and adolescent mental health services leads were looking at smooth transitions with regard to one of the actions in the mental health strategy, and the minister might be able to tell us how that is progressing.

As the ambitious roll-out of nursery provision to the same hours as primary school continues and the wonderful increase in play-based learning continues in nurseries and the early years of primary, I hope that give them time will become much less of an issue.

17:39

Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con): I am happy to speak in today's debate on the give them time campaign. I, too, thank Fulton MacGregor for bringing the debate to the chamber.

There are many problems in relation to childcare here in Scotland, but today is not an opportunity to discuss all of them; rather, it is an opportunity to talk about one of them. The Education (Scotland) Act 1980 made it possible for parents to defer their child's entry to the first year of primary school if the child is aged between four and five at the start of the school session. There are many reasons why parents might make that decision, but ultimately it comes down to a feeling that their child is not ready to enter school.

Parental choice is an important aspect of early years education and, as we have heard, that choice is limited in several local authorities. In many councils, an extra year of funded childcare is often granted along with such a deferral. That allows parents to continue living their lives as they wish.

Sadly, however, that is not the case everywhere. Some councils do not offer another funded year to parents, which means that the decision on deferring their child's schooling is controlled by the family's financial situation, not by parents' choice to defer.

As we have heard, give them time is a grass-roots campaign that aims to get parents the legal right to an extra year of funded childcare for their child. As other members have pointed out, many councils offer an extra year of funded childcare on the basis of need. In my region, which is Central Scotland—in North and South Lanarkshire through to Falkirk—the picture is varied. Just slightly to the north, Stirling Council granted only about a quarter of requests last year.

That is the postcode lottery that we see too often in childcare. A parent residing in one council area can freely make a choice about deferral of their child's schooling, while a parent in another authority has the shadow of costs hanging over them. The give them time campaign wants to eliminate that postcode lottery, so that all parents who are eligible to defer their child's schooling can receive another year of funded childcare. It is not the child's fault that they are born in a certain month, so why should they have to suffer and be pushed into school early because of where that month falls in the school year?

The give them time campaign has wide-ranging support. I am happy to have backed the motion for all parents to receive equity in treatment. However, that is only the first step. I have heard worrying reports that parents in Fife who wish to defer their children's schooling and receive funded childcare are told that the provision must be at a council nursery. That is not in the spirit of equity, fairness or parental choice.

That echoes the problems that we have seen in the expansion to 1,140 hours of funded childcare: that private, voluntary and independent sector nurseries are excluded. Parents should be free to choose to defer their child's schooling for a year, if they are eligible, without worrying about additional costs for childcare. They should be able to choose to have that childcare at any service that meets the national standard. They should not have to pull their child out of one nursery to send them to another. Therefore, in supporting the campaign, let us also commit to its principle of parental choice.

I reiterate that the need for equity and fairness was why the give them time campaign was founded. Let us ensure that that aim stays at the heart of our discussions.

17:43

Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab): I, too, thank Fulton MacGregor for bringing the debate on an important campaign to the chamber. The level of cross-party support for his motion is testament to the importance of the issue. I also commend the give them time campaign, which operates in Coatbridge and across Scotland, for the work that

it is doing to highlight the issue. I welcome its representatives to the chamber.

As has been mentioned, a national survey found that 80 per cent of parents were aware that children who are born in January and February have a legal right to have their school start deferred and to receive nursery funding, but that—by contrast—only 19 per cent of parents were aware that children born between mid-August and December also have that right. In addition to problems of awareness, there is, as we have heard, no guarantee of necessary funding for nursery.

Age remains the sole determinant of whether a child is ready to attend school, but the primary school starting age in Scotland is left over from the Victorian era—it has been the same since the Education Act 1872. Scottish children start school between the ages of four and a half and five and a half. As Claire Baker does, I have always thought that that is far too young. In many countries in Europe the starting age is six or even seven. The UK has some of the youngest school starting ages in the world.

In reality, a child's readiness for school has more to do with their development than their age. Some studies suggest that children who begin their education later tend to do better academically in the long term—notwithstanding the example of my colleague Maureen Watt's daughter. There are, of course, many reasons why a parent might wish to defer their child's entry to primary school. The important thing is that the choice must be theirs—the point that Maureen Watt made—because they know their child best.

The significant regional variation in whether an application to defer entry will be accepted is also a matter of concern. There is clearly a need for a national standard to be set across all local authorities. Parents should have the opportunity to be involved in all decisions regarding their children's education.

The process of applying for a deferral seems to me to be not fit for purpose. That is obvious from the testimony of concerned parents, many of whom are reporting the same issues, regardless of the fact that they come from different local authority areas. A number of parents have complained about a lack of involvement in the application process, and there have been reports of decisions being made by panels of senior staff members who have never met the children involved and have little prior knowledge of their cases. It is understandably frustrating for parents to need to seek the approval of health and education professionals only to have approval overruled by such panels.

The campaign has also highlighted the experience of parents who felt as though nursery and school staff were being encouraged to discourage them from using their right to defer. There are interesting quotes in the anonymous survey that was done. People talk about

“lack of communication from council”

and say that the system is

“Uninformative and largely predetermined.”

Probably the worst comment is that it is a

“Diabolical system, unfair and disappointing.”

No one understands the progress and development of a child better than the child's parents, so the decision should ultimately fall to them. The Government should support parents in making that decision—a point that was made strongly by Iain Gray. That is why I support the campaign's proposal to ensure that staff who deal with applications are fully trained in parents' legal rights, and that the information that is offered is clear and consistent. I am pleased that the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities appears to agree with that in its briefing for the debate.

However, parents should not have to resort to funding their own places; it is important that deferred pupils have nursery places funded automatically. Otherwise, as Fulton MacGregor pointed out in his opening speech, there will be implications for access equality and there will be issues to do with poverty.

Although this is a serious matter for parents, I understand the financial constraints that local authorities have been working under in recent years. Of course, that might influence decisions, but that is another reason why it is so important for the Government to be proactive in helping to resolve the inconsistencies. As Iain Gray pointed out, that might well have to include the opportunity to legislate on the matter.

The campaign to give them time will no doubt continue. I look forward to hearing the minister's views when she responds to the debate. Once again, I thank Fulton MacGregor.

17:47

The Minister for Children and Young People (Maree Todd): I thank Fulton MacGregor for raising this issue and supporting the parents involved in the campaign to improve information and awareness for all parents. I gather that many of the campaigners are in the gallery and I welcome them to the Parliament. It is really fine to see them here.

I met the parents from the give them time campaign in December and I appreciate that this is a very personal issue for many families. Of

course it is important that they have the information that they need to make informed choices for their children.

I am pleased to confirm to Parliament that Scottish Government and COSLA officials have been working together since my meeting with the give them time campaign to improve the information for families around the deferral process. That includes changes to the information on the Scottish Government and Education Scotland websites to increase the clarity for parents and carers about their rights.

It is important to be absolutely clear about current policy. All children who are still four years old at the start of the school year can be deferred and can start primary 1 the following year. Those children with a birthday in January or February who defer school entry are automatically entitled to another year of funded early learning and childcare. Where a child's fifth birthday falls between the start of the school year and December, parents can choose to defer entry to primary 1 and request a further year of funded early learning and childcare. It is then for local authorities to consider carefully any requests for additional funded early learning and childcare based on an assessment of the child's needs.

As decisions about access to additional funded early learning and childcare for children whose fifth birthday falls between the start of the school year and December are a matter of discretion for local authorities, it is important that local authorities listen to the campaign's concerns about parental awareness.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): I am grateful to the minister for her words. Will she write to the 32 local authorities to encourage them to consider inquiries favourably and to report that there is a cross-party view in the Parliament that there should be funding for those children?

Maree Todd: As I said, since we met the campaign, my officials and COSLA officials have been working to improve the communication of parental rights, and I am more than happy to do whatever is required to improve that situation.

Where deferral is being considered, it is important that parents are provided with accurate information. Let me be clear: it is extremely important that parents are fully involved in the decision-making process, in line with guidance and the Government's expectations around parental involvement and communication.

The Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006 placed duties on local authorities and schools to involve parents in their child's education, and good quality communication is an important part of that. Indeed, it is one of the key goals that the Scottish Government set out in

"Learning together: national action plan on parental involvement, engagement, family learning and learning at home 2018 – 2021", which was published last year.

Claire Baker: I welcome the minister's comments on parental involvement. Are there any barriers with regard to the suggestion that someone should approach a family when their child is approaching three and have a discussion about the fact that the child will start school at four? At that point, the child could wait until the summer to start and so get two full years. Are there any problems with adopting that approach?

Maree Todd: That is certainly something that I am willing to explore. I thank the member for that suggestion and I will look into it.

If a local authority decides that it will not fund the additional year of early learning and childcare, it is important that parents understand the reasons behind the decision, and that they are reassured that, if they send their child to school, that child will get the support that they require.

Oliver Mundell made the point that this is the third debate in two days that has talked about variation among local authorities. There is undoubtedly a tension between central control and local discretion. I come from a part of the country where we really value that local discretion. I continue to believe that it is right for decisions about access to additional, funded ELC for children born between September and December to be made on a case-by-case basis by local authorities. However, I reiterate that parents should be fully involved in that decision making.

In this afternoon's debate, we heard concerns from Rona Mackay and others about the attainment gap. Closing the poverty-related attainment gap is a priority for the Government. We believe that the expansion of funded early learning and childcare will make a real difference for Scotland's children, and I know that local authorities are similarly committed to ensuring equity and excellence for all, and that they will continue to give full and careful consideration to requests for additional funded early learning and childcare for those children whose parents believe that deferral is the best choice.

We know the transformative impact that high-quality early learning and childcare can have, particularly for children from a more disadvantaged background. That is why we already provide an additional year of early learning and childcare to those two-year-olds who are likely to benefit most. Around a quarter of two-year-olds are entitled to extra, funded early learning and childcare, and local authorities have further discretion to support other two-year-olds whom they feel would benefit.

I state clearly that the Scottish Government believes that schools must be child ready, rather than children being school ready. In Scotland, we have taken the important step of fully integrating our early years and school curricula. The early level of curriculum for excellence deliberately spans early learning and early primary education. In response to some of the points that Alison Johnstone made, I say that, as a result of that collaboration, early learning settings and primary schools often work closely to help ensure a smooth transition. In many cases, that can mean that a play-based learning approach extends into the school years.

In fact, I have visited a number of schools where I have not been able to tell the difference between the nursery and primary one classes; for example, there were no desks in the primary one classes. As I have said, I also love to visit a nursery that is like the Mary Celeste because the children are outside playing. It is a real strength of our system that Scotland's curriculum enables practitioners to introduce a play-based, child-centred approach throughout the learner journey and, specifically, to support the transition into P1.

Children who face the greatest socioeconomic disadvantage also benefit from the additional resource that is provided through the pupil equity fund. There are excellent examples of PEF supporting transition arrangements in early years, with funding being used for outdoor learning and for early years practitioners to move to the school or the nursery class, or for school teachers to move.

In closing—

Alison Johnstone: I appreciate that the minister is highlighting all the good things that go on when a child gets to school. However, the crux of the issue is that, in many circumstances, parents and carers feel that the child should not be in that environment. It concerns me that that right is there for some people, but that a child who is born one day earlier loses out on the funding, which just seems to me to be entirely unfair. I wonder whether the minister will address that?

Maree Todd: I understand Alison Johnstone's concern. I have reiterated several times how important I think it is for the parents to be fully involved in the decision that a local authority is making about a child; as many people have said, those parents are the greatest experts on that child. The way forward that I advocate is for parents to absolutely be a part of the decision that is made about what is best for the child.

In closing, I thank Fulton MacGregor and the members of the give them time campaign, some of whom are in the public gallery. I know that the issue is very close to their hearts and I am more

than happy to meet them again to continue our discussions. I also thank all the members who contributed to the debate.

Meeting closed at 17:57.

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