

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 1 July 2004

Session 2

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 1 July 2004

[THE PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 09:30*]

Social Work

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): A very good morning on this, our last morning in the Assembly Hall. The first item of business is a debate on the subject of 21st century social work. The debate will be concluded without any questions being put.

09:30

The Minister for Education and Young People (Peter Peacock): It is always an enormous pleasure to open a debate on the last day of a parliamentary term and to see the continued enthusiasm of members as they flock to the chamber to debate an important subject. It is also worth recording, as the Presiding Officer has said, that this is the last day's business in this chamber. I have come to enjoy debating in it. For a temporary home, it has had a good atmosphere. While we look forward to moving into the new building, I wish personally to thank everyone who has given us support in the use of this building. It has been a super home for us in the early years of the Parliament.

Back in May, I made a statement to the Parliament on the case of a young woman with learning difficulties who had been the subject of serious abuse, in which there had been serious failings in social work practice. I announced then that the Executive would engage in a fundamental look at social work in this early part of the 21st century. This morning, I will set out the issues and how we plan to take forward that fundamental look at social work services.

The individual and systemic failings that were identified in the Borders case were made all the more shocking by the fact that they had occurred over a 30-year period. I said in May that that case marked a watershed and that the time had come to ask some fundamental questions about the nature of modern-day social work and the task that we are asking social workers to undertake for our society in this fast-changing world. We need to ask how we can strengthen the contribution of social work in our society—and it is my purpose to strengthen that contribution.

I was pleased that the proposals that I set out in May, which were an outline for a fundamental look at social work, were warmly welcomed by the

social work profession, by employers in the sector, by partner agencies and by users of social work services. I have received a number of letters and messages of support for the initiative. There is clearly a consensus that the time is right to ask searching questions to help to strengthen social work for the future.

Yesterday, in a written answer to a parliamentary question, I revealed the broad remit and membership of the group that I have asked to lead that task. The group will be known as the 21st century social work group. I want the work of the group to be open. That is why we are having this morning's debate without a motion, which will allow members to express their views freely and openly and to help to shape the agenda for the future. I recognise the significant expertise on these matters on the benches of the chamber and I look forward to what members have to say today. The debate will help to inform the work of the 21st century social work group as it begins its task.

There are about 7,000 professionally qualified social workers in Scotland, which is more than at any time in the past. They form a key dimension of a sector that now employs 120,000 social care workers in total. Over the past two decades, the once comparatively narrow focus of social work has widened, moving from an often institutional focus to more mainstream service provision.

In its widest sense, social work impacts on an increasing number of families in Scotland. The people of Scotland expect services of a high quality that are delivered quickly and competently to meet testing standards and priority needs. Those expectations must be met in the face of major strategic challenges. Demographic changes will be an increasingly potent force in how we have to muster our resources into the future. We can anticipate much higher demand for health and social work services with fewer people available to provide them. Significant societal changes are taking place. Different work patterns exist now compared with a number of years ago. There are stresses and pressures on families and family life that did not exist a few years ago. Households are formed in different ways compared with just a few years ago. Drug misuse and alcohol abuse present huge challenges for family life. Meeting those challenges must include the optimum use of our most valuable professionals, including social workers.

The aim of the 21st century social work group will be to strengthen the contribution of social work services to deliver integrated services. The group will focus on issues relating to the qualified social worker and the social work profession but, because social workers do not work by themselves, its scope will also cover social work services provided by social care workers. The

group's work will cover a wide range of care groups: children and young people, families, vulnerable adults and offenders. The group will consider the contributions that other professions and sectors can make through the key supportive interventions at their disposal. As social work is not delivered in isolation, there will be implications for the way in which partner agencies, including health, education and the police, work jointly with social work.

I want the 21st century social work group to explore six areas of challenge: to define the task for social work and social workers for the early part of the 21st century; to explore how to improve quality assurance mechanisms and embed a culture of continuous improvement in the profession; to explore how to strengthen the leadership and management of the profession to ensure consistent and effective delivery of services; to explore how to improve the capacity and confidence of the professionals who deliver services; to determine how best to deliver services in the diverse landscape of modern service provision; and to consider whether the legislative framework, including the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968, remains fit for purpose.

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I very much welcome the tone of the minister's remarks, which seem to address many matters that the professionals in the sector want to be considered. Will he also address the underlying problems associated with the lack of social workers, the current recruitment and retention problems and pay and conditions?

Peter Peacock: I respect the point that Brian Adam makes. If he will bear with me, I will talk about those problems specifically. I know that Euan Aitken—my apologies: I meant to say Euan Robson. It is one of those days. Euan Robson has been chairing a group that has been considering those matters and he will say more on the subject when he winds up the debate.

We need to identify the needs of each care group and be clear about the tasks that we require social workers and related professionals to do. There are a number of key questions. What is the central purpose and function of social work in the early part of the 21st century? Is it about a broad concept of social welfare or care? Is it primarily about protection of the vulnerable? Is it about promoting a broader concept of social inclusion? Is it about enabling vulnerable people to realise their full individual potential as citizens? Is it about all those things? Which of those functions, if any, ought to be taking priority over others? What, precisely, is the nature of the intervention that we are asking social workers to make on our behalf as a society? Our responsibility as politicians is to be much clearer about what we want social

workers to do on our behalf and the 21st century social work group will help us identify that.

We need to explore the concept of the generic social worker. Is that concept still valid or does modern reality dictate something different? In the modern, complex landscape of services, what are the particular skills of the social worker that add value to all that we do in our society? What are the necessary organisational cultures and arrangements that must be in place to ensure that the sector delivers effective, responsive services and avoids repeated systemic failure?

The 21st century social work group will also explore how to develop a stronger improvement culture across the sector at all levels and will consider what we need to do to strengthen professional management and positive leadership. Critically, it will examine what the role of the chief social work officer should be in providing professional leadership and quality assurance.

Local authorities, along with their partners, have the complex task of delivering services that are focused on the needs of specific client groups. We need to determine how to optimise effectiveness in the relations between local authorities and their delivery partners. The 21st century social work group will be asked to identify what action the Executive might take to remove obstacles preventing social workers and their partners from delivering integrated services.

We need to examine the legislative framework. Much of the 1968 act has been replaced by more recent legislation, but the time has come to ask whether the current legal frameworks are still fit for purpose. Is statutory change required if we are to deliver better outcomes? What will be the best statutory framework for social work interventions in the future? I genuinely look forward to hearing members' views on those questions and their suggestions on other areas that I may not have covered that they think need to be explored.

We have set a challenging and far-reaching remit for the social work group. Some people will argue that all that is required is more resources—I am sure that we will hear such arguments today. Making available more resources—or resources of any kind—is always an issue in all forms of public life, but the work that I want to be done is first and foremost about making clear the task of modern social work and its fit in the modern-day landscape. The Executive will then consider resource issues in that light.

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): The minister may recall that I received a written answer earlier this week that said that the Executive does not know the number of social workers who are entering training and that it has not had those figures for the past five years. Is that

consistent with an ability to develop the resources that social work requires?

Peter Peacock: That indicates how far we must travel on some matters. I am glad that we have now cracked issues such as far better work-force planning in education, but we want to move on to do much more about such issues in social work. Again, Euan Robson will say more about that later. We recognise that more resources are required in social work, which is why we are, for example, increasing the number of social workers, providing financial incentives for recruitment and fast tracking training to try to meet already existing resource constraints.

I will now talk about how we will deliver on the remit. Social work in the 21st century falls into two strands of activity. The first strand deals with the complex issues and big questions at the heart of the process, including the task of the social worker in modern society, the role of the chief social work officer and the optimal way of delivering services. The second strand relates to the improvement agenda. We have already identified the fact that improvement in the quality of services is required through better leadership and operational management, stronger performance management and improved work-force development. The approach that we plan is to ensure that the agenda that I have outlined is driven through an independent and challenging process. The 21st century social work group will deal with the key questions first, directly and early in its work, and will influence our current improvement agenda, but it will not stall that agenda pending the outcome of its work.

The chair and the group will determine how best to achieve the group's objectives. At this stage, I envisage that the group will take the agenda that I have set out in the remit to a much wider audience; address the core questions of the role of the social worker and chief social work officer and the delivery of social work services; invite evidence on key issues, consult stakeholders in preparing findings and take the group's findings back to stakeholders; and identify the implications of its work for future, current and planned development work.

The group has members with strong track records of making consultation real and effective. It includes people with real expertise in delivering user-friendly services and customer requirements to the highest specification across public services and in the private sector. It is equally vital that the process should involve employers, service providers, people who work in the sector, especially those who work on the first line, and others who hold a stake in social work—those people must have a real opportunity to make an impact on the future of social work. Again, it will be

for the group to determine the most effective channels for representation.

The group's work will be shaped to take account of other developments, including the review of the children's hearings system, our child protection reform programme and the recent consultation on reducing reoffending. Of course, the work of the group will take account of the wider policy environment, including the impact of new legislation, such as the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003 and the recently passed Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Bill. The timetable for the process is ambitious. The group will start its work next month and will be expected to cover the bulk of the key questions in the next 12 months.

Members will recall that, in my statement on 6 May, I indicated that I would be considering options for delivering inspection of social work services. I made it clear then that we wanted to separate policy and inspection in order to allow a focus on each more effectively. I have concluded that the option that provides the best way forward for social work inspection is establishing an executive agency. That follows the model that is in operation for Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education. The social work services inspectorate has now been established as a shadow executive agency and will become a full agency by April next year.

In concluding, I repeat what I said in my statement in May:

"Practising social work is one of the most demanding and complex tasks that we ask any group of professionals to carry out on our behalf. Today, as we speak in the chamber and deliberate on these matters, social workers the length and breadth of Scotland are confronting extraordinarily challenging circumstances. Many social workers, health staff and social work and health managers ... are exercising sound judgment, assessing difficult situations, making the right interventions and improving the lives of vulnerable citizens."—[*Official Report*, 6 May 2004; c 8215.]

I want to continue to recognise the strong and positive part that social work plays in the life of our nation. Our focus must be on how we can strengthen that contribution further.

As I have stated, today's debate provides an early opportunity for members to express their views. The process will be a once-in-a-generation opportunity to make a real difference to the lives of our citizens when they are in need and I look forward to hearing what members have to say.

09:45

Brian Adam (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak again on behalf of the Scottish National Party about social work. I also welcome the review of the profession that the minister has announced today and the fact that he has put flesh on the bones of his earlier statement.

Key questions must be answered about the future of the profession. What do we expect social workers to do? What is the nature of the interventions that we expect them to make on our behalf? Should all interventions that are currently carried out by social workers be carried out by them? What is the best use that we can make of such a skilled profession? What are our priorities—given that we are the ones who must set them—for social work, care and protection and for the general help that we offer to all our citizens?

I understand the concerns of professional bodies about the role of chief social work officers in local authorities, but we must not get carried away with what might be seen by some people as an attempt to enhance that role for the sake of the profession. We should address concerns only if they relate to delivering for the citizens. However, we should not try to tell local authorities how they should best organise their departments in order to deliver the services that their citizens require. There is always scope for performance improvement, because circumstances change. We must be in a position to respond according to the changing demands on the service and the improvements in skills that will be available.

Is there appropriate leadership? Recent leadership failures in Scotland have certainly been identified, but perhaps we do not need to revisit those failures today. I understand the need for a significant update in the legislative framework within which social work operates in Scotland, but that is only one side of the equation. We must deliver services now, in the medium term and in the long term. It is important to consider the wider professional issues—the review will rightly address them—but we must still provide services and I am not satisfied that that can be done. In spite of a plethora of Executive initiatives, we have still not turned things around.

I acknowledge that there is more to dealing with the problem than simply providing resources, but, given that we are considering imposing fresh burdens—the minister detailed several significant burdens and undoubtedly there will be more to come—we will not be able to deliver the services unless we provide those resources. The issue is not just about throwing more money at social work; it is also about the need for more social workers.

How will we get more social workers? The Executive has implemented a number of initiatives but has failed to take advantage of the opportunity to attract social workers from elsewhere in the world. I am not talking about robbing the less-developed parts of the world; I am talking about getting social workers from the United States. In the light of the Executive's fresh talent initiative, I

approached the First Minister before my visit to the US in April to ask whether we might achieve something through attracting social workers to Scotland—I had been contacted by universities in the US that wanted us to do that. In the US, I talked to two social work departments—in one of them, there were adverts on the wall from London authorities asking for social workers to go to work in London. The universities with which I had discussions were keen to take advantage of the opportunities that might exist for partly training their trainee social workers in Scotland through placements and internships, possibly linking up with universities.

When I returned, I was advised by the First Minister to write to Mr Peacock. I did so in the terms that I have just outlined, although I understand that that aspect of the fresh talent initiative is the responsibility of Mr Wallace. I was extremely disappointed to receive earlier this month a letter that, in essence, said that trainee social workers from the US would not qualify for the initiative. Furthermore, there was no suggestion that the Executive might think about attracting them in a slightly different way or in this or that way—it was a straightforward no. Why can we not be a bit more positive about taking the opportunities that can and do exist to recruit social workers from elsewhere, without robbing the developing world, to fill vacancies that we have here in the short term and perhaps even in the medium term? I hope that our ministerial colleagues will ask Mr Wallace nicely to consider that suggestion rather more positively than he did in his letter to me of 9 June.

We have had a series of debates on social work. I secured a members' business debate on social work on 14 January in which I called for a McCrone-type review of social workers' pay and conditions and other matters. We also heard a statement on 6 May, to which the minister has referred, in response to which Mr Barrie said:

"We need a fundamental review of what exactly we expect from social workers and what exactly we believe is the role of social work in the 21st century."—[*Official Report*, 6 May 2004; c 8222.]

To be fair, that review has been announced, which is very welcome. However, we are not hearing exactly how we are going to tackle the difficulties that are associated with the key shortages of social work staff in the various departments across the board.

Social workers are employed not just by local authorities, but by the health service, and they are likely to be employed in a new agency that might be hived off from local authorities. Professionals are concerned about the breaking up of the present arrangements and about how the Executive will deal with that. Indeed, I was

surprised to find that I was to speak today on behalf of the SNP on social work, as my remit is primarily education, children and lifelong learning. I am here because Mr Peacock is here. It is perhaps surprising that the matter did not fall under the communities remit of Margaret Curran. Given that I received a letter from Mr Wallace on the subject, it appears that he, too, has some involvement with it. Professionals are expressing the concern that there does not appear to be a coherent view in the Executive about how social work should be delivered. I would like to hear from the ministers how they believe that it should be delivered. It seems peculiar that social work should be handled within the education brief—that does not quite seem to fit. We need to be clear about what we expect of social workers and about how we are going to deliver the services day by day. We have not yet received a clear indication of that.

The work force in social work is not as big as it should be. Although the number of whole-time equivalent social workers has risen since 1999, the total number of social work staff is only approaching the number of staff who were employed in social work in 1997. We do not appear to have specific data on the number of whole-time equivalent social workers before 1997. Interestingly, since 1999, although expenditure on social work by local authorities has increased by a little over a third, the number of social workers has not increased at the same rate. For every extra £1 million that has been spent on social work since devolution, we have employed six extra members of staff in the social work sector and one extra social worker. I would be interested to hear the explanation for that. Is it because we are putting the work out to the voluntary sector or the private sector, or is it because social work staff are being given enormous pay rises? I do not believe that it is the latter. We need to have some explanation of why we are spending so much more when we do not have the staffing level that is commensurate with that expenditure.

Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): Does the member accept that one of the reasons for the huge increase in social work budgets was the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990, which placed a large number of extra duties on local authorities to work in collaboration with health colleagues? That is where a lot of that money went, some of it being transferred from the health service.

Brian Adam: Yes, I accept that point. However, there is almost certainly more to it than that and the figures may reflect other movements of duties away from local authorities to the voluntary sector. For example, many of the care homes that were formerly under the authority of local councils have been moved to the voluntary sector in a steady

process. Perhaps that is where some of the money has gone. It would be interesting to find out whether the increase can be explained in those terms.

We have significant recruitment problems in social work, but we have not heard anything today—although perhaps we will when Mr Robson speaks—about how we are going to address the significant changes that are taking place in the sector. I will finish by talking a little about the chief inspector of social work's annual report, which has the catchy title "Progress with Complexity". The report finds that the problems in some areas of social work have been due to increased pressures on the service and difficulties with the recruitment of staff to cope with those pressures. For example, in criminal justice social work, there has been a 15 per cent increase in the demand for social inquiry reports across the local authorities and, in recent years, there have also been big increases in the demand for probation orders and community service orders. That has placed increased burdens on the resources in criminal justice social work. In youth justice, only three local authorities achieved the standard of submitting 80 per cent of reports within 20 days of the request for them. Those are significant failures that exist now and we need answers now, as well as in the medium and long terms.

In community care social work, the provision of free personal and nursing care has set challenges for local authorities at a time of significant pressure on them from competing demands. Some areas are also experiencing problems in developing the framework for mental health services because of the financial constraints of their health service partners in joint working. The Scottish training on drugs and alcohol initiative was singled out for having stalled in its progress, meaning that the problems for children and adults are increasing rather than being resolved. More than 360 children in Scotland are awaiting a foster placement; more than 200 are waiting to be adopted; and more than 11,300 are looked after by local authorities. There were 2,289 children on the child protection register at March 2003—a 13 per cent increase on the figure for the previous year—and there were more than 8,000 child protection referrals at March 2003, which was a 12 per cent increase on the figure for the previous year.

As services continue to expand—I do not doubt that the Executive will continue to expand them—the number of vacancies is increasing, especially for qualified social workers. The issue is the management of rapid growth and expectations. We need to develop even more new solutions to ensure that we have high-quality social work provision and appropriate access to the profession—we must encourage not just young

people but people from a wide range of backgrounds and with a wide range of experience to come into the profession. I hope that, when he winds up the debate, Mr Robson will tell us how we will recruit and retain social workers and set within the overall review of the professional framework appropriate pay and conditions to achieve that aim.

10:00

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I thought that Brian Adam was enjoying making his speech so much that he was not going to stop. I was expecting to be sitting in my chair for a fair while. He was probably asked to open for the SNP because he is not in the running for the leadership and is spare for the day.

I certainly welcome the review of 21st century social work. I also respect and commend the minister for his tone; after all, the tone of previous debates on this subject has been indicative of many of the problems that we have faced. It is easy to say that those problems should have been addressed earlier. However, the thoroughness of the investigations into the Caleb Ness case and the Borders case has undoubtedly given us more information to consider. We also need to listen to social workers on the problems that they are facing. Although I agree with all the elements of the expert group's remit, I would like to suggest a few more that the minister might not wish to include within that remit but which I hope will be addressed elsewhere.

The Conservative party does not call for more resources. However, we are calling for lines of accountability and transparency in social work spending. Members will know that, in many cases that have been raised with us, social work departments have claimed that they do not have enough money while the Executive claims otherwise. Who do we believe? We need openness and honesty in this matter.

The expert group's remit should also include an examination of the question whether services are always best delivered through social work departments. We need some clear-headed thinking on this issue, which I will return to later.

Social work is often talked about as if it stands alone and operates in a vacuum. We hear all too often of headline cases in which the finger of criticism points mainly at social work departments. The two investigations that I mentioned earlier highlighted poor interagency working, poor communications, assumptions about what other agencies were aware of and marked failures to respond appropriately at the appropriate time. Unless all organisations get better at working together, people who need help and support will

continue to fall through the net. A strong and effective link with social work will strengthen support for the criminal justice system, social care, children and young people in need and other vulnerable groups.

I welcome the fast-track qualification for social workers, particularly for people in the Highlands who have families. After all, it would be difficult for them to attend university in Aberdeen or the central belt. There is no doubt that such an approach will give many experienced staff the necessary qualification to practise and so boost social work staffing levels. I should also point out that we focus too much on recruiting new social workers. We must focus equally on retaining qualified and experienced staff, who need to feel valued and supported in their jobs.

We must examine the relationship between the Parliament and local councils. Too often, we in this Parliament pass bills whose provisions require more social work staff to implement them. As a result, we pile more responsibility on to already overstretched departments. I hope that the expert group will have a better dialogue with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and trainers to ensure that work-force planning is improved and that social workers in post are given necessary support and are made to feel valued for their work.

On Monday, I spoke to an elderly gentleman who has been fighting for a long time—I cannot remember how long—to secure free nursing care for his wife, who is in a care home. As he pays the full fees, his wife was placed immediately. He said to me, "Your Parliament promised free personal and nursing care. Why am I having to fight so hard with Highland Council to get it?" I am not pointing the finger at the Executive or the councils, but someone is missing something. We need more transparency and accountability. In this case, the problem lies with Highland Council social work department but, for the population as a whole, the blame lies with the Parliament. After all, we pass the legislation.

Brian Adam mentioned the chief inspector of social work's recent report, which highlighted an increase in demand for social inquiry reports, probation orders and community service orders. Those demands are being placed on social work staff and will have to be met either by increasing the number of staff or by introducing more efficient working practices. The blame culture has to end. I have no doubt that, given the extent of its remit, the expert group will help to achieve that aim.

Because Highland Council has run out of money, many people in the Highlands have had to wait until the new financial year to receive funding for residential care. Either the Scottish Executive is not funding community care adequately or

councils are using the resources for other budgets. Whatever the problem, elderly people should not have to languish in hospital beds when they should be in care homes or given home care. Moreover, that care should be provided in accordance with the agreed care plan that was introduced by legislation that we passed.

Of all the glossy brochures that the Executive has produced, my favourite is perhaps "The same as you? A review of services for people with learning disabilities". I am pleased to say that almost all the 29 recommendations have mostly been met. However, given the varying and complex needs of those in care and the difficulty of finding health care staff, the closure of long-stay hospitals, which is scheduled for the end of next year, represents a huge challenge for social work departments. The Executive and COSLA must have an open and honest discussion about this matter. There needs to be better dialogue, because I know that there are huge difficulties in the Highlands and I am sure that there will be difficulties elsewhere in Scotland.

In its recent work-force report, Community Care Providers Scotland found that 92 per cent of providers experienced serious difficulties in recruiting staff and that almost half the providers have no care home or day care managers who are qualified to the standard required by the Scottish Social Services Council—which again was set up by legislation that we passed. Moreover, CCPS found that there was no identified means of securing the necessary resources to achieve that standard.

The Social Care Employers Consortium now recommends that the Commission for Social Care Inspection should be given the power to inspect the funding relationships between local authorities and the voluntary sector providers to ensure that those providers are adequately resourced to meet the new care standards. Furthermore, Audit Scotland has promised to revisit this issue once the Community Care and Health (Scotland) Act 2002 has bedded in. As a result, I am not sure that the expert group should examine financial spending, accountability and so on, although I hope that someone will look into those matters.

Home care charges in the Highlands have risen from £5.45 an hour to £10.50 an hour and there is no doubt that the financial burden is falling on those who self-fund their care. Although 1,785 people remain in blocked beds waiting for social work funding, those who can pay the full costs of care are placed instantly. The Executive has created a two-tier system in which the people who have substantial savings receive the care that they need when they need it and the others simply have to wait to be allocated social work funding. The Parliament should not find it acceptable that

councils pay considerably higher sums to fund care in their own homes while the Church of Scotland, the voluntary sector and the independent sector have to meet the same quality standards set by the care commission with substantially less funding.

Last week, when MSPs met children's panel members, they were told about the desperate need in Scotland for detoxification and rehabilitation facilities for children under 16. If children's panel referrals for services cannot be met, surely social work departments and COSLA need to work with the Scottish Executive to establish the need for such a service and then to consider whether that need should be addressed.

When the Parliament was established, prisoners were being discharged into the community with no throughcare or support for their drug or alcohol problems. The help and support that they got in prison was often wasted when they were released and they were lost to the services. Now, Cranstoun Drug Services provides care and support within prison that continues seamlessly in the community on the prisoner's release. Prisoners build up tried and trusted relationships in the community while they are incarcerated. One of the great indications that a privatised public service is working is that it is not headline news every day—unlike a certain other privatised prison service. Is it not time to consider other aspects of social care that could be privatised to give better value for the public purse, provide better-quality health care and support, and bring social justice and equality of access to all those in need when they need it? I hope that the minister will bring a bit of blue-sky thinking into the expert group.

10:11

Donald Gorrie (Central Scotland) (LD): It is interesting and pleasant to take part in a debate where members are putting forward constructive ideas rather than abusing one another. I will try not to recapitulate a lot of the constructive comments that other members have made, but I will indicate briefly where I support them.

First, we must decide what we are trying to do, which is often the most difficult thing in life. What is social work trying to do? It is one of the vaguer forms of public activity and the new expert group must decide what the whole enterprise aims to do.

The two main aspects are the structure and the people. With due deference to the two ministers, Peter Peacock and Euan Robson, both of whom I have a high regard for, I ask whether they are the right people—I do not mean whether they are the right individuals, but I wonder whether it should be their job to address social work. We must consider how we address social work nationally and locally.

At the local level, many councils are disbanding their separate social work department, with a separate director of social work, and are merging social work departments with other departments. That may or may not be the correct thing to do; on the one hand, there are issues about liaison and co-operation across the board but, on the other, it is important in any human activity to have somebody whose purpose it is to drive things through. It is no use having a tired man or woman in a local council or a Government department who, after many hours of work on his day job, thinks, "Oh, I am meant to be running social work as well. What should I do about that?" There must be designated people who have the energy, time and resources to pursue the issues.

The next consideration for the expert group is how to get the balance right. We want to involve the professionals; they should not be sidelined and they should get their due say because, in many instances, they know what they are talking about. However, a review should not become a defensive professional and trade union exercise. For example, if a group of MSPs were to examine MSP-related issues, they might not always come up with the right answers. We must strike the right balance between the professionals and what the expert group is trying to achieve in the outside world.

We must consider the issue of liaison across the board—with health, education, youth work and the police. In my view, our Government system most often fails when it tries to bring different parts of the system together; the individual parts often work quite well, but it is very difficult to get people to co-operate. A rising English civil servant told me that the real enemy is the civil servants in the other departments. We must get over that attitude.

We must address the issue of specialist versus generalist within social work. I am not sufficiently well versed to give advice on the matter—there are strong arguments both ways. I spent a lot of time with somebody who suffered from a previous reorganisation of social work, who felt that the whole thing was done wrongly. Reorganisations are, on the whole, a mistake, but perhaps we should re-examine the system and identify how we should organise the service.

We somehow have to combine rigorous assessment of social workers to ensure that they are doing their job well with support for them against witch hunts. Social workers are currently demonised about as much as politicians are, so we should sympathise with them and try to give them some support.

We need good professional social workers who are properly trained to do the jobs that we have identified for them. They must be properly assessed and there must be continuing training

once they have taken up their professional work. In order to achieve that, we must decide what social workers should do and what other people could equally well do. We must not invade the professionalism of social workers, but we must use their professionalism where it is most needed. For example, where it is necessary, there should be more administrative support to try to reduce the amount of paperwork that social workers have to do and free them to do social work. Politically, it is not attractive for a council or a Government to appoint more people to desk jobs, but if those people can free up the front-line troops to fight the battle that they are trained to do, that is a good step to take.

The biggest growth in social work activity is, and will continue to be, in dealing with the elderly, because there are far too many people like me around and not enough people like some other members. How should we support elderly people? Care staff could often do more and could be given more responsibilities. Home helps and volunteers could all make a considerable contribution to helping elderly people and providing care in the community, without calling on the time of professional social workers—other than to make sure that the whole team is operating well together.

According to my information, which is a few months out of date, there have been complaints that although it is difficult to recruit social workers, there are queues of people wanting to qualify as care workers but the system does not provide enough funds for that. There should be more care workers. There could be a greater contribution from teachers in dealing with young people, because they have a great knowledge of young people and could contribute more than they do to the team effort that is required to sort out difficult young people. The energies of paid youth workers and voluntary youth club workers could also be harnessed much more.

Another issue is the recruitment of more social workers. I am a great student of correct phrases, because I never remember them. I understand that the correct phrase is "work-force development", so we need lots of that. I am sure that the minister—unlike me, he understands these things—will explain to me what work-force development is and what he is doing about it. How will he produce more social workers and ensure that they are properly trained? It seems to me from what I have been told that often people could become social workers and train on the job if they have a background that, although not strictly professional, is relevant to social work. They could combine their academic training and training on the job without waiting as long as some of them currently do.

We must consider how we deal with problems. That again involves work across different departments. For example, someone has to lead on the issue of alcohol—it may be health rather than social work, but social work has a big part to play. Everyone at a local level must understand who is in charge and what they are trying to do. We do not need tsars—newspapers love tsars because “tsar” is a short word that fits in a headline, but we do not need the tsar mentality. We need good local activity, with co-ordination and monitoring of the issue at a national level to ensure that things are happening. That also applies to matters such as alternatives to custody and antisocial behaviour, which we have recently been immersed in. There is an idea in some quarters that there should be, as I understand it, a tsar in charge of a single correctional agency. That would be to go in entirely the wrong direction.

Co-ordination is needed. It may be that just as we have Her Majesty's chief inspector of prisons, we should have an inspector of non-prisons to co-ordinate but not to be in charge. Local people must run the thing and harness the energies of the whole local team, rather than there being some central agency. I hope that the minister can explain to us how he will produce more social workers, how they will be trained better and how they will fit in with all the other departments. If the two ministers can make local and national departments co-operate better than they do at the moment, they will deserve knighthoods, lordships or whatever Mr McConnell has at his disposal.

10:20

Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): I welcome the review of social work services and the fact that the minister has called the review group the 21st century social work group, because that is an appropriate title. It is 36 years since the passing of the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968, which was a radical and far-sighted piece of legislation, not least section 12, which placed a duty on local authorities to promote social welfare. We should not forget that the 1968 act created a sea change in social provision in Scotland in the last decades of the 20th century.

In his introduction, the minister referred to the six key tasks that he wishes the review to focus on, the last of which was legislative changes. I hope that, in considering legislative change, we do not forget about the fundamental principles that are contained in the 1968 act. It may be time to replace that act with more comprehensive and modern legislation, but the fundamental principles in that act are as appropriate now as they were in the 1960s.

A number of members have talked about difficulties in social work. When we talk about

social work, we tend to focus on the negatives, because we can all think of times when things have not worked well or could have worked better, but we should pause to reflect on and recognise the fact that the vast majority of social workers in Scotland work incredibly hard and yet receive little public recognition for their efforts. They deliver services competently and to a high standard. We want that standard to be more consistent and to increase, but let us not forget that the vast majority of social work services that are delivered by our local authorities and our voluntary organisations are delivered to the standards that we expect.

When we talk about social work, it is tempting to concentrate on some of the negatives to do with the difficulties that some local authorities face in recruiting and retaining staff. Brian Adam touched on that point this morning and in his members' business debate on social work earlier this year. However, it is worth noting that neither of the two most recent inquiries into failings in social work—the Caleb Ness case in Edinburgh and the Scottish Borders case—highlighted a shortage of social workers or social work staff; they highlighted the lack of experienced management and the fact that people were not working together effectively. It is sometimes too tempting to say that a lack of social workers is somehow contributing to some of the difficulties that we find. We have to ensure that the resources that we have are being used to their ultimate and fullest potential.

Brian Adam: Is it not true that, subsequent to the negative publicity about both of the cases that Scott Barrie referred to, if there was not quite a flight from local authority social work, a significant number of people left the field, which exacerbated vacancy rates? Although I recognise that failures in management contribute to problems, the additional pressures on management because of the lack of staff mean that it is difficult to handle cases appropriately.

Scott Barrie: I am not aware that we can draw that conclusion. It is not just about management failures and difficulties being faced by main grade social workers. In the Caleb Ness case—I did not want to concentrate on that case, but I will address it since it has been raised—the difficulty was the procedures and practices that the City of Edinburgh Council put in place to review its child protection cases. It is utterly incredible that, at case conferences, decisions on placing children on the child protection register and drawing up child protection plans were taken by some of the same members of the same divisional team in the same city council.

Anybody who knows anything about child protection knows that there has to be rigorous external analysis of whether what is being presented is correct. In my social work practice, it

would have been inconceivable that anyone who had any management responsibility for a case would also be responsible for deciding about the child protection plan at a case conference. That is what I mean when I refer to failures in management and structures that have been put in place by some of our local authorities. We should bear those points in mind.

Brian Adam referred to the role of chief social work officers, and made two points that are worthy of repetition.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): You have one minute.

Scott Barrie: We do not want the role of chief social work officers to be increased for the sake of it; we have to ensure that that is done for a specific purpose. Brian Adam's other connected point was that we as a Parliament should not be telling local authorities how to organise themselves. However, we have to acknowledge that the fact that responsibility for delivering social work services lies with 32 different local authorities means that some of our local authorities are just too small to carry out the task and provide the range of services that are required. Perhaps we need to encourage some of our local authorities to enter into consortium arrangements with neighbouring authorities, so that they can provide the breadth and depth of services that are required.

Finally, on recruitment and retention, I note that the briefing from my own trade union, Unison, stated:

"Retention of existing staff is not merely a question of pay. Neither is it an issue for QSW's alone."

That is an important and telling point. Of course we want to ensure that social workers are adequately recompensed for the job that they do, which might mean an increase in their salary levels. However, we might be able to learn something from the teaching profession, where the new charter teacher scheme is allowing teachers who are very good at the job to remain in the classroom. If we allowed social workers to do the same, so that those social workers with extra skills in child protection, mental health—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Barrie, you will have to finish now.

Scott Barrie: On that point I will finish.

10:27

Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): In general, I welcome the review, which must have two aspects: it must address specific matters relating to the nature and terms and conditions of the job—which I will return to briefly—and it must address the nature and philosophy of what social

work will do in the early part of the 21st century. It is important that those points are addressed.

On the specifics, there are two important matters. First, there has to be a McCrone-type review of social work. It is clear that there are problems, which we must address, with salaries and with staff being pinched by other local authorities. I ask the minister to take those problems on board and to confirm that they will be a specific aspect of the review.

Secondly, there is the question whether criminal justice social work should become a separate department. That would be a fundamental mistake, although it is important that we address that issue. Criminal justice social work does not exist in isolation. Those who commit crimes tend to come from situations and backgrounds on which a variety of issues have an impact. It is not just about people having a propensity to commit crime; it is also about underlying social problems, such as mental health problems and poverty. Those issues require to be viewed in the round, and we must address not just the individual who is incarcerated, but the circumstances from which they have evolved or in which their families find themselves. We must address the fact that the issues cannot be dealt with properly in isolation.

It is important at this juncture that we address the underlying philosophy of what we expect from our social work departments. They act not in isolation, but in accordance with the rules and regulations put out by us as a legislature and by the Executive and under guidance and guidelines from social work departments. It is important that we recognise that social work practice relates to the society in which we live, which has evolved substantially since the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 was passed. Scott Barrie was right to comment on that piece of legislation, to which I will return in a few minutes.

Three key factors come to mind, the first of which is the issue of drugs. As members have said in numerous debates, drugs are a major factor in our society, not just in terms of their interface with the criminal justice system but because they impact substantially on social work services. More kids than ever before are being taken into care or are coming before children's panels, not as a result of neglect but primarily because of drug abuse or because their parents are under the influence of drugs. Although drugs have changed our society, our society has not evolved to deal with the problem. Social work requires to act differently in order to take cognisance of the change that has taken place.

Secondly, there is the question of the longevity of the human race. We are reaching a point in our society at which the question is not simply one of what we are going to do with granny but what we

are going to do with great-granny. That point was touched on by Mary Scanlon and others in their references to the care commission. I repeat that the nature of the society in which we live is not the same as the nature of society back in 1968.

Thirdly, there is the question of the dislocation of communities. We have a society that is much more mobile, and with that mobility comes fracturing and fragmenting not only of the family unit or the family circle but of the communities in which people live. That factor impacts on the ability of social work departments to deliver. We require an underlying philosophical review of what we expect our social work departments to do.

Social work is nothing new: it is something that has been with us since time immemorial, not just since the 1968 act. What changed in the 1960s, however, was the recognition of social work as a state responsibility. In years gone by, social work was done by the clan or the community or by the parish minister or priest. If parents died or were sick, communities took children in.

In 1968, it was recognised that, because of the changes that were happening in our society, social work required to be formalised so that the state could take responsibility nationally or locally. It was further recognised that the previous structures—whether in communities or through the church—would not be able to deal with the scale of the problems and that it was appropriate that the state should act.

As I said earlier, the three key factors in the debate are drugs, longevity and dislocation of communities. Our society has moved on and it is important for us to work out what we expect our social work departments to do.

I take issue with Mary Scanlon's point about privatisation. It would not add anything to the review to have that hare running about. We do not want to see the privatisation of departments in any shape or form. I am prepared to accept that it is not necessarily better to have services delivered by the state—whether by a local department or by a national department. We should be prepared to accept that if a voluntary sector body can deliver services that are as good as or better than those that the state can deliver, whether at the local level or at the national level, that body should be funded to deliver those services. My only provisos are that the body does not seek to impose values that are not accepted by the overarching state ethos and that it is subject to monitoring and scrutiny. I say no to privatisation. What matters is not who delivers, but the end-product for the end user and the betterment of society.

It is important that we address the specifics through a McCrone-style review. The hiving off of the criminal justice aspect needs to be addressed

in any review of social workers' salaries and terms and conditions of employment. Fundamentally and for the sake of our social workers, we need to define what we believe society needs in the 21st century. Our society is much more complicated nowadays. We owe it to our social workers to provide the overarching definition of what their job entails in the 21st century.

10:33

Mrs Nanette Milne (North East Scotland)

(Con): Few members in the chamber will not have had contact with social services, either professionally or at a personal level. Members will have had experience of older relatives who needed extra help to stay at home; carers who needed support and respite; and people with disabilities who needed practical aids to help them to cope with the problems of day-to-day living. Also, in today's world in which substance abuse is rife, increasing numbers of children are in need of support and protection, either because their parents have a chaotic lifestyle or because they themselves are young carers. However, I will confine my remarks this morning to social care services for the elderly.

As a result of all of the social change, local authority social work departments have struggled over the past decade or so to cope with the ever-increasing demands that are placed on their services. Nowadays, no one would question the right of people to live at home—if they so wish—for as long as they are able to do so. That right comes at a price, however. Such support is often complex and resource-intensive, which means that it does not come cheap. For that support to work, close collaboration between councils and health services is needed. The joint future agenda is trying to move forward that collaboration by developing an integrated health and social care service that is built on the foundations of joint teams of health and social work staff who work together at the local level, sharing premises, equipment and budgets.

Progress is patchy across the country. There are major problems in moving forward with the joint future agenda, particularly in systems design and staff training. There are cultural barriers to information sharing between nurses and social workers. Information technology systems are not fully compatible yet, and that leads to a lack of accurate information on which to base the planning of services. Some areas have aligned their social work and health budgets and there seems little disagreement among professionals that it would be better to have a single unified budget that brings health and social care services under the same umbrella. That would ease the process of shared assessment of people's needs

and speed up the system. It would give faster access to community care services such as home helps and meals on wheels. It would also help to deal with the difficulties that are caused by inadequate local authority funding for nursing home places in the independent sector. The present two-tier system, under which those who are able to self-fund can access a nursing home place but those who are dependent on council funding cannot, is inequitable. The problem will be solved only when there are unified health and social care budgets.

My home area of Grampian has an agreed and fairly well-developed strategy for older people and services. Each council has a local action plan that is being taken forward by joint future operational teams. In Aberdeen, a multidisciplinary, rapid-response team is having some success in averting hospital admissions. The council has met the demand for free personal care but to do so it has had to vire resources from other budget areas such as training. The council has organised shopping and household maintenance via independent contractors and the voluntary sector and, working with housing associations, it is having some success in tackling the problem of delayed discharge from hospital by means of rehabilitation projects in very sheltered flats.

Aberdeenshire Council has developed 24 health and community care teams that are linked to general practitioner practices. The teams provide care services for older people, people with disabilities and people who need palliative care. The teams are well supported by local paired managers—one from health and the other from social work.

Both authorities involve service users and carers in the planning and evaluation of their services. In Aberdeen city, that has led to a number of service developments. A particularly useful—and simple—example is the training of home care staff in basic nail clipping. By undertaking simple foot care, home care staff are able to relieve the chiropody service. Aberdeenshire Council has developed six local carer drop-in centres and has 10 carer support workers, four of whom work with young carers.

It is good to see those positive developments on the ground. I am sure that there are similar examples across the country. That said, there is no room for complacency. Adequate funding and human resources are, of course, essential. Collaboration between health services, council social work departments, carers and voluntary and independent sector care providers is vital if clients' needs are to be adequately catered for. The challenges for the 21st century planners and providers of social care services are enormous. I am glad that the work has at least begun.

10:38

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): My maiden speech in this chamber was on the exciting issue of MSP allowances. In this, my last speech in this chamber, I find myself speaking about another misunderstood group of workers. One of the things that MSPs and social workers have in common is that, from time to time, we are attacked in the media. We should not underestimate the importance of that issue as far as the social work profession is concerned.

We should try to find a way to encourage as many people as possible who would be an asset to the social work profession to come forward. I make a plea to professionals in the media to bear that suggestion in mind. At times, it seems as if there are almost constant attacks on a profession that, for the most part, does a tremendous job.

Social work is the kind of job that many of us would not want to undertake ourselves. In recent weeks, the Justice 1 Committee has been considering the Emergency Workers (Scotland) Bill. We have heard examples of social workers going on their own, without police protection, into difficult child protection situations. Such situations often turn out to be violent, which is unfortunate not only for the family but for the social worker.

I welcome the review and the setting up of the 21st century social work group. We must do whatever we can to strengthen the social work profession and we must ask ourselves what we expect social workers to do and what our priorities are. I think that our priorities should include the protection of the vulnerable—that would be my starting point. We must also ask how we can make the best use of the skills and expertise of our trained social workers.

We have to ask how we can best provide services to protect and support the vulnerable. I agree with Kenny MacAskill, who gave a very good speech, that we should not say that the services must be provided by a council department, or by the voluntary sector, or by somebody else. What we should do is ensure that we provide the required services as best we can. The people who provide services should be accountable and should work in partnership with others to provide those services.

Social work is a very wide-ranging job indeed, and social workers have a very important role to play. Some time ago, I spoke to people from the British Association of Social Workers who told me that they had to deal with six or seven different departments in the Executive and six or seven different committees in the Parliament. That just shows how wide-ranging their work is.

The issue of children's panels often comes up at my surgeries, as I am sure it does for all members.

Children's panel members give their time voluntarily, only to face the frustration of a lack of social workers. Departments are not able to offer the support and supervision that children's panels have actioned.

Greater expectations than ever are being placed on social workers. Donald Gorrie and Mary Scanlon were right to highlight the importance of liaison and joint working for social work departments. At present, such working does not often happen. It is easy for us to talk about joint working; it is not easy to achieve it. The review must consider how we train social workers and how we get the message across that joint working with other partnership organisations is essential. We have to give people the tools to do the job and to allow joint training and access to IT or other ways of sharing information. That point came out during the Caleb Ness inquiry and during debate on the situation in the Borders.

Social work in Edinburgh is in a mini-crisis. I think that that is the first time I have ever stood up in this chamber and used the word "crisis"; I am not somebody who bandies such a word about. I wish Duncan MacAulay well in his new post in Edinburgh. There is a crisis in Edinburgh and no doubt about it. The council is having to try to fill vacancies with people from Canada and elsewhere. There is a crisis in the morale of the department in the wake of the Caleb Ness inquiry. There is also the threat of strike action. Because of the vulnerability of the people they deal with, I urge social workers not to carry out that threat, although I suspect that that is where we will end up.

It is very questionable whether the reorganisation of the department is the best way of achieving better services. The Executive review may be able to offer some broad brush strokes on how we can best achieve service delivery. Scott Barrie talked about critical mass in small councils. The Executive could give some broad guidance on that, after which it would be for councils to make their own decisions in their own areas.

When we consider recruitment, we must also consider retention. It is important to attract new and enthusiastic recruits into social work, but it is also important to support people who have experience. We also have to offer social workers better administrative support. That is not as sexy as creating a certain number of social work posts, but such support is crucial. That is another issue that came up in recent cases.

We have to offer social workers better support, perhaps by offering more in the way of training and joint working. More capital support is required for IT provision. We have to focus on joint working between social work departments and other partners.

I consider social workers to be one of the most important professional groups in the country. We send an awful lot of stuff to their door in the form of Scottish Executive legislation passed by this Parliament. Perhaps we do not always take as much time as we should to consider exactly what the impact will be on the profession. That is a lesson that we should all learn.

10:45

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I will allow myself a moment of wistfulness after five years in this chamber. I want to pay tribute to Ben Dawson, the worker in wood who designed and built the desks in this chamber. The design has allowed for cosiness sometimes and for cantankerousness sometimes. However, usually we have behaved in a co-operative and creative way—as we have done this morning—and the design of the chamber has played a great part in creating the atmosphere in which we work.

I begin my contribution to today's debate by reinforcing what Margaret Smith has said. I will read to members part of an opinion piece from the *Evening News* of 27 April this year by John Stevenson, the branch secretary of Unison.

"You never hear about social work until something goes wrong.

As many politicians admit, it is not a vote-catcher. Who wants to hear about families in crisis, children at risk, the elderly needing care or people with disabilities relying on support to keep their independence?

Who wants to know about the skilled work preparing a child for adoption or about the Social Worker going home late at night knowing they cannot protect a child because there is no resource? Who wants to know about children in trouble who never had the childhood we would all wish for our children?

Who cares about the residential worker being assaulted or the staff branded as 'useless' because there is no money for care packages?

Precious few it seems, until a tragedy hits the headlines. Then Social Workers carry the brunt of blame while the years of underfunding and lack of respect for the job get off Scott-free.

The Victoria Climbié Inquiry changed some of that. Lord Laming made it clear that top managers and politicians who underfunded the service could not escape the blame.

That may be why there has been such political fall-out from the O'Brien Inquiry into the tragic death of Caleb Ness, followed by a drive to be seen to be doing 'something'.

But 'something' is not good enough. The people social work serves deserve action that learns real lessons. Edinburgh's reorganisation fails to do this and has again dented the morale of the people delivering the service—a service that has plummeted from a 16% shortfall in staff to 32% since O'Brien."

I think that that supports absolutely everything Margaret Smith said.

My heart sank slightly when I heard the minister talk about quality assurance and a culture of continuous improvement among the five things that he wanted to consider in the social work service. That, in a sense, puts even more pressure on social work services—before the other things that we have to get right have been put in place. We have to consider work load and the number of people employed first. We need quality assurance and a culture of continuous improvement, but I implore the minister to work on the details of that with the people in the service and with the unions. We must not impose things from above; we must work them out with the people involved. They must have ownership of the whole package.

Mary Scanlon made points about fast tracking and incentive schemes. I say to the minister that, although incentive schemes might, in the short term, address serious problems throughout Scotland, knock-on effects must be monitored carefully. We do not want social workers to be drawn into the areas of greatest need with the result that other areas of Scotland are left in even greater need than at present.

Scott Barrie mentioned that the small authorities are sometimes unable to cope with numbers because of their size, and that they should be allowed to work together, across borders. That is fine, but Orkney, for instance, already has 16 social workers per thousand population. That is well over twice the national average of seven social workers per thousand population, which is roughly the same as the number of lawyers per head of population in the United States—so we have got one thing right.

Scott Barrie: Under the previous structure of local government, Orkney Islands Council was still a unitary authority. One of the problems that Lord Clyde identified in his report into the Orkney child abuse cases was the fact that the authority was too small to have the critical mass of experience to cope with such a large-scale inquiry.

Robin Harper: I accept that point absolutely—I was just pointing out that there is some compensation for the smallness of the authority.

I accept the arguments about reorganisation in Edinburgh, although the chief social work inspector's 2004 annual report says:

“Whilst there are significant resource challenges ahead, the main priorities now are not additional financial resources but the best deployment, development and stewardship of human resources”.

I ask the minister to consider—at least in the review—the benefits that could accrue from focusing resources on children, young people and families at the earliest stage, because that will save so much of the social work that has to be applied to children at a later age.

10:51

Frances Curran (West of Scotland) (SSP): I am not sure what to make of the proposal that has been announced today. It seems to be saying, “Social work is in crisis”—and not just in Edinburgh; there is a crisis in social work in a number of areas in Scotland—“so let's announce a review and reorganise the whole system.” Any review that considers the situation in social work should be welcomed; however, I found the minister's comments worrying because the slant was towards issues of systemic failure and quality assurance. He talked of the need for strengthened management, he said that systems need improving and he mentioned the structural issue of social work systems, but there was very little about resources. When members walk out that door, every social worker they meet will tell them that the key questions are in the service itself.

Social workers want quality assurance, inspections and clear and defined standards. However, they feel that they are being scapegoated and that their professionalism is being undermined, because they are not being given the necessary resources and because of many of the high-profile inquiries that have taken place recently, which have shown failures. John Stevenson, who is the branch secretary of Unison in Edinburgh and a practising social worker, makes the point that social workers work with risk. If there is a 90 per cent assessment that a child is safe, there is a 10 per cent assessment that that is not the case. John Stevenson says that social workers cannot delete the risk; they have to manage it, which is usually a question of resources.

If 40 to 50 per cent of vacancies in social work services—including some children's services—in Edinburgh are unfilled, there are children at risk in Edinburgh now; there are children in Edinburgh who are not being covered and managed. That is a disaster for families. The same systemic failure and the same problems that we have witnessed in inquiries are still there and they are not being resolved. It does not appear that any of those issues will be addressed by the 21st century social work group that is being set up. I ask members to consider social workers' wages and the fact that we are asking them to make decisions that would require the wisdom of Solomon. They are under impossible pressure, which is added to by understaffing. If members were to ask social workers what the key issue facing the profession was, they would find that it is a long-term, chronic lack of resources. That is what social workers will tell us, it is what the managers will tell us and it is what we will hear time and time again.

John Stevenson also makes the point that, with the appropriate resourcing and staffing, many current systems can deliver all that is required of them from recent inquiries and Scottish Executive reports. However, the number 1 priority is resources, particularly in staffing. It did not sound from the minister's comments as if there was any recognition of that priority in the proposal—perhaps the deputy minister will take up that point when he replies to the debate. It was almost a tagged-on issue: "Well, we'll discuss resources." However, it is the central issue in the social work system. The Parliament should make up its mind. Does it want a social work service that can deal with all the scenarios in the *Edinburgh Evening News* article that Robin Harper read out, or will we have a half-hearted service, broken up and merged into other departments, with care going into housing and criminal justice social work going to the courts and the criminal justice system? Alternatively, do we want a social work service that can provide for families in distress, that can provide for the crisis that we face and that can provide for children who need that service?

We are starting at the wrong end of the road. No service can operate with a 40 to 50 per cent shortfall in staffing—I note that such a situation is not unusual in Scotland. To talk about systems and procedures in that context is to fiddle while Rome burns. Systems and procedures cannot be dealt with unless the shortfall in staffing is addressed. I urge the 21st century social work group to consider resources, training and remuneration, which are the key issues that the social work service is facing in the 21st century in delivering the service.

The commitment to fast tracking that the minister mentioned is a triumph of spin over substance. I have a friend from Dundee who wants to fast track into socialism—[*Laughter.*] I wish she did want to fast-track into socialism, but unfortunately she does not—it is the last day of term. My friend went to an open day and found that there were four places in Dundee, four in Angus, four in Fife and none in Perth. That was it. Let us deal with reality. We hear what the expectations are and what the Executive would like, but there is often quite a gap between that and what is happening on the ground. Where is the infrastructure? Where are the courses? Where are the places? Where is the financial support? Those are the issues that the 21st century social work group should address.

So far, there is no one on the group to represent the interests of front-line social workers. Unison, which represents the workers on the front line, should be represented on the group. There is no point in not having the interests of front-line workers represented when the issue is the front-line service that is falling apart. How long will the

group take? When will it present its findings? When will we hear what its findings are? There is a crisis now, and it must be dealt with.

10:58

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): My colleague Scott Barrie indicated how well the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 has served social services in Scotland over the past 36 years, but it is a period during which society has changed a lot and during which the task of social services has changed a lot. For example, we see in the documents that have accompanied the review of the children's hearings system that the numbers of children referred to the children's hearings system on non-offence grounds—that is, children referred because they are seen as vulnerable or in need of protection—has increased by 600 per cent. The number of children living in residential care has decreased by 75 per cent, but the number of looked-after children has decreased by only 25 per cent, so a lot more children are being supported in their families and in their communities. That is what we would want, but it obviously adds stresses on the services.

Last year, 19 per cent of the Scottish population was of pensionable age, and 7 per cent was over the age of 75. The fact that someone is of pensionable age does not mean that they require social work services; however, as Kenny MacAskill said, we are now in a society that is more mobile, and where families are more likely to have moved. Therefore, elderly people in need even of transient support are less likely to be able to call on the services of sons, daughters or grandchildren in the way that they might have been able to in the past.

Social work services increasingly have to deal with the problems of drug and alcohol abuse. In 2001, 56,000 adults in Scotland were reckoned to have a drug problem. The Education Committee was quite shocked to learn during its child protection inquiry that one baby in 53 is born to a parent who has a drug abuse problem, which obviously creates issues for social workers and social work departments.

We have an increased prison population, and this morning we heard about problems of drug use and violent behaviour in Dumfries prison. If those problems are not dealt with adequately in the prison service, those who have them will come back into society with them and will require a degree of support through social services or voluntary organisations.

How social work services are provided, and the job that social workers do, has changed considerably over the past 36 years. My mother was what was known in her day as a medical social worker and she retired in the early 1980s. I

was interested to hear from the minister that the Executive is considering whether it is still appropriate to have generic social workers. My mother has terribly strong opinions about that and I am sure that, even at the age of 80, she would be happy to lobby him on that topic.

When my mother was trained, she was actually called a lady almoner, not even a social worker, so the job has changed a lot in her lifetime. The department in which she worked was situated in a geriatric hospital, in which people lived in wards. Those who were not well enough to go home lived in the hospital for the rest of their lives, which could be many years. There were a limited number of outcomes: patients either went home and looked after themselves, went home and were looked after by their families or received residential care in a care home or the long-stay geriatric hospital. Now, with care in the community, people are rightly being supported to live in their own homes. We all believe that that should happen, but it requires the bringing together of packages of care of a type that did not exist in 1968, or even in the 1980s, but are a more recent development.

There have also been changes in how social work services have been organised in councils. Many councils took the opportunity of local government reorganisation to group services differently. For example, South Ayrshire Council put social work services in with housing and Stirling Council was one of the first councils to have a children's services committee. Other councils have reorganised over the past 10 years and there is now a super example in Dumfries and Galloway, where social work services are in with education. There is a number of different sorts of groupings and I am not sure whether we have a handle on how successfully those groupings work.

As we hear, councils are also facing severe shortages of key staff in a number of areas. In the campaign for the Scottish parliamentary elections last year, I went round to a gentleman's door with my leaflet that promised more nurses, more teachers and more police—I think that everybody was making that promise—and he accepted the leaflet with a resigned sigh and said, "What about more social workers?" That shows that social workers, who support society, have felt that they are the forgotten profession.

I am, of course, aware of the steps that the Executive is taking in trying to tackle the shortage of social workers, such as the fast-track postgraduate qualification and the new honours degree qualification. Unison made a strong case in its evidence for the training of unqualified staff who are already in social services to give them some sort of on-the-job qualification that could enable them to go on to social work. That is what the

work-force development issue to which Donald Gorrie referred is about. Mary Scanlon made the good point that we must also consider how to retain experienced staff. We do not want a lot of churn in the system.

Shortages of other care workers thwart the best intentions of social services. In my constituency, there is a shortage of care workers, so, although social workers identify the care needs of people in hospital and are identifying the funding for them, there is delayed discharge from hospital because the care workers to provide the support are not available.

I welcome the review and note those who are involved in it. The review should include input from the whole social care sector and it is important that it should include input from the users of the services as well as the professionals.

11:04

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): What is clear from all the speeches is how social work has changed over the years. That is reflected in what the minister said on 6 May:

"We need to be clear about what we expect in the early part of the 21st century, which is so different from the 1960s when social work as we know it today found its statutory basis."—[*Official Report*, 6 May 2004; c 8216.]

It is true that, nowadays, local authority social work departments are required to deliver the most extensive and far-reaching agenda since the inception of the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968. With the establishment of the Parliament and the Scottish Executive, we have had a wide range of new legislation and policy initiatives that are, by their nature, accompanied by a substantial volume of guidance and directives. A lot of that work has been in community care, but there is also a major development agenda in children and families services and criminal justice.

I had the pleasure of meeting people from a social work department in central Scotland the other day. I was interested to see the main headings of the kind of work that social workers now do and the responsibilities that they have. Under community care alone, they work with older people and people with dementia, with people who have learning disabilities, mental health problems, physical disabilities, impairments or acquired brain injuries, with children and young people who have disabilities, with people with addictions and, of course, with carers. A very wide range of services are now being provided under the heading of social work, and a review is required—it is probably long overdue—so I am very pleased that one will be carried out and I look forward to hearing much more about what it will involve.

I would like to make one point in particular. Scott Barrie touched on it when he said that we should never forget the fundamental principles of the 1968 act, when social work as we know it was set up to act on behalf of us all. When we hear about so many bad things happening in social work, we should remember that an awful lot of good work is also going on. We must not throw the baby out with the bath water, but take note of the good practice that exists and the great things that are already happening and we must try to build on them rather than start all over again.

The social work department that I visited was at North Lanarkshire Council and I was greatly impressed by its work, particularly that on supported living. That is the term that the department uses for its approach to enabling people with significant levels of disability to live in their own homes and communities—communities that they know—which allows them to maintain close connections with their families and friends. All those with whom the department works on supported living have individualised care packages and many of them receive 24-hour care in their own homes. What is important about that work is that it shifts away from the concept of fitting people into a service and towards designing services around the unique needs of the individuals. I was amazed to learn that, in North Lanarkshire, 250 people—the majority of whom receive 24-hour care—are in their own fully supported tenancies. Another side to that work is that the arrangements have generated more than 700 social care jobs.

The future growth of such work depends on resources. Some say that resources are not the only issue; of course they are not, but they are important because we need the resources to provide individualised care services such as that I mentioned. That is not only about redeploying existing resources to better effect, as many councils—including North Lanarkshire Council—are doing, because it is evident that need outstrips the available resources. We must take that on board.

Much good practice exists and we should build on it, but we must also monitor effectively. I am concerned about how the Scottish Executive monitors social work services because, if we measure outputs only in the short term, we are not really seeing the quality of service below that and it sometimes takes a long time—many years, in some cases—to produce the results for which we are supposed to be aiming. Therefore, I would like the ministers to consider how they monitor.

The minister mentioned joined-up approaches. I am confident that North Lanarkshire Council has a joined-up approach, and I hope that the Scottish Executive will review its own approach to social

work to ensure that it is joined up. Brian Adam mentioned that already. Who exactly is in control of social work? I am concerned, for example, about the supporting people fund. It is a great initiative, but there are concerns among practitioners that that funding will be cut, which could have a negative effect on the good practice that the initiative helps to bring about in the long term, which cannot be measured just by looking at the performance sheets and ticking the boxes on outputs. I know that that falls under the communities budget, even though the Minister for Education and Young People is talking about social work. I ask him to assure us that the Executive's approach is joined up and that all such matters are being considered in the round.

11:10

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): In a debate about social work in the 21st century, recruitment, retention and resource issues are fundamental. Despite the Scottish Executive's efforts to attract and retain social workers through the fast-track social work qualification and the provision of additional money to improve training, the shortage of social workers remains a problem that affects service delivery in community care and the criminal justice system, and service delivery for children and young people.

The increase in social work involvement in the criminal justice system was highlighted by the report of the chief social work inspector that was published in 2004, which recorded an increase of 15 per cent in the demand for social inquiry reports in nearly all Scotland's local authorities, together with increases in demand for probation orders and community service orders. Those increases are likely to continue, given the Executive's aim of promoting alternatives to custody. Such disposals will involve more input from social workers and the social work service.

The partnership agreement contains a pledge on a single correction agency to deliver custodial and non-custodial sentences in Scotland, the aim of which is to reduce reoffending rates. That would result in criminal justice and social work being taken away from local authorities. To date, the Executive has remained silent on that pledge and I believe that the uncertainty is damaging morale. Perhaps the minister could confirm whether the Executive intends to introduce a single correction agency.

I will now deal with the pressure on social work services for children and young people. It is a sad fact that one of the growth areas in that field is child protection. Adequate numbers of experienced, qualified social workers are needed to manage the challenging work load and to deal with the huge rise in the number of children of

drug-using parents who are suffering from neglect. Although the Executive's statistics suggest that the number of social workers in post has grown, the Association of Directors of Social Work says that those posts are mainly in new initiatives, such as community schools and youth justice and intervention projects, and that they come at the expense of child protection services.

The number of children on the child protection register has risen and there are more referrals from reporters to children's panels. The lack of social work resources has resulted in situations in which a social worker attends a hearing merely to state that they have no knowledge of the case under discussion as they are just filling in. That results in the hearing having to be rescheduled. Such delays are deeply damaging to the children who are the subject of those hearings and they are a waste of panel members' valuable time.

Against that background, we desperately require action, which the ADSW acknowledged in its submission to the Education Committee's inquiry into child protection. Although the ADSW welcomed the recommendations in the November 2002 report, "It's everyone's job to make sure I'm alright", it expressed frustration at the lack of progress in implementing key recommendations, such as that on the establishment of clear guidelines for standards rather than just a framework. It also sought the progression of the proposals on a framework for multidisciplinary inspection processes.

On the final day of debate in the Parliament's temporary home, it would have been good to end on a positive note, but I regret that that is not possible. I am saddened that the minister's main announcement has been about the creation of an independent group to consider the future of social work and social workers, rather than about a range of concrete proposals to implement the recommendations of the November 2002 report. In effect, the minister has announced a review. It is sad that this Executive's tenure has been characterised by dithering and delay. Scotland's children and its social work services deserve more. I hope that things will be very different when we move to the new Holyrood building but, given the Executive's record, it would perhaps not be wise for me to hold my breath.

11:16

John Swinburne (Central Scotland) (SSCUP): Peter Peacock has clearly enunciated his vision for a modern social work service in the 21st century. He is to be applauded for that because, for far too long, social workers have been regarded by all and sundry as the whipping boys. The poor social worker has been the only person who has been blamed. That ethos must be

stamped out. Social work departments should no longer be asked to carry the can for something that they did not do—someone else instituted the problem. The minister must address the situation by getting rid of the blame culture.

One of the biggest problems that Peter Peacock and other people who are trying to improve social work services face is the fact that social work departments in 32 regions all over Scotland receive guidelines. They require directives rather than guidelines. The money that is allocated to those departments for social work services must be ring fenced so that it is used for the correct purpose. The disparity between services in different regions is tremendous. One region's practice on kinship care is exemplary—it implements the philosophy that, if a social worker asks the grandparent to look after a child, the grandparent should get paid for that. Glasgow City Council, on the other hand, has not paid a single penny to a grandparent for looking after their grandchildren, even though a social worker has placed the children there. Such disparity is not acceptable. The minister must give directives to ensure that his policies are carried out by every council.

I have another worry. Social work is a caring profession. The most off-putting thing to social work recruitment must be the fact that social workers are asked to go to the bedside of senior citizens who have landed in residential homes to help them to implement the sale of their homes to pay for their residential care. It is not acceptable to ask someone who cares for people in society to go to the bedside of a vulnerable elderly person to say to them, when they are at their lowest ebb, "We will help you to sell your home to pay for your residential care." I do not know how we can take that out of the equation. There must be some other way of doing that that does not involve allocating the task to a social worker.

As I have said, social workers have been society's whipping boys for far too long. Peter Peacock must give clearer guidelines and directives to make social workers' jobs a little bit easier. The establishment of an inspectorate will mean that councils will no longer be able to use social work money for some other purpose. The money is there but, in many instances, it is not being allocated properly. I will leave it at that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): Thanks. That is helpful.

11:20

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): Use of the term "social worker" tends to downplay the work of a profession that forms the support structure for the most serious and complex

problems in our society. Social workers are decision makers in their own right; their tasks include child protection, work with offenders, and the preparation of reports to allow sheriffs to determine the nature of sentences. It is fitting for us to spend the last day in our temporary home—I am a bit sentimental, like others—discussing the 21st century social work group and the importance of the social work profession. I note that Douglas Bulloch is described as a rocket-science chairman, which just goes to show that some things are rocket science when it comes to social work.

We recognise the hard work of the profession. Social work is a vocation; it needs to attract people who are committed to the work that it involves. Everyone appears to welcome the review, which will shape the future of social work. It seems that we need to turn our attention to the needs of the profession that delivers our most-needed services, but at the same time the review must involve a fundamental look at modernising the service because we require it to deliver appropriate services that reflect the changing nature of our society.

We have spent a lot of time in this session reviewing, discussing and debating the changes that are required to reform radically our approach to criminal justice. Those issues include alternatives to custody, which Margaret Mitchell mentioned; community sentencing; the recent announcement on non-payment of fines, which will result in supervised attendance orders; the creation of drugs courts; and a new team approach to addressing offending, which is a good example of joint working. New approaches include the provisions for electronic tagging that we have agreed to this year, which will involve an increase in the number of social inquiry reports and a greater role for social workers, and the sentence order for lifelong restriction, which is a response to serious sexual and violent offences. All those developments in sentencing involve social work services and we are dependent on them and other professions to deliver the new laws and approaches, so they are certainly at the heart of change.

The inquiry into reducing reoffending is an aspect of the Justice Department's work that is integral to the work of social services. It is difficult to balance the views of the public at large, who demand long, harsh prison sentences, with the need to reduce reoffending rates. Reoffending is often linked to custodial sentences. The job of rehabilitation becomes 20 times harder as people cross the barrier into prison because they are removed from society and from their jobs and placed in overcrowded and outdated prison accommodation. Social work services have a fundamental role in getting the right balance in criminal justice to ensure that custodial sentencing

of those for whom it is the only option is balanced with community sentencing. If we are to move forward with alternatives to custody, we will rely on social services to build confidence in community sentencing.

From our work in this session, we know about the work that is needed to support children, particularly children in care and children who are exploited in prostitution. Young runaway children are likely to find themselves exploited by adults in prostitution. Although we adhere to the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 and deal with children in the hearings system in line with the welfare principle, we need to review the appropriate type of accommodation for children, particularly those who need a place of safety. I have been pressing for that for the past few years. Not all the Kilbrandon principles were adopted. There was some discussion in 1968 about the need to link social work services with the education department. The review allows us to go back to some of the issues that Kilbrandon discussed in 1968 and perhaps to use some of them in the modernisation work that we are trying to do, which seeks to integrate social work services with other services and departments.

The review of the children's hearings system needs to be joined up with the work of the 21st century social work group—we must recognise that the other reviews that are going on need to feed into the group's work. I mentioned the inquiry into reducing reoffending and the review of the children's hearings system and we need to ensure that such work is joined up. Indeed, part of the purpose of the review is to make sure that services are integrated and joined up.

We know that child protection takes up huge resources, perhaps to the detriment of dealing with children who are involved in reoffending, and that needs to be addressed. Some of the new powers under the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Bill will strengthen the role and responsibilities of children's panels in relation to social work services.

I put to the minister a question that I have raised before about the role of the children's panel: why is it necessary for social work services to screen the decisions of the children's panel? If the children's panel decides that a child requires secure accommodation or some other action, why do social work services screen that decision and sometimes implement a different decision? That is not in line with the 1968 act and it is not fair to the children's panels—we ask them to be the decision makers and they should have the last say. If there is an issue of resources, we should address it.

Mary Scanlon talked about the rehabilitation of prisoners in relation to drugs and she is right to point that out. Some £12 million has been

allocated to the prisoner release programme and we need to find out where that money has gone. It was meant to address the needs of prisoners on their release to ensure that the cycle of drug addiction was broken and to deal with offenders in the community. There is still a lot of joining up to be done; the review will be welcome if it makes those connections.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Sandra White.

11:25

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I will not call you convener today, to save your embarrassment.

Like everyone else, I welcome the minister's announcement about the setting up of the 21st century social work group, although perhaps he could shorten the name, as it is a bit of a mouthful. Perhaps it will be shortened as time goes on.

There is no doubt that the role of social workers has changed dramatically during the years and that their remit has changed beyond recognition. We should also be aware that the provisions of the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Bill will land at the door of social work services. I hear what the minister says about the remit of the new working group, but I ask him to take seriously the comments that were made by Brian Adam and Kenny MacAskill on the need for a McCrone-style review alongside it. We desperately need to examine the pay, retention, conditions and training of social workers in order to ensure that we have proper social work departments. I ask the minister to include a McCrone-type settlement in the working group.

I will concentrate on retention and pay and conditions in the short time that I have. I welcome the fast-track scheme; I have sent many questions on that scheme to the minister and I am pleased with his replies. Given the scheme's remit and timescale, it seems to be going well. However, given the current shortage of social workers, the fast-track scheme will not be sufficient to make up the loss of social workers. I would like a scheme to be put in place for workers in social work departments who do not have proper qualifications. Such a scheme could fast track those workers through the system to enable them to get qualifications without having to leave their jobs.

We need to find work-based routes into learning for people who are already in the sphere, rather than sending them back to university. They have experience on the ground, so to fast track them into getting qualifications is an excellent idea. We should consider that part of the work force, because despite the fast-track scheme, which

enables graduates to train as social workers in two years, we are still short of social workers.

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Is the member aware that that is already happening in Scotland, particularly in the Highlands? We are fast tracking people who are already working in social work as care assistants into getting qualifications.

Ms White: I was aware of that. Unison raised the point about experienced staff with me. I welcome Maureen Macmillan's comment that that work is starting in the Highlands, but throughout Scotland, particularly in the Glasgow area and in Edinburgh, we are desperately short of social workers and people think that they are not able to enter the profession unless they have the proper qualifications. A bit of encouragement would help immensely.

Another point that Unison raised is on registration. Most people are not aware that registration in social work is entirely different from the registration of nurses, teachers and occupational therapists. People have to pay for registration and disclosure and sometimes that involves a lot of money coming out of people's pockets. We talk about social work being a big department, but we are also talking about voluntary workers. I ask the minister to consider whether we can help people to register and pay the disclosure fees so that they are not out of pocket.

Unfortunately, social work is sometimes seen as the Cinderella service, which it should not be. It helps people through what are sometimes difficult situations. Social work intervention can sometimes be the difference between life and death—the situations can be as serious as that. We owe it to social work professionals and the people they serve to produce something for the 21st century to ensure that we have social work departments of which we, social work professionals and the public can be proud.

11:30

Scott Barrie: We have had a wide-ranging debate in which many members have made useful points that I hope will inform not only ministers, but the review by the 21st century social work group that we have talked about. It is worth remembering that the review has been welcomed by all the organisations that work in social work, including the Association of Directors of Social Work, the British Association of Social Workers Scotland and Unison, which is the main social work trade union. The fact that such a cross-section has welcomed the review shows that a root-and-branch examination of what we expect from social work in the 21st century may be overdue.

If members will forgive me, I will start by reiterating the final point that I made in my earlier speech, which was about recruitment and retention. We need to find a way to retain workers who are good at their jobs in the jobs that they were employed to do. In my social work experience, the way to obtain a salary increase—but not, perhaps, to have status—was to be promoted out of the job that one was employed to do. We could consider a structure that encourages those who are good at what they do and who enjoy direct work with people to continue to do that. Social workers could consider adoption of the chartered teacher method that is used by our education colleagues; social workers who achieve further qualifications—such as from training to become a mental health officer or from post-qualifying child protection training from the University of Dundee—could be retained to do those jobs and to put what they have learned into practice.

We must acknowledge that the number of other opportunities for social workers has grown hugely in the past decade or so. People with social work qualifications are sought after for a variety of jobs that do not necessarily relate directly to social work. Even in social work, people no longer have to be employed mainly by local authorities. Many job opportunities are available in the independent and voluntary sectors, some of which have more attractive salaries and terms and conditions. That is because many specialist projects that independent and voluntary organisations have established can say no to referrals, whereas local authorities never have that opportunity and must take everything that is presented to them. A large children's charity will operate a screening process for referrals, which means that a youngster might not be accepted on to a scheme, whereas a local authority worker has little choice in that. We must acknowledge that that is an extra stress on local authority staff and that it is one reason why it is difficult to retain appropriately qualified staff in some key areas.

We should not underestimate the effect of the negative portrayal of social work. Several members have discussed that. As politicians, we must take some responsibility for that. As I and other members said, we usually talk about social work when it appears to have failed, and we do not talk up social work successes often enough. If politicians do not talk up social work successes, the popular media will not do so and we will read in the papers and hear on television and the radio only about the perceived failures of social work. That negative portrayal of social work must be taken into account; we all have a part to play in ensuring that we give a more balanced view of social work and what it achieves.

I was interested in Donald Gorrie's comments that social work is often demonised and that social workers are held in low esteem—almost as low as that in which politicians are held. I must be one of the few people who have chosen to move from a demonised profession to one that has even lower status. Perhaps that says something about my failings.

Mary Scanlon called for greater privatisation of social work services and compared unfavourably the rates that local authority residential homes charge with those of private and independent sector homes. One of the main reasons for that difference is that local authority wage rates tend to be higher, although perhaps they are not high enough for the skilled work that care assistants and other staff undertake. It must be acknowledged that wage rates in the public sector are higher and that the work of staff in our nursing and care homes should be properly remunerated. We should not consider the rate that is charged to be the only indicator of a home's quality of care.

Mary Scanlon: Does Scott Barrie agree that the independent sector could pay higher wages if it received the same amount of funding as local authority care homes receive?

Scott Barrie: My point was that the charges for local authority homes are higher because local authority staff have higher wage rates. Before we give the private and independent sector more money I—and most other people, I am sure—would want to ensure that that extra money is spent on improving wage scales. I am not entirely sure that it would be. We must acknowledge that 70 per cent of all social work expenditure is on services to older people. Perhaps we do not acknowledge that enough.

The importance of social work and appropriately qualified social workers cannot be overemphasised. I hope that even if today's debate does nothing else, it anchors the review of social work in the 21st century in a context from which it can be progressed, to ensure that we have a social work profession in the 21st century of which we can all feel proud.

11:36

David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con): Like several others—including the minister, Robin Harper and Pauline McNeill—I am struck by the fact that it is our final day in this chamber. In the past five years, much good debate has taken place and much rubbish has been spoken. However, Parliament has been guilty of not always connecting with reality—Frances Curran mentioned that. Whatever points are made today, the reality in places such as Stranraer in the west of Dumfries and Galloway is that the number of

social workers is insufficient. Much money has been spent on advertising and other recruitment vehicles, but it has not delivered those social workers. We cannot have a high-falutin' debate about social work and not focus on that reality.

Parliament has also been willing to ignore evidence. When, for example, the Local Government and Transport Committee considered the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Bill, we heard clear evidence from social workers from the Highlands and Glasgow that the people are not available to deliver on that bill, which Parliament has gone ahead and passed. The Executive and others have issued the usual press statements about how the bill will change everything, but the reality is that the people to implement it do not exist.

Mary Scanlon referred to free personal care and the changes that it was supposed to make. One reason why I was keen to support free personal care was that I thought that it would remove a chunk of bureaucracy from the system. However, we have found that it has introduced more bureaucracy and form filling. People whom we think should be involved in front-line social work are often actually involved in form filling and bureaucracy. One key challenge for the review is to free people from such activities.

When I come into contact with social work, I am concerned not with the difficult cases that everybody encounters, such as the Miss X and Kennedy McFarlane cases—although those are dreadful—but with the day-to-day cases, which may involve a social worker deciding whether somebody has a shower. That is not what we want 21st century social workers to do—they should be in the front line of a professional service that helps people to get through difficult points in their lives. However, we cannot suggest that social work can remedy the difficulties in our society.

I do not agree with John Swinburne about directives from the centre in any context. I certainly do not believe in giving people directives on how to live their lives. People nowadays live very complicated lives; many of us see very complicated constituency cases and it is too glib for politicians and others to say that the difficulties and complexities of society and people's lives can be sorted out by involving a social worker. Life does not work like that.

As Mary Scanlon and other members have said, many other groups and people need to be brought much more into the tent to assist people. In Dumfries and Galloway, for example, there is an excellent befriending service that seeks to help young and older people who live chaotic lives. Such groups need to be given much more support.

It is a positive step forward when the minister announces, as he did, that the review will be fundamental. We must ask ourselves what we want social work to do, why we want it to do it and how it will be done. We must also tackle the issue of where social work sits. I am cynical about the decision to move social work into education in Dumfries and Galloway. The council wanted to have three directors and social work had to be fitted in somewhere, so it ended up with education. However, in an area such as Dumfries and Galloway the focus must be on the elderly population, which is extremely large and growing. That issue has not been spoken about as much as it should have been in the debate. Work with the elderly will be a key element of social work activity in the future.

As I said at the start of my speech, there is no point in having discussions and reviews if the fundamental matters of the number of social workers on the ground and devising alternatives that involve other care workers, volunteers and so on are not addressed. If that does not happen, the review will be a waste of time and—unfortunately, like many things that Parliament has done—it will not live up to the public's expectations.

11:42

Stewart Stevenson (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I was a sceptic when Parliament first introduced subject debates, but I have become a convert because they provide a good platform for us to set aside some of the more partisan comments that we might otherwise make. However, Mr Robson should not relax yet—I have one or two comments to make on the Executive's performance.

I start by focusing on committees, of which there seems to be a proliferation. I am reminded of the words of a gentleman called Barnett Cocks, who said:

"A committee is a cul-de-sac down which ideas are lured, then quietly strangled."

That quote immediately springs to my mind when I see the proliferation of committees that is taking place. To paraphrase it, committees conserve and individuals innovate.

I want to say one or two things about the role of individuals, but I will focus first on the national work force group that the Deputy Minister for Education and Young People has chaired since its first meeting in September 2003. That group appears to have met four times so far and I commend it to some extent on its ambition. At its first meeting in September—it was not chaired by the minister, who joined the group at its second meeting—some very interesting things were said about Scotland in 10 years' time. I refer members

to appendix A of the minutes of the meeting. David Mundell referred to the Antisocial Behaviour etc (Scotland) Bill. Apparently, in Scotland in 10 years' time,

"Young people are demonised, subject to curfews and in bed by 7.00".

Perhaps; perhaps not. Under information technology, the minutes of that meeting suggest that we will have "virtual companions" and that we will "talk to fridges". This is fascinating stuff. However, the minister's ambition travelled much further. Page 4 of the minutes includes a statement that will warm the hearts of everyone who listens to today's debate. The very last line of the page reads: "Scotland wins world cup". I shall harry the minister for the next 10 years to ensure that he delivers on that commitment.

On what is both a happy and a sad day, I see in the minutes some of the enduring legacy of my great friend and colleague John Swinney, who will shortly take this seat to harry the First Minister for the last time in his current capacity, at the last First Minister's question time that will take place in this chamber before we move down the road. Under the heading "Politics/governance" for Scotland in 10 years' time, we see the words "Possibility of Independence". There is only one word wrong in that statement; it should refer to the certainty of independence, which the SNP will continue to pursue at every opportunity that presents itself, as John Swinney has throughout his political career.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I assume that you will return to the subject of social work later in your speech.

Stewart Stevenson: Indeed I will, convener. I should have said "Presiding Officer"—this problem is infectious. The Presiding Officer feels compelled to intervene in the debate, which I welcome. Perhaps there will be a revision of standing orders to encourage that in every debate when we move down the road, to our new wee shed there.

More seriously, there are a number of issues relating to the Executive's activities in social work over recent years. In April 2002, the Executive announced plans for the social care work force. However, as Brian Adam suggested, we are not making much progress on that. A written answer that I received from the minister indicated that we still do not seem to know what is happening on training for social workers. It is very difficult to plan when one does not know what is happening.

However, let us be fair. The three sets of minutes that I have for the working group contain just one timetabled commitment, which tells us something about the way in which the civil service works, but the group has delivered an action plan for the social services work force. There is something slightly bizarre about that. The plan

contains a number of targets, but it is obvious that there is a crisis in social work, because every target is either for the next nine weeks or for the next nine months—it is 999 all the way for social work. The trouble with this worthy document is that there is no real substance to the targets that appear in it.

As I approach the last minute of my speech, I turn to other subjects that have been raised in the debate. We have heard about some of the basic difficulties that exist and with which none of us in politics has properly engaged. I refer to the difference between national policy and local implementation. John Swinburne would have us send directives from Edinburgh to all parts of Scotland. Uniquely, I agree with David Mundell from the Conservatives and disagree entirely with John Swinburne on that point. Local variability is practical and valuable, because it responds to local needs.

Peter Peacock gave us six questions. Let us hope that we do not have to wait too long for at least six answers. My colleague Brian Adam called previously for a McCrone-style review of social work and was derided in some quarters for doing so. I am glad that others have now come on board and that we agree on that. I am getting older and so is the work force—30 per cent of social workers are now over 50, which is a big problem.

If we are going to attract the right kind of people into the profession, we must empower them and let them break the rules if it serves the purposes of their clients. Let us not get too tightly hogtied, as we might have been in the past.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Euan Robson to wind up the debate. You have 10 minutes. There is a bit of restlessness in the chamber.

11:50

The Deputy Minister for Education and Young People (Euan Robson): I thank members for their speeches. For the most part, this has been an informed, interesting and constructive debate. The record of our discussions will undoubtedly help to shape the agenda for the crucial work of the 21st century social work group in securing the future of social work services.

I echo the comments of Robin Harper and others that it is a privilege to speak for the final time in this building. I for one shall miss it in the months ahead.

I thank many individuals and organisations for their messages of support for the debate and for setting up the review and the 21st century social work group.

I emphasise that social work services are essential. The Executive is determined to ensure that modern Scotland has social work services that are of the highest quality. Why? It is because those who work in social work services can change people's lives for the better. We ought to celebrate their achievements as we did at the care accolades 2004 a short time ago. I record my thanks, as other members have done during the debate, to all who labour long, hard and often unrecognised to help their fellow citizens.

We will ask the social work group to take a fundamental look at what we ask of social work services. We will rule in nothing and we will rule out nothing. If that means legislative change, so be it. As Scott Barrie remarked, it is after all 36 years since the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 and society has changed markedly in that time, although he was right to say that we must retain the fundamental principles of that act.

I remind members of three key elements of 21st century social work. First, we must ask what is the core purpose of social work in modern Scotland. Is it care and welfare of individuals? Is it protection of vulnerable people, whatever their vulnerability? Is it promotion of social inclusion? Is it about enabling people to fulfil their potential and to make the most of their talents? I think that social work might be about some or all of those things, but we need to set out our priorities.

Secondly, how can we best deliver services? Local government faces a complex and demanding task in delivering social work services. We must strengthen partnerships across the sector. We need to examine joint working and commissioning arrangements and we need to look at the scope for new models of working. That means that we must identify what actions the Executive might take to remove the obstacles that prevent social workers and their partners, whether in the public or voluntary sectors, from delivering integrated services.

Robin Harper: In reference to the final rather rushed words of my speech, does the minister agree that, given that only 16 per cent of social workers work with young children and families, it should be a priority to investigate what long-term benefits would accrue if more attention were paid to children and young families?

Euan Robson: Yes, I agree. In fact, we have invested in a specific incentive scheme to try to encourage social workers to go into that area of work.

The third key element of 21st century social work is that essential services must have clear lines of accountability. As Peter Peacock said, the group will evaluate the role of the chief social work officer in providing professional leadership and quality

assurance. It will examine organisational structures and consider better commissioning arrangements. It will look at professional development and continuous improvement of standards. There will be no let-up in our drive to improve performance management, to promote better leadership and operational management and to develop the work force. I will speak about those matters in a minute.

I will now address some of the points that were made by members during this morning's debate. Margaret Mitchell mentioned the single correctional agency. The consultation on reducing reoffending has just closed and officials are analysing the results.

Pauline McNeill made a fair point about screening in hearings. She may be assured that we have picked up that point in the course of the review. If she cares to write to me about it, I will make absolutely certain that it is included.

Brian Adam made an important point about overseas recruitment. I see that he is not present—

Members: He is.

Euan Robson: I am sorry; he is here, but he has moved. I undertake to consider overseas recruitment. If Brian Adam would like to meet me for more discussion, I will be happy to do that.

I acknowledge the important point about supporting, motivating and training staff in order to retain them. Many members mentioned retention; it is not just a question of recruitment. The human resources group of the national work force group is addressing that using, for example, a series of seminars with various sectors to promote good practice. We have acknowledged excellence through the care accolades and we are developing an effective social care human resources network to address and ease retention problems.

From September 2005, there will be protection of title for social workers. We are also supporting the ADSW's initiative on supporting front-line staff.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am most reluctant to interrupt the minister, but the rising volume of conversation is making it difficult for the debate to be concluded properly. I appeal to members to hear out the rest of the debate courteously.

Euan Robson: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

It is true that 21st century social work looks ahead, but it is also building on significant recent progress. I remind members of what we have achieved in driving up standards. We have a new regulatory framework through the Scottish Social Services Council that combines high-quality service standards with registration of the work

force. Registration is tied to qualifications, competence and continuing learning. We have established the Scottish institute for excellence in social work education and we have introduced new honours-level degree qualifications as the minimum qualification for professional social work. As I mentioned, we will institute protection of title for social workers from September next year. We are making record investment, including an incentive scheme and £11 million to boost training. Some of that money will go into leadership training through the leading-to-deliver developments. Total resources have risen from £12.4 million for training to £25.7 million in the current financial year.

We are, with employers and other partners, building an effective partnership in the national work force group. We have more social workers in Scotland today than ever before. Demand remains high; there are still significant numbers of vacancies and I do not for a minute underestimate the problems that that creates. However, the tide is turning. Last December, local authorities reported to me that they had 4,257 social workers. Last month, that figure was 4,356, which is an increase of just short of 100 in six months. Last December, they reported 669 vacancies; that figure is now 611, which is a fall of 58 over the same period. Although we have a long way to go, we have made real progress and I believe that the future is bright.

Talented Scots want to train as professional social workers. In 1999, 397 students graduated as qualified social workers. By 2004, that annual number had risen to 509, which is an increase of 112 additional graduates just five years later. That additional number does not include the injection into the system that has been provided by the fast-track graduate recruitment scheme to which a number of members referred. We predict that the fast-track scheme will add another 150 graduates a year for the next three years. We expect there to be about 700 students graduating in 2008 as qualified social work professionals. Interest in the fast-track scheme is high: this spring, we attracted 1,700 graduate applications for only 150 places. Let there be no mistake about the amount of positive interest out there in social work careers.

Our additional tactic for attracting bright young talent is paying dividends. The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service reports a 26 per cent increase in applications for undergraduate programmes. We must all work together to harness that rich potential. I put on record how encouraged I am by the positive response of social work professionals and employers to our initiative.

We must keep the purpose of the exercise to the fore. It is about creating better outcomes for people who rely on social work services. The test

of its success will be how it changes people's lives. We need the results of the 21st century social work group to ensure, for example, better protection for our most vulnerable children and adults, better outcomes for young people who are looked after and better quality of life for those who use social work services.

I welcome this opportunity to hear members' views today—the debate marks the start of a process. We are determined that 21st century social work will look outwards and that it will be inclusive. I look forward to hearing the views of people throughout Scotland who want to contribute to ensuring that essential social work services are excellent social work services.

We have begun the task of ensuring that a profession that has perhaps been neglected in the past has a positive and bright future. We must do that for the people of Scotland and for the most vulnerable citizens in our land so that we can improve their prospects and make the best of their potential and their talents in a Scotland that has a declining population and where we cannot afford to waste the talents and potential of any individual.

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): This will be the last First Minister's question time in the Church of Scotland Assembly Hall.

Cabinet (Meetings)

1. Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): I am sorry for the delay, Presiding Officer. I was just checking that Mr McAveety was in his place.

For the 83rd and last time, I ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S2F-970)

I hazard a guess that the First Minister will say that he will discuss issues of importance to the people of Scotland. [*Laughter.*]

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): I was going to say that Cabinet will meet during the summer recess to agree budgets for the next three years—and to discuss issues of importance to the people of Scotland.

I think that everyone will join me in wishing Mr Swinney very well. I assume that, if everything goes well inside the Scottish National Party during the summer, this will be Mr Swinney's last First Minister's question time—at least for a while. I wish him well and I hope that when he is free from the constraints of being the leader of the Opposition he will occasionally find time to join me in working for Scotland. I hope that we will share ideas as well as debates and I genuinely hope that he and his wife have an enjoyable and relaxing summer. [*Applause.*]

Mr Swinney: I thank the First Minister for his kind remarks and good wishes. I assure him that I intend to have a restful summer—I hope that it will be a great deal more restful than his happens to be and I am sure that it will be. I assure him that I am very committed at all times to working for Scotland.

The First Minister made a statement this morning about the promotion of Scotland, which I warmly welcome. He said:

"We will make greater use of Scotland's flag. We will fly our ancient flag with pride. The Saltire unites Scots across the world. It is our national symbol, one that transcends politics."

I very much agree with his remarks.

The weekend press reported the First Minister as saying that he wanted the saltire to fly at 500 locations around the world. In a spirit of consensus, will the First Minister add two locations to the list: the United Nations; and the European Union?

The First Minister: Should we ever be fortunate enough to organise receptions at the United Nations, I would be happy to make a special request on those occasions. As Mr Swinney knows, the great benefit of devolution to Scotland is, of course, not only that we can promote our national flag and our national interests in Scotland, but that we can share the strength of the United Kingdom, too. Of course, inside Europe we fly our flag in the best possible way, with an excellent office at the heart of Brussels, where we represent Scotland's interests very well, as I am sure that Mr Swinney would agree.

Mr Swinney: I hear what the First Minister says, but, not for the first time, he does not go as far in his answer as I would dearly love him to go. The SNP has given a warm welcome to a variety of Government initiatives over the years, such as Scotland the Brand, which was launched by Donald Dewar in 1997, the Scottish international forum, which was launched by Jim Wallace in 2002 and the ministerial group to explore the promotion of Scotland abroad that was set up by Iain Gray in 2002. However, does the First Minister agree that the best way to promote our country would be to promote Scotland as a full member of the international community?

The First Minister: Devolution gives us the benefits of the best of both worlds. We have a unique opportunity in Scotland to promote our country—I will return to that in a second—and we have the benefit of the influence that the UK gives us, both in Europe and in the United Nations, where the UK clearly continues to have a major impact. We have the opportunity through devolution—it is five years to the day since the official opening of this Parliament—to promote our country across the world and to do that more effectively than we have done in the past, using not just symbols but real substance to describe a modern Scotland that has dynamic cities, modern companies, great people, a fantastic landscape and a fantastic future ahead of it.

I hope that Mr Swinney, the members of the Scottish nationalist party and whoever the new leader might be will join us to ensure that, when we promote Scotland abroad, we do so in as united a fashion as possible.

Mr Swinney: The First Minister mentioned the benefits of United Kingdom representation. Let me remind him of something else that he said this morning:

"The predominant image of Scotland is a mythical one. Castles, glens, mist and mountains."

He went on to say:

"These perceptions of Scotland have become entrenched."

They certainly have become entrenched. The British embassy in Washington promotes Scotland in the following terms:

“Edinburgh is famous for its Castle. Our character is synonymous with the kilt, haggis and the Loch Ness Monster”—

whatever that happens to mean. Is not that precisely the image that we are trying to get away from, but which the United Kingdom Government is actively promoting on our behalf?

I do not doubt the First Minister's patriotism or commitment to Scotland. We have all witnessed the style and aplomb with which he wears the national dress of our country. However, is it not the logic and substance of the argument that he has advanced this morning that we in Scotland should not leave it to others to speak for us, but should speak for ourselves?

The First Minister: We in Scotland do speak for ourselves, and we choose to do so not just ourselves but by using the strength, might, power and influence of the United Kingdom to assist us in our cause. We do that because it gives us a unique influence around the world. It gives us the opportunity not just to utilise the resources of Britain internationally, in Washington and elsewhere, but to establish, as we have done in Washington, our own Scottish office in the embassy to promote Scotland and Scottish businesses and interests.

We have another unique selling point, which transcends the historical image of Scotland—the image of “Braveheart”, the mountains, the mist and the myths—and which is relevant to modern Scotland, our companies, our cities and the events that we host: the people of Scotland. Ultimately, the people of Scotland—who chose devolution and who chose to create this Parliament five years ago—are the abiding image of both modern Scotland and traditional Scotland. If we use the image of our people, Scotland will be even more warmly welcomed across the world in years to come.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

2. Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): I, too, take the opportunity to acknowledge, on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives, Mr Swinney's final appearance as leader of his party. It is an onerous position, and I make it clear at this point that my leader is away only temporarily. We all wish Mr Swinney a happy and restful future and contentment in whatever he decides to do.

To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister and what issues he intends to raise. (S2F-969)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): I welcome Miss Goldie to First Minister's question time. I look forward to welcoming other women to First Minister's questions in September. Whether it is Roseanna Cunningham or Nicola Sturgeon, I look forward to that in due course. [*Interruption.*] I am not sure that I would welcome it quite so much if it was Alex Neil, but let us wait and see what happens.

Having occasionally described Mr Swinney as the temporary leader of the permanent Opposition, I hope that I am not necessarily welcoming Miss Goldie as the temporary leader of the almost real Opposition.

Miss Goldie: The First Minister has not answered my question. I had anticipated that what he might say would probably be along the lines of “At some point in the near future, when matters of relevance will be discussed.” Perhaps when the happy encounter takes place, the First Minister might like to discuss with the Prime Minister efficiencies in government. Last week, the Minister for Finance and Public Services, Mr Kerr, told Parliament that the Executive intended

“to attack waste, bureaucracy and duplication in Scotland's public sector.”—[*Official Report*, 24 June 2004; c 9577.]

Does the First Minister really believe that spending £300,000 to establish that the saltire is Scotland's best promotional symbol represents good value for money?

The First Minister: If that was the case, it would be very silly indeed. No one in the Executive or anywhere else has spent money to establish that the saltire is Scotland's national flag. However, in an age in which international marketing and international image are so important for countries as well as companies, it is important that we research our image and that, in making decisions about our place on the international stage, we conduct ourselves in a way that is as informed as possible. We have conducted research and I have outlined this morning the outcome of that research and the programme of immediate action that we will take to improve Scotland's international image. When such actions take place and that image improves, our investment in research will have been well made.

Miss Goldie: We all laud the effective and successful marketing of Scotland—nobody would disagree that that should be done. However, the problem is that every Scot in the land could have told the First Minister that the saltire would be a recognisable symbol and nobody would have charged a brass farthing for the privilege of doing so.

Is not what we are discussing part of a wider problem? Last week, Mr Kerr promised us that his efficiency review would save £1 billion, but then—

bizarrely and incredibly—he denied that there had been any significant waste in the previous five years. The First Minister then chipped in and told us that the public sector was too big, but that he would not cut it. Will the First Minister now give us the definitive Executive position? Does he, like other parties in the chamber, believe in big government and small people, or does he, like the Conservatives, believe in small government and big people?

The First Minister: I believe in government that is the right size, that is effective and that makes a difference. The Government has a role in investing in infrastructure to boost the work of private companies and to grow our economy, in providing key public services—sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly—and in establishing leadership for the country, which is what we have tried to establish this morning with the launch of our initiative to promote Scotland's international image.

In the past five years, there has been increased investment in our public services in Scotland, which has improved results in our schools, reduced deaths from heart disease, improved our transport infrastructure and increased the use of public transport, while unemployment and poverty have gone down. The attack on and the clear-up of recorded crime have improved. Such investments have been well made, but after five years of devolution, now is the right time to review budgets to ensure that we are spending money as efficiently as possible and to reallocate resources for further investments that can improve the quality of life and economic growth in Scotland.

Miss Goldie: The First Minister is an expert at one thing—he is a master of bluster. However, even he has eclipsed his best efforts. He is out of touch and his statements are utterly at variance with reality.

On Monday, the First Minister told the Fraser of Allander Institute that

“Scotland was a place of big ideas in the past.”

The problem is that neither he nor his Government has any big ideas for the future. When I say big ideas, I am not talking about flying a saltire in Salzburg, but about really big ideas, like those that are offered by my party: lowering business rates; investing in roads and transport—which the business community is crying out for; devolving power to teachers, nurses and doctors; and giving parents and patients the right to choose in schooling and health care. I invite the First Minister to endorse such policies today so that he can really start delivering for Scotland.

The First Minister: As most of us learned at an early stage, quality is as important as quantity. Big ideas are important, but the quality and impact of

those ideas are also important. The Parliament should never adopt big ideas that would cause chaos in the classroom, run down our national health service, divert essential resources into subsidising people who can afford to pay for their operations and run down the investment in infrastructure that is essential for growing Scotland's economy. The big ideas that the Parliament should adopt are: reversing Scotland's population decline by attracting fresh talent to this country; promoting Scotland's international image more effectively and making our mark on the international stage; reforming our public services—not only in education and in health, but in criminal justice and in other areas; building volunteering in our communities, which Margaret Curran spoke about yesterday; and tackling antisocial behaviour and putting respect back at the heart of our neighbourhoods.

That is the kind of Scotland that we are trying to create, those are the big ideas that make a real difference and those are the reasons why the people of Scotland voted for devolution and why the Parliament was created, five years ago. In the autumn, the Parliament will have the opportunity to move on, to live up to those dreams and to make them happen for Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: There is one constituency question from Mr Duncan McNeil.

Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): As the First Minister is aware, Argyll and Clyde NHS Board is reverting to type and is once again seeking to deal with the undoubted difficulties that face the national health service throughout the country by centralising everything in sight. When he next meets the Prime Minister, will the First Minister take time to discuss how the Westminster Government is meeting those challenges and what can be done to find a better way forward than the deeply unpopular and questionable plans that are currently being presented in places such as Argyll and Clyde?

The First Minister: I discuss such matters with the Prime Minister regularly; however, I am keen that we in Scotland should devise our own solutions for our own circumstances. We need to ensure that our health service performs as effectively as possible, with the best possible technology and in the best locations. As many services as possible must be delivered locally, too. Although changes are taking place in health technology and the provision of health services, which require centres of excellence to be established, there is also a pressing need and demand in our local communities to have services delivered as locally and humanly as possible. Getting the right balance, not just in Argyll and Clyde but elsewhere in Scotland, is the aim of the Executive.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): I invite the First Minister, on behalf of the whole Parliament, to send our deepest condolences to Rose and George Gentle over the tragic loss of their son on Monday in Iraq.

To ask the First Minister what the top priority will be for discussion at the next Cabinet meeting. (S2F-985)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): I express my deep condolences not just to the family of the young man who was killed in Iraq this week, but to the families of others who have been killed not just in Iraq but serving our forces elsewhere in the world in recent times. The Parliament does not have responsibility for defence, but I hope that it has a strong loyalty to those from Scotland who serve our armed forces.

I repeat my earlier answer to Mr Swinney about the next meeting of the Cabinet.

Tommy Sheridan: I hope that social exclusion will be at the top of the agenda of the next Cabinet meeting. It is a sad reality that, after five years of the Scottish Parliament, far too many Scots are still socially excluded through low pay, poverty and ill health. Does the First Minister agree that the Executive has not done enough to tackle social exclusion? Further, does he agree that, given the fact that £450 million of public money has been spent on building the politicians' palace at Holyrood, it would be completely unacceptable and socially exclusive to charge individuals for tours of the Scottish Parliament?

The First Minister: The policy on the operational use of the new building is a matter that the Presiding Officer rightly and carefully is protecting for the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body—it is devolved to the corporate body—and I do not intend to interfere in that or to express too many opinions on the corporate body's decisions.

Five years on, we have made a dramatic difference to tackling poverty in Scotland through a range of programmes, not least in partnership with our colleagues at Westminster, through which targeted action is making a real difference in tens of thousands of homes. For example, our programmes to tackle fuel poverty in Scotland have been particularly effective and are admired elsewhere. Not just in the past five years, but in the seven years since 1997, we have seen in Scotland 170,000 older people lifted from poverty; 210,000 children lifted from poverty; and a total of 540,000 individuals lifted out of poverty. I believe that the Parliament can be proud of that achievement; however, it is only a start and we must build on it.

Tommy Sheridan: I actually asked the First Minister for his opinion on this matter. Does he agree that we should charge the public to see a building that they have already spent £450 million on? Does he agree that doing so would socially exclude the very people we should be trying to include? Does he agree that our new Scottish Parliament building should open its arms to and welcome all our citizens, or does he support the idea of charging them for a building that they have already paid for?

The Presiding Officer: Before the First Minister responds, I should say that the matter is quite rightly for me and the SPCB. There is of course no charge for the basic democratic process of people coming to committees and the chamber and seeing their members. Instead, charging will be made exclusively for long architectural tours.

If you wish to respond to the question, First Minister, on you go.

The First Minister: I do not intend to interfere in the SPCB's decisions or to express opinions about them at this time. However, I will say that people in my constituency and those I meet across Scotland who live on low incomes, with ill health and in a poor environment and who are concerned about the educational opportunities that are available for their children want me as the First Minister to address issues such as providing those educational opportunities, providing better health services and providing opportunities to get out of poverty, to get jobs, to get a decent income for them and their families and to live in decent housing. I say to Mr Sheridan that I face those challenges day in, day out. I am prepared to concentrate on them and I hope that he is prepared to do so as well.

Child Protection Services

4. Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): To ask the First Minister how the Bichard inquiry will influence any reform of child protection services in Scotland and what role Scottish police forces will play in facilitating, or advising on, reforms in England and Wales. (S2F-972)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): Although the Bichard inquiry report compares the existing system in Scotland favourably with that in England and Wales, we cannot be complacent about child protection. In particular, we need to ensure that we are able to share information across borders to protect children and young people. We will work with colleagues in England and Wales to achieve that, and Scottish police forces will be actively involved in those deliberations.

Rhona Brankin: I very much welcome the fact that the Bichard report held Scotland up as a

model of exchanging information between police forces. However, I agree with the First Minister that there is no room for complacency as far as our children's safety is concerned.

Is the First Minister aware of concerns about Disclosure Scotland's efficiency and will he inform us of any action that is in hand to address those problems?

The First Minister: I am aware of those concerns. Indeed, I discussed them yesterday with representatives of the Guide Association Scotland at an event at Holyrood. A number of professional and voluntary organisations and groups across Scotland are concerned about the situation with Disclosure Scotland and we have recently taken action to improve the efficiency of the service. Additional staff have been engaged to work on processing and the information technology provider has been asked to improve the functioning of the systems. I am told that, as a result, the average processing time for correctly completed applications in the week ending 27 June was 13 days.

I am aware that individuals and groups are particularly concerned that, when relatively minor things go wrong in the completion of application forms, they lead to very long delays in processing the forms. The Minister for Justice and other ministers are currently discussing with Disclosure Scotland and others how to tackle that problem.

Scotland (Overseas Promotion)

5. Richard Lochhead (North East Scotland) (SNP): To ask the First Minister whether he intends to introduce any new measures to promote Scotland overseas. (S2F-982)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): Mr Lochhead will be delighted to hear that today I have announced a package of measures to improve Scotland's international image, which are the outcome of research into attitudes towards and knowledge of Scotland. Those measures include introducing new promotional materials and visual images; utilising Foreign and Commonwealth Office posts and British Council offices across the world to develop our international networks further; and building relationships with key international media outlets and bringing them to Scotland so that they can see for themselves what Scotland has to offer.

Richard Lochhead: I flag up to the First Minister that I warmly welcome his support for the saltire, which I know he will want to ensure flies as the flag at the new Holyrood building when we move in very soon.

I ask the First Minister to acknowledge that, although it is important that we investigate how Scotland is perceived overseas, the key to

success is how we actively promote that image. Is he aware not only that we are missing out on the opportunities enjoyed by independent countries, but that many people feel that we are not punching our weight even as a devolved country? We must bear in mind the fact that the Flemish, for example, have 77 distinct offices overseas to promote themselves. Does the First Minister envision a greater presence for Scotland overseas, so that we can capitalise on the enormous good will that exists for Scotland internationally, as is identified in the Executive's research that was published this morning?

The First Minister: The Flemish have a devolved Government and they promote themselves effectively overseas. They do not need to separate themselves from the rest of Belgium to achieve that, but of course that is a decision entirely for them.

I hope that in putting forward his ambitions for the promotion of Scotland, Mr Lochhead will agree that research is important. I notice that he showed a lack of ambition on that front earlier in the week when he criticised the fact that the Executive had spent money on the research. I hope that the publication of the research today and of the actions that we have outlined, which will be immediate, will make a significant difference. I hope that we can build more of a cross-party consensus on the effort and that we can work together to achieve the goal. If we do that, although we might have debates about the constitutional status of Scotland, I hope that we will be able to ensure that people throughout the world see modern Scotland for what it is: a successful, thriving country that is doing very well with a devolved Scottish Parliament.

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Is the First Minister happy that £300,000 has been spent to tell the people of Scotland that their national flag is an important symbol of their country? Will he be kind enough to tell us why he has scrapped Scotland the Brand, which was another important symbol in promoting Scotland?

The First Minister: We have not scrapped Scotland the Brand and we have not spent £300,000 identifying that the St Andrew's cross is Scotland's national flag.

Another thing that I said at my press conference this morning was that I believe that all members of the Parliament—including me, but everyone else too—have a duty and a responsibility come September to rise to the occasion in the new building and to raise the level of debate. I hope that Mr McGrigor will be one of those involved in that.

Genetically Modified Crops

6. Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): To ask the First Minister whether trials of genetically modified crops were carried out under safety guidelines issued by the supply chain initiative on modified agricultural crops. (S2F-988)

The First Minister (Mr Jack McConnell): The guidelines issued by the supply chain initiative on modified agricultural crops were developed by the industry for farmers participating in farm-scale evaluations. The guidelines set out proposed separation distances between GM and non-GM crops and are based on internationally recognised criteria for ensuring high purity in seed production. Safety is dealt with separately under the conditions of consent, which are enforced by the GM inspectorate.

Mr Ruskell: Perhaps in answering his last question in this chamber, the First Minister will do just that and answer the question. There has been a series of conflicting accounts on whether the GM trials were carried out using safety guidelines. Ross Finnie told the Parliament that the safety guidelines would apply to GM trials, but the head of his GM team said on oath that safety guidelines did not apply to GM trials in Scotland, and a farmer who conducted one of the trials admitted on oath that he did not even know that the guidelines existed. Is not it the case that the Executive's management of the GM crop trials was a mess? Will the First Minister agree to put the record straight on how all the GM trials in Scotland were carried out, by releasing the full details of the licences and the safety guidelines used?

The First Minister: The last point is a point of detail, the answer to which Mr Finnie will know much better than I do. I reinforce the point that I made in my earlier answer, which is that the guidelines that were issued by the supply chain initiative on modified agricultural crops were developed by the industry itself for farmers who participate in farm-scale evaluations. They are separate from the safety conditions of consent that are enforced by the GM inspectorate. Perhaps Mr Ruskell is mixing the two issues—I presume not deliberately. I would be happy to ensure that he receives full clarification from the ministers concerned.

Points of Order

12:30

Carolyn Leckie (Central Scotland) (SSP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): I think that Mr Gallie gave notice of a point of order first. I will take him first.

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): Following on from the points of order that were raised at the end of question time and at the end of business last Thursday, did the Presiding Officer and First Minister come together to discuss the ministerial code of conduct? Further, has the Presiding Officer given consideration to the fact that if a minister arrives late and is criticised, or is likely to be criticised, during the course of question time, they should not depart early?

The Presiding Officer: On the first point, the First Minister and I did not come together, but our respective views were absolutely and adequately made known to the Parliament. On the second issue, there were awkwardities on this occasion, but I am absolutely sure that such an eventuality will not arise again.

Carolyn Leckie: Presiding Officer, I gave you a wee bit of notice of my point of order. Following the First Minister's inability to confirm the situation in relation to charging for entry to the new Parliament, can the Presiding Officer—*[Interruption.]* Excuse me.

The Presiding Officer: If it is a point of order, get to it now, please.

Carolyn Leckie: It is a point of order. Can the Presiding Officer give Parliament the appropriate information and the opportunity to debate the appropriateness of charging people who have already paid for the Parliament through their taxes an additional fee to be allowed entry? What opportunity will we be given? For example, would you be minded to accept a motion without notice to schedule a statement this afternoon, so that the Parliament has an opportunity to discuss whether it is appropriate to charge—

The Presiding Officer: I am being very patient.

Carolyn Leckie:—so that it can avoid another public relations disaster before the end of this session?

The Presiding Officer: One of the ways you get PR disasters is if information is misinterpreted to the public. *[Applause.]*

Carolyn Leckie: Tell us. What is it then?

The Presiding Officer: I make it absolutely clear that this Parliament has duly elected members of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body to decide on such matters. They consulted widely. I make it absolutely clear that the fundamental democratic right of the people of Scotland to meet their representatives is free. It is free to come to debates. It is free to come to committees. It is free to meet members. It is free to be in the front hall. Anything else is misrepresentation of the situation.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: Order. I am not finished speaking. For those people who want what could be called special tours—the architectural tours, the frippery bits, the guided explanations—there will be charging. The tours are long and the charging will pay exclusively for the guides who guide the tours. There is no profit element whatsoever.

Tommy Sheridan rose—

The Presiding Officer: That is the end of that. I suspend Parliament for lunch.

12:33

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Environment and Rural Development

Fishing (Public Access)

1. Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it has any plans to improve public access to fishing on rivers. (S2O-2883)

The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Allan Wilson): The Executive's partnership agreement contains a commitment to improve access to watercourses for anglers and to remove prohibitive restrictions. Officials are working with all interested parties to address that and other issues relating to freshwater fisheries management.

Mr Home Robertson: Does the minister recall that, in April 2000, one of his predecessors—a pretty radical kind of guy—launched some alarmingly radical proposals for the improvement of public access to fishing on rivers? As the House of Lords is no longer in a position to exercise a veto on behalf of landowners in Scotland, will the minister seek an early opportunity to introduce legislation in this session to maximise public access to licences to fish on Scottish rivers?

Allan Wilson: Being a radical kind of minister, I, too, welcome the diminishing influence of their lordships and am pleased to be able to tell John Home Robertson and other members that there is a provisional slot for a fisheries bill this session. That will provide the means for repealing the Freshwater and Salmon Fisheries (Scotland) Act 1976, which would be widely welcomed. We are in the process of consulting on what we would wish to put in its place.

Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West) (Ind): Does the minister agree that the best way in which to improve public access would be to repeal the notorious 1976 act and to replace it with legislation to set up a democratically constituted Scottish anglers trust that would administer all freshwater fishing in Scotland?

In the meantime, will he reject any new applications for protection orders under the 1976 act, in view of the fact that such orders would more appropriately be called exclusion orders and given that the underhand way in which the Scottish Executive dealt with the Assynt - Coigach Area Protection Order 2004 (SSI 2004/260) has

been severely criticised not only by me but by the Subordinate Legislation Committee?

Allan Wilson: I dispute that the order to which Mr Canavan refers was dealt with in an underhand way. I would expand on my view if more time were available. While the existing legislation remains in force, people remain entitled to make applications and we are required to continue to deal with the applications according to the requirements of the legislation. I inform the member that I acted to ensure that the timescale of that protection order was set with reference to our parliamentary timetable.

I recognise Mr Canavan's long-standing commitment to this subject over the past 30 years or more and repeat the commitment that I gave to John Home Robertson: we intend to repeal the Freshwater and Salmon Fisheries (Scotland) Act 1976 and replace it with more modern mechanisms, which will include the trusts to which the member refers.

Renewable Energy Targets

2. Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what the impact on the environment will be of meeting its renewable energy targets for 2010 and 2020. (S2O-2991)

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): The ambitious targets that we have set for renewable energy reflect our desire to protect Scotland's environment by reducing harmful greenhouse gas emissions. Any environmental impact issues raised by individual developments will continue to be properly and thoroughly assessed against robust planning guidelines.

Phil Gallie: Does the minister accept the recent comments made by the Enterprise and Culture Committee about renewable energy? Does he recognise that the establishment of wind farms across Scotland will result in little reduction in CO₂ emissions, given that the constant back-up that wind energy requires will always produce CO₂ emissions? Does he agree that the extension of the 400kV transmission lines that will be required if wind farms are erected across Scotland will be detrimental to the environment of Scotland?

Ross Finnie: The member has raised two separate issues. First, in setting the 40 per cent target, the Scottish Executive made it clear that we were keen that there should not be a reliance on wind power and that wave and tidal power should play an integral part in achieving the target. That is why the Scottish Executive is pursuing the question of an intermediary technology institute in Aberdeen and why we are funding the research institute in Orkney. I believe that wave and tidal power will make a major contribution to a seriously

sustainable energy supply. Secondly, the Scottish Executive is anxious to work with the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets and the British electricity trading and transmission arrangements to ensure that improvements to the infrastructure and the grid are made in a way that does not disadvantage Scottish consumers and that will give us the opportunity of developing renewable energy over the widest possible geographical area.

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): Picking up on the points that Phil Gallie raised, does the minister accept that linking his remarks with the committee report that was published yesterday is a total distortion of anything that the committee, of which I am the convener, said in its conclusions? Secondly, does he agree that the successful development of renewable energy will necessitate the strengthening of the grid, given that most of that development will take place around the coasts and in the rural areas of Scotland, far from the market for electricity? Does he also agree that it is not sufficient just to rely on market forces to provide the finance for or the direction of that strengthening?

Ross Finnie: Obviously it is disappointing for the convener of the committee to find his report being distorted by another member in the chamber. I see that Mr Gallie is looking suitably chastised. [*Interruption.*] Mr Morgan may laugh, but I can only say that that is how it looked to me—he might be getting a different view from where he is.

The matter of the grid is extraordinarily important, as the Scottish Executive has consistently acknowledged. On sharing costs and pump priming, I go back to the latter part of my answer to Mr Gallie. Those matters are dependent on our engaging with Ofgem and BETTA. The arrangements for sharing costs on a United Kingdom basis—not something that Mr Morgan might want to advocate—would be of great benefit to Scotland and the development of its renewable resource.

Chris Ballance (South of Scotland) (Green): As a member of the Enterprise and Culture Committee, I associate myself with the convener's remarks about the report's findings. Is the minister aware that one of those findings is that energy demand reduction is a vital component of any Scottish energy policy? Will he therefore support measures to increase energy efficiency as a way of conserving the environment?

Ross Finnie: Absolutely. Indeed, as the member is aware, we have done so. Comparatively recently, we took measures to change the building control regulations to improve the energy efficiency of new build. That has to play its part. However, there are always two sides. We need to try to dampen down demand at the same

time as trying to increase the amount of dedicated renewable resource.

Planning (Third-party Right of Appeal)

3. Carolyn Leckie (Central Scotland) (SSP): To ask the Scottish Executive what input its Environment and Rural Affairs Department has had to the consultation on the third-party right of appeal in respect of planning applications with an environmental impact. (S2O-2967)

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): It is normal practice for relevant departments in the Scottish Executive to liaise on work that cuts across their respective interests. My officials have worked with colleagues in the Development Department during the preparation of the consultation paper on rights of appeal in planning.

Carolyn Leckie: I hope that the minister will bear in mind the example of Dunbeth park in Coatbridge, where the public-private partnership, if it is allowed to proceed, will result in the removal of natural parkland and the loss of habitat and trees—the lungs of the surrounding area. Floodlights, security fencing, Astroturf and entrance charges will also be introduced. Will he ensure that those things do not happen? Bearing in mind that environmental impact, will he use his good offices to put pressure on all concerned to ensure that the community cannot be ignored and that a third-party right of appeal will be assured?

Ross Finnie: Those are two quite separate matters. First, as the Minister for Communities will confirm, any application for a development of that magnitude requires to be accompanied by an environmental impact statement. Indeed, the member is well aware that the decision was the subject of a call-in by Scottish ministers and the reporter who was appointed duly came to a conclusion based on the evidence, which included an environmental impact assessment.

Secondly, reform of the planning system involves consideration of a wide range of issues, including third-party right of appeal, on which the Executive is currently consulting. However, the third-party right of appeal alone will not resolve the complex matter on the site to which the member referred. With all due respect, even if there had been wider public access to appeal, some form of arbitration would still have been required at the end of that process—it is likely that reporters or other arbiters would still have had to have been appointed to make a final determination, notwithstanding any extension of the right of appeal. Land designation is an issue that requires the right control measures to be in place at the outset. I understand what the member says, but I do not believe that a third-party right of appeal is a panacea for dealing with such issues.

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): I am grateful for the minister's response to Carolyn Leckie's question. Does he agree that, although the merits of introducing a third-party right of appeal must be carefully considered, the planning system needs to engage with communities effectively at an early stage to ensure that bad planning decisions are avoided? Given that a third-party right of appeal will not always ensure that communities get the decisions that they want, does he agree that what Scotland needs is good planning decisions and good planning law?

Ross Finnie: I acknowledge Karen Whitefield's constituency interest. I made it clear in my earlier response that I do not believe that a third-party right of appeal would have provided a panacea in this instance. I am sure that my colleague Margaret Curran would agree with me on that—indeed, she has made it clear in her consultation on the third-party right of appeal that such a right would be only one element in the planning process. Karen Whitefield's well-made points about the need to engage the public early in the process will be considered by my colleague in any reform or adjustments that she makes to the planning system.

Domestic Water Conservation

4. Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what priority it places on domestic water conservation measures. (S2O-2921)

The Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Ross Finnie): I am tempted to preface my remarks by saying that I make them despite the recent weather. Nevertheless, domestic water conservation measures are a high priority—and the economic and environmental benefits of conservation will be greatest—where water resources are scarce. Such measures benefit water consumers and the environment.

Scott Barrie: I concur that this might be difficult to recollect given the amount of rainfall that we have had over the past few weeks, but there was a distinct lack of water in most of our reservoirs last October and November, when drought orders had to be imposed. What additional steps do the Scottish Executive and/or Scottish Water intend to take to reduce household consumption of water? In particular, what steps can be taken to enable householders to use less water in future?

Ross Finnie: As Scott Barrie has said, there are two aspects to the issue. There is an imperative on Scottish Water to ensure that it prevents undue consumption, misuse and contamination of the water supply. Scottish Water makes use of those powers. In its water efficiency project, it is considering ways of optimising water use and of encouraging users, including domestic users, to

use water more efficiently. A leaflet on water efficiency for domestic customers has been produced and a forthcoming leaflet will address more efficient use of water in other domestic and non-domestic circumstances. In the interests of water efficiency, Scottish Water recently obtained a relaxation of the byelaws to allow retrofitting of dual and interruptible flushing mechanisms for toilets.

Salmon Farming

5. Mr Alasdair Morrison (Western Isles) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress is being made with the application to the European Union to safeguard the Scottish salmon farming industry. (S2O-2955)

The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Allan Wilson): Having carried out a thorough preliminary investigation, the European Commission has reported its findings to the member states. We believe that we have significant support from the member states, which will allow the Commission to introduce provisional measures at this stage. We think that that is good news for the industry, which has been under severe financial pressure, mainly due to cheap imports of salmon coming into the European Union from Norway and being sold below production cost.

Mr Morrison: I thank the minister for that encouraging response. I applaud him and his United Kingdom colleagues for their collective effort to secure measures to safeguard our fish farming industries. When can we expect the measures to be put in place and for how long will the protection be used?

Allan Wilson: The Scottish Executive has worked closely with the UK Government on the issue. That has resulted in the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and the Minister of State for Trade and Investment, who has responsibility for foreign trade, all becoming involved in discussions with the EU on our behalf. That is an example of the UK working in partnership in the interests of the Scottish aquaculture industry. I hope to see the measures introduced within the next few days or the next week. They will operate for 200 days, which will be important in providing the stability that our aquaculture industry needs at this time.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): It would be churlish of me not to welcome the execution of a U-turn by the Westminster Government, even though it has taken five years. Does the minister recognise the parlous economic state of the salmon farming industry in this country? Does he agree that, in order to safeguard it, three simple measures will be required? Those measures are, first, to remove

the rental charges exacted by the Crown Estate; secondly, to heed the arguments put forward by Scottish Quality Salmon and others with regard to the regulatory regime that applies here but not in Norway or in other countries; and, finally, to promote salmon as a healthy part of people's diet and as being especially beneficial to the cognitive development of the unborn child.

Allan Wilson: Mr Ewing is quite wrong to suggest that there has been a U-turn on the matter on the part of the UK Government or of anyone else. That suggestion is symptomatic of the policyless, directionless and leaderless state of the SNP at the current time. Perhaps Mr Ewing wants to fill that leadership gap.

I agree with Mr Ewing that the health benefits of eating two portions of oily fish per week cannot be overstated and that salmon provides a reliable and nutritious source of that dietary element. We shall continue to work and act on behalf of the industry. The aquaculture framework strategy, which we set up, is working closely with the industry to ensure that it is as competitive as it can be, but the safeguard application has clearly shown that the Scottish industry is as competitive as the Norwegian industry is, to within less than 1p in the pound.

Mr Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Although attempts to reduce Norwegian, Chilean and Faroese salmon imports to the European Union might appear to help the Scottish industry, does the minister accept that nearly half our industry is Norwegian owned? Is he concerned that attempts to block salmon imports from Norway, however well intentioned, might lead to a salmon price war that could eventually have serious repercussions for Norwegian-owned salmon farms in Scotland?

Allan Wilson: I was absolutely astonished to hear Struan Stevenson expressing similar sentiments during the European election campaign and I think that the Scottish public gave the Conservatives their response. I do not think that there is the danger that Mr Brocklebank describes; if I did, we would not have pursued the approach that we did. The needs of multinational industries in the aquaculture sector are quite different from those in the indigenously owned sector, if I can call it that, who want bigger sites and better regulation. That is what we are working with that sector of the industry to procure through the framework strategy.

Marine Environment

6. Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to improve Scotland's marine environment. (S2O-2960)

The Deputy Minister for Environment and Rural Development (Allan Wilson): I will give the member the answer when I find it. I have now found it—I apologise to the Presiding Officer for the delay.

The Scottish Executive has developed a number of initiatives to ensure the sustainable management of our marine environment. Those include the biodiversity duty in the Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 and its underpinning Scottish biodiversity strategy, both of which extend to the marine environment; the sustainable Scottish marine environment initiative, which is piloting ways of delivering an ecosystems approach to the management of human impacts on our seas; the Scottish coastal forum's commitment to draft a strategy for the management of Scotland's coasts by 2006; and the current strategic review of inshore fisheries. In addition, we are currently consulting on a strategic framework for Scotland's marine environment. I am sure that members will agree that that answer was worth waiting for.

Richard Baker: The answer was comprehensive and it shows that the minister is aware that improving our marine environment is vital environmentally and for those whose livelihoods depend on it. One approach that has been taken in other countries to achieve that aim is the establishment of marine national parks. Does he agree that the establishment of a national coastline park in Scotland could help to ensure the proper management and improvement of the marine environment?

Allan Wilson: I agree with that, as I stood on that political platform at the election. The aim of the strategic framework for Scotland's marine environment is to bring a more coherent approach to the Executive's activities on the marine environment. The framework brings together existing or planned initiatives and sets out what I hope is a clear vision for keeping a clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse marine environment. I have no doubt in my mind that a marine national park will play an important role in that process.

Health and Community Care

Hospital and Primary Care Facilities (Lothian)

1. Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): Good Lord, it is me again.

To ask the Scottish Executive what progress has been made with plans for the provision of new hospital and primary care facilities in the Lothian area. (S2O-2884)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm): I understand that, at its meeting on 23 June 2004, Lothian NHS Board approved the move to public consultation on its three strategy areas: the mental health review; the pan-Lothian review of older people's services; and the better acute care in Lothian project. The outcome of the consultation process will set a clear direction for the new hospitals planned in Lothian, including the provision of hospital services in Haddington.

Mr Home Robertson: Is the minister aware that four years have passed since people in East Lothian registered strong support for plans to develop new hospital and primary care facilities at Roodlands in Haddington and in Musselburgh? Does he share the concerns that Susan Deacon and I, as constituency members, have expressed about the long bureaucratic and consultation delays to the fulfilment of the promises? Now that NHS Lothian has endorsed a strategy to increase the number of hospital places in East Lothian from 204 to 236, can we stop talking about the plans and get on with the job of implementing them?

Malcolm Chisholm: I am assured by NHS Lothian that that is exactly what it is doing. There were particular reasons for the delay in Musselburgh, which were to do with the site. As I indicated in my previous answer, in Haddington the issue is now very much dependent on the outcomes of the consultation.

NHS Lothian should be congratulated in general on the extent to which it has developed so many new hospitals and health facilities over the past five years or so—perhaps I can say at this point that I will open the new community treatment centre in Leith next Friday. I think that NHS Lothian has achieved an excellent balance between centralising specialist services in specialist hospitals and delivering as many local services in local hospitals and community treatment centres as possible. It has been very successful in achieving that balance.

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): Does the minister share my concern about some of NHS Lothian's plans to reduce services at the Western general hospital, which I know is very important to him as well as to my constituents? Does he also share my concern about the decision to hold the important consultation on those plans over the summer months?

Malcolm Chisholm: Consultations often take place over the summer and I am sure that the length of the consultation will take that into account. It would be premature of me to make any detailed comment on NHS Lothian's current proposals, although obviously I have a local as well as a national interest in the Western general. As I indicated in my previous answer, NHS Lothian

is in general striking a good balance between services that need to be centralised and those that can be delivered locally.

Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab): The minister is aware, because I have told him on many occasions, that my constituents in Midlothian have been waiting 30 years for a new community hospital. Will he give me an assurance that the totally inadequate provision in Midlothian will be replaced as soon as possible by a high-quality service, including a new community hospital and community-based services that are fit for the 21st century?

Malcolm Chisholm: I know that plans are well advanced for that. The fact that there are proposals for East Lothian and Midlothian, as well as the development in my constituency, shows that NHS Lothian wants to have as many local facilities as it can to balance the superb centres of excellence that it already has at the Royal infirmary, the Western general and St John's.

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): I remind the minister of the 1,000-plus patients who are waiting for a first appointment at the sleep centre at the Edinburgh Royal infirmary. That is against a background of a £100,000 drop in funding from NHS Lothian compared with the previous year. Given that the treatment that is provided is effective, will he revisit his decision not to fund the sleep centre centrally and speak to the consultants, who want the centre to be a centre of excellence with satellite provision elsewhere in Scotland?

Malcolm Chisholm: I have spoken to the lead consultant, Professor Douglas, on more than one occasion and I am aware of issues around the service. I recently spoke to someone who is involved and I know that action is being taken to address the problem. I agree that the situation is unacceptable, but I am reassured that NHS Lothian is taking action to address it.

Social Inclusion Partnerships (Glasgow)

2. Mike Watson (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress has been made in improving health and well-being within social inclusion partnership areas in Glasgow. (S2O-2961)

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Mr Tom McCabe): Our health improvement policy aims to improve health for all while reducing health inequalities. We have seen heartening signs of improvement in Glasgow social inclusion partnership areas. A recent report on the health and well-being of the greater Glasgow population clearly shows that there have been positive changes to key health indicators among people living in social inclusion partnership

areas. In addition, we are providing an additional £12 million to Greater Glasgow NHS Board in this and the next financial year to support action to address unmet health needs in deprived populations.

Mike Watson: Does the minister agree that it is essential that the progress that has been made, which he outlined, continues? That will involve the funding of a number of community organisations that assist in the delivery of health care locally and make a big contribution, such as Healthy Castlemilk, which has had a major impact in that part of the city.

Mr McCabe: I agree with those sentiments. Some of the health outcomes in the city of Glasgow—such as the disparities between some sections of the city in life expectancy—are totally unacceptable. I assure the chamber that the Executive has put in place a range of measures that are designed to address those discrepancies.

Maternity Services (Caithness and North-west Sutherland)

3. Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will ensure that maintenance of the status quo will be one of the options in NHS Highland's consultation on the future of maternity services in Caithness and north-west Sutherland. (S2O-2932)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm): NHS Highland will consider the options on 2 August and ministers will give a view at the end of the process.

Mr Stone: The fear is that, when NHS Highland considers the options, it will present a series of alternatives that essentially represent a choice of downgraded services. By the status quo I mean, as the minister understands, some form of consultant-led services in the north. Given the risk to mothers and babies of having to travel 100 miles to Inverness, there has to come a time when the Scottish Executive steps in and says, "This risk is too great." It is a matter of life and death. The Executive must say to NHS Highland, "Halt. Enough is enough."

Malcolm Chisholm: As is well known, ministers have a formal role in these matters, as I described in my answer. I will be saying the same thing at the end of today's members' business debate on Argyll and Clyde. I spoke recently to the chair of NHS Highland, who assured me that he and the board are committed to looking at any options that people put forward. He specifically said that any option that Jamie Stone wished to propose would be considered. Options have to be sustainable and in particular they have to be consistent with the working time directive in relation to the hours

that consultants or any other health care staff work. There are constraints but, within those, the board has reassured me that it will look at all the options.

Prescription Charges

4. Colin Fox (Lothians) (SSP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether the £6.40 prescription charge deters patients from seeking the medicines that they need. (S2O-2996)

The Deputy Minister for Health and Community Care (Mr Tom McCabe): No, we do not believe so. Extensive exemption and remission arrangements are in place to ensure that no one need be deterred from obtaining prescribed medicines on financial grounds.

Colin Fox: The minister may be aware that my member's bill seeking to abolish prescription charges completed its consultation period yesterday. One of the respondents, the Social Market Foundation, has described the current system as a dog's dinner that lacks all logic. Does he agree with that and with his Labour colleague in the National Assembly for Wales, the Minister for Health and Social Services, Jane Hutt? She stated:

"prescription charges do deter people from having their prescriptions dispensed. Free prescriptions for all is the simplest and most effective way of resolving inequalities and inconsistencies in prescribing".

Alternatively, is he determined to see chronic sufferers on low incomes continue to go without the medicines that they need because they cannot afford them?

Mr McCabe: It is important to put prescription charges in their proper context. More than 50 per cent of Scotland's population are exempt from the charges. The low-income scheme, which is for people on low incomes who have less than £8,000 in capital, is available to those in employment, those who receive benefit and students. Around 72 million items are prescribed in Scotland every year and in excess of 91 per cent of those items are prescribed free. The current charge for a prescribed item is £6.40, but the average cost of a prescribed item is £12.69.

Mr David Davidson (North East Scotland) (Con): Will there be a review of the chronic condition exemption scheme? The scheme is unfair and has not been considered for a long time. More and more patient groups are pointing out to members that they are now, in a sense, the working poor and that they do not get the support that they require for their chronic conditions—and only for their chronic conditions.

Mr McCabe: I confirm that such a review is under way.

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): I notice that the minister did not respond further to that question. The review that the Scottish Executive is undertaking is welcome, given that for 36 years, under all sorts of Governments, we have not had a review. Will he confirm that he will progress the matter as soon as possible?

Mr McCabe: I am happy to confirm that the review is an important part of the partnership agreement, which covers the coalition arrangements in Scotland. We will progress the review as soon as we can. I repeat that it is extremely important to put the overall issue in context: 72 million items are prescribed each year and more than 91 per cent of them are prescribed free.

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Clinical Improvement (Distinction Awards)

6. Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive how the efficacy of distinction awards as a driver of clinical improvement is measured. (S2O-2922)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm): The Scottish Advisory Committee on Distinction Awards allocates awards on the basis of an individual's record of achievement on a range of factors, including clinical excellence, outstanding contribution to the achievement of service goals and research, innovation and improvement in the service. We are committed to a fundamental review of the awards scheme, which will ensure its effectiveness as a means of encouraging and rewarding outstanding contributions to the national health service.

Scott Barrie: I am glad that there will be a review. Does the minister agree that all staff in the NHS should be properly rewarded and that the distinction award scheme, with its old-boys-club approach through which consultants reward one another, is at best opaque and should be replaced by a scheme that is founded on a proper objective basis and that does not reward only those at the top of the medical hierarchy?

Malcolm Chisholm: In the recent past, improvements have been made in the way in which awards are made. Clearly, we believe that there can be further improvements, which is why we will undertake a wide-ranging review, during which the issues that Scott Barrie raises will be considered.

Bowel Cancer (Screening)

7. Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will introduce colonoscopies as the standard test for colorectal cancer as part of the national bowel cancer screening programme, in line with practice in most of the United States of America and Europe. (S2O-2999)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm): Colonoscopy is not a procedure for routine population screening. It is used for diagnostic purposes, but national evidence-based clinical guidelines for the management of colorectal cancer state that there is currently no clear consensus as to the investigation of choice for the diagnosis of colorectal cancer. We shall build capacity in colonoscopy as part of our planning for the future roll-out of national screening for colorectal cancer.

Christine Grahame: In a parliamentary answer to me, the minister has stated that it would take five years to plan a Scotland-wide colorectal cancer screening programme. If that cancer is detected soon enough, it is curable in 80 per cent of cases. Will the minister say why it will take five years simply to plan a programme? Current tests are inadequate and men who could live are dying.

Malcolm Chisholm: We should not confuse the issue of screening with the issue of diagnosis. As I have indicated, colonoscopy is a diagnostic tool; it is faecal occult blood testing that is used in the screening programme. It is a great credit to Scotland that the bigger of the two pilot sites in the United Kingdom is in Scotland. We will still be in the second stage of the screening pilot until 2005, so obviously there are more results to come. However, we are not simply waiting for the end of the pilot. We have said that, in principle, we want to roll it out. Clearly, however, capacity has to be built up. Colonoscopy services will be part of that.

We should acknowledge the enormous progress that has been made over the past three years in the diagnosis and treatment of colorectal cancer. Recently, I launched the framework for bowel cancer. At that event, I was told of the great advances that have been made through the managed clinical networks for colorectal cancer. In fact, £4 million of recent cancer money has been spent on developing endoscopy services. That has included money for new colonoscopy equipment and extra sessions in Edinburgh.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): Does the minister recall the case that I raised with him of Gerard O'Neill, which concerns stomach cancer and its diagnosis? Does he agree that, when diagnoses are made, much more regard must be given to family history? As the minister may recall, that young man was not diagnosed until it was far too late?

Malcolm Chisholm: Many issues arise relating to the diagnosis of stomach and other cancers. Politicians should be careful when they go into that particular territory. That is why, in my answer to Christine Grahame, I referred to national evidence-based clinical guidelines. Politicians have to accept those guidelines. In Scotland, we have guidelines from the Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network that are internationally famous. We have to respect them.

I cannot comment on the individual case that Tommy Sheridan raises, or indeed on the case that was highlighted in a recent newspaper article on colorectal cancer. Although I cannot comment on those particular cases, it may well be that particular mistakes have been made but that the guidelines are not wrong.

General Practitioners

8. John Farquhar Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to address any shortage of GPs. (S2O-2931)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm): The new general medical services contract recognises the importance of both the recruitment and the retention of general practitioners and contains a number of measures that support that, including the continuation of the "golden hello" scheme for GPs with a standard £5,000 payment. Funding has been agreed for additional GP vocational training, ensuring that 280 places are available in 2004-05. New workforce planning arrangements across NHS Scotland will take into account the changing needs of primary care service teams.

John Farquhar Munro: I am encouraged by the efforts that have been made to improve GP services throughout the country. However, the minister will be aware that some areas of the Highlands and Islands find difficulty in attracting and retaining GPs—especially in small and remote practices. Will the minister consider offering additional financial inducements in order to recruit and retain more GPs in those areas?

Malcolm Chisholm: We already offer particular inducements to GPs in rural areas. The new contract should be beneficial in helping both to recruit and to retain GPs in rural areas. I know that out-of-hours services have been causing concern, but the new options for GPs in the new GMS contract will make general practice more attractive, as will the other positive features of the contract.

General Questions

Affordable Rented Housing

The Presiding Officer: Thirty seconds early, we come to general questions. Question number 1 is, again, from Mr John Home Robertson. [*Applause.*]

1. Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): House!

To ask the Scottish Executive what progress has been made with its plans to enable local authorities to undertake prudential borrowing to fund the provision of affordable rented housing. (S2O-2885)

The Minister for Communities (Ms Margaret Curran): Anyone who has just walked into the chamber will be most interested to know why Mr Home Robertson is so popular. I reassure them that he is indeed our number 1 guy in the chamber. [*Laughter.*] Can I have it in the *Official Report* that Allan Wilson laughed?

I am considering the options in this area as part of the review of affordable housing.

Mr Home Robertson: I am grateful to the minister but, seriously, does she recall, from her visit to East Lothian last year, that although there are 6,000 people on the waiting list for council houses, only 400 houses become available for re-let each year, which means that some people are having to wait 10 years or more to get an affordable rented house? Will she give urgent and active support to East Lothian Council's plan to borrow to build 2,700 homes to let and—this is important—will the Executive consider changes to the right-to-buy legislation to ensure that every area keeps a reasonable stock of affordable rented homes?

Ms Curran: John Home Robertson will have paid attention to last week's discussion on the right to buy, when the Executive pointed out to the chamber a number of options that we have introduced to address the pressures resulting from the right to buy. Mr Home Robertson will know that the right to buy was modernised under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001. That act also introduced pressured area status, for which local authorities can apply if they are under pressure. East Lothian is considering other ways of meeting the challenges that it faces and a number of local authorities such as East Lothian, with low debt and low investment needs, are considering a new-build programme through borrowing under the prudential regime. My officials are considering the details of that scheme. East Lothian has come up with a number of interesting examples. We need to consider some of the regulatory issues, in order to protect the interests of tenants, but the scheme is something that we are interested in and will give

some attention to, as part of the review of affordable housing.

Shona Robison (Dundee East) (SNP): In addition to designating areas as pressured areas, would the minister consider giving housing associations the right to apply for an extension to the opt-out from the right to buy in 2012? If they can prove that there is a shortage of affordable housing in their area, should they not be able to apply to the Executive to be exempted from the right to buy, for a period to be agreed, so that such housing can be protected until the situation is better in that area and the right to buy can be reinstated?

Ms Curran: I am sure that Shona Robison is well aware of the vigorous debate about right to buy during the passage of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001. I firmly believe that the policy that the Executive evolved and the mechanisms that we introduced at that time are the right ones. On the coalition benches, we have a comprehensive approach to ensuring that we balance the supply of housing with the right of people to exercise their right to buy. I would be interested to know whether the Scottish National Party is abandoning the right to buy. Is it likely to emerge with that policy? It is always criticising and questioning the right to buy and asking us to make changes. My only conclusion, given the political debate that is about to take place, is that the SNP is abandoning the right to buy—that would be an interesting policy development for that party.

Shona Robison: If the minister had listened to what I said, she would have heard me ask whether, in 2012, when the right to buy is extended to housing association tenants, if a housing association applies to the Executive to say that there is a crisis of affordable housing in the area, it would not be responsible of the minister to consider postponing the implementation of the right to buy in that area until affordable housing is less under pressure. That is not about removing rights; it is about balancing rights against the affordable housing crisis in that area. Is that not a sensible way to proceed?

Ms Curran: This is interesting. I reassure Shona Robison that I listened carefully to both her questions. I think that I am right in saying that the SNP opposed the extension of the right to buy to housing associations. The fact that the SNP is now saying that it just wants to fiddle about with the details begs some questions. We hear inconsistent messages from the SNP, which constantly wishes us to curtail the right to buy. It did not support our modernisation plans for the right to buy. The coalition's policy is a balance between allowing people who have lived in the housing for some time, and should have rights, to exercise those rights, and issues of supply. We

have the right policy. It is perfectly reasonable for me to say that I am unclear what the SNP policy is.

The Presiding Officer: Question 3 is from Irene Oldfather.

Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to assist manufacturing industry.

The Presiding Officer: I am sorry, I think that I have skipped a question. Forgive me. We will go back to question 2 and I will come to Irene Oldfather in a minute.

Schools (Road Safety)

2. Janis Hughes (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress has been made in improving road safety around schools. (S2O-2951)

The Minister for Transport (Nicol Stephen): Speed limits of 20mph are now in place at 716 out of the 2,855 schools in Scotland, which is more than one in four of our schools. I expect more limits to be introduced shortly with the funding that the Executive is making available to local authorities. Those lower limits will improve safety for all children walking or cycling to school.

Janis Hughes: I am aware of the good results that have been achieved by the speed limits that South Lanarkshire Council has introduced around schools in my constituency. What work has been done to evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives that involve walking to school, such as safer routes to schools, which not only aid safety but promote exercise for children.

Nicol Stephen: As Janis Hughes knows, we are investing heavily in cycling, walking and safer-streets initiatives. Between 2000 and 2006, we are providing funding of £38 million to local authorities for such initiatives and we are currently providing £1 million per year for school travel co-ordinators. Through those initiatives, we want to encourage more children to cycle and walk to school.

Scotland's record on that is reasonable, but there is room for significant improvement. Already, more than 50 per cent of our children walk to school and the latest figures, which are for 2002, show the highest level—56 per cent—since the Scottish Parliament was created in 1999.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): Will the minister confirm that 20mph speed limits outside schools have been a complete success, that they have substantially reduced casualties and that there is a strong case for rolling them out throughout Scotland?

Nicol Stephen: Yes, I agree with all those points. When I was Deputy Minister for Education

and Young People, I visited several schools and saw the success of 20mph schemes and I have continued to do that as Minister for Transport. Some of those schemes have achieved remarkable reductions in the number of incidents and injury accidents. Previously, some schools in Scotland had concerning levels of accidents and I was surprised at the regularity with which accidents, sometimes serious ones, took place near or around schools in Scotland. We are starting to drive those figures down, but more can and must be done and my ambition is that we have 20mph speed limits outside all our schools in Scotland, including schools on our trunk roads.

Manufacturing Industry

3. Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress has been made—no, that is question 2.

To ask the Scottish Executive what action it is taking to assist manufacturing industry. (S2O-2935)

I seem to be having a disruptive effect on question time for the second week running.

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning (Mr Jim Wallace): The Executive's top priority is to grow the economy, and the manufacturing sector plays a major role in Scotland's economy. A range of support is available to manufacturing through business gateway and assistance schemes such as regional selective assistance, the small firms merit award for research and technology and support for products under research. The Executive has also responded positively to the recommendations of the Scottish manufacturing steering group's report of February 2003.

Irene Oldfather: The minister will be aware of the effect that the rapid decline in world market prices for penicillin is having on GlaxoSmithKline in my constituency. Will he assure me that the Executive will work with the company to protect the 600 jobs that it sustains in my constituency? I invite the minister to come down to Irvine to hear at first hand about some of the difficulties that the company is experiencing in world markets at the moment.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Wilson.

Mr Wallace: Wallace.

The Presiding Officer: I am sorry. Mr Wallace.

Mr Wallace: It is catching.

The point that Irene Oldfather makes is important. Indeed, she has not only written to me about it but spoken to me about it. I recognise GlaxoSmithKline as a major contributor to the Ayrshire economy. Inevitably, such a company

operates in a dynamic and global market and must always consider the challenges and develop its product range with new and different products. I assure her that Scottish Enterprise Ayrshire maintains regular contact with the company to assist, as far as is possible, with its forward strategies. She has already issued her invitation and I have asked my officials to meet her and the management of the company at some time over the summer recess, either in her constituency or in Glasgow.

Charities (Tax Exemption)

4. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): To ask the Scottish Executive how the roles of the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator and the Inland Revenue will be co-ordinated to ensure that organisations receive tax exemption when they are recognised as a Scottish charity. (S2O-2984)

The Minister for Communities (Ms Margaret Curran): We are consulting on the draft Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Bill, which sets out a Scottish charity definition that is similar to the one that is being proposed by the Home Office. Bodies that are granted charitable status by OSCR will be entitled to local rates relief. However, relief from United Kingdom taxes is a reserved matter and is the responsibility of the Inland Revenue. Nevertheless, I expect that, as long as the final definitions are sufficiently similar, OSCR's decisions on charitable status will also be accepted for UK tax purposes. Officials from the Executive and the Inland Revenue are discussing how best to co-ordinate those roles.

Patrick Harvie: Does the minister acknowledge that problems could arise for organisations if they are recognised as Scottish charities by OSCR but are not recognised by the Inland Revenue? Has she considered the option of transferring ministerial functions from the UK to Scotland, as is allowed under the Scotland Act 1998, so that organisations that have achieved charitable status with OSCR are not left waiting for a UK body to determine their status for tax purposes?

Ms Curran: The member is asking me to be very ambitious and bold by transferring powers from Westminster. What an enticing possibility!

I assure Patrick Harvie that when we were preparing the draft bill in co-operation with a range of organisations, we had long and detailed discussions with the relevant sectors, because a variety of organisations expressed concern about inconsistencies that would mean that some bodies might not get tax relief even though they had been granted charitable status in Scotland. That is a position that we all want to avoid.

The best way forward, which has received the broad support of the sector, is to continue to hold

negotiations on the bill that is going through Westminster and on our proposals, and to have a close dialogue with the Inland Revenue and OSCR. I am fairly confident that those discussions should allow us to ensure that we avoid significant difficulty as we advance.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): Does the minister agree that it would be more intriguing to discuss what the Inland Revenue would do if an organisation did not secure Scottish charitable status but continued to be deemed to be a charity in other parts of the country and was therefore still eligible for tax relief? Will she assure me that that issue will be raised in her discussions with the Inland Revenue and others? She will know that the Communities Committee is already engaged in dialogue on the matter with her Westminster colleagues. I trust that she will continue to be robust on the connection between charitable status and tax relief.

Ms Curran: I am delighted that members of the Parliament want me to continue to be robust in all the work that I do. I would take great glee in doing that.

I assure Johann Lamont that we will ensure that when we introduce proposals on definitions of charitable status and on the granting of such status, organisations will have things to prove. They will have to be able to prove public benefit. I am sure that the proposals and the mechanisms that we have in place will ensure that organisations are tested on that and that they can prove that.

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): Will the minister also be examining the position of Government quangos which, quite perversely, enjoy many of the benefits of charitable status?

Ms Curran: We will be doing that. Quangos will have to go through the public benefit test and will have to comply with the other requirements that are made of them.

Integrated Community Schools

5. Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what progress it is making towards implementing the commitment to ensure that every school is an integrated community school by 2007. (S2O-2911)

The Minister for Education and Young People (Peter Peacock): More than 2,000 schools have now adopted the integrated community school approach. In partnership with local authorities, we are on track to roll out that approach in all schools by 2007.

Mike Rumbles: Does the minister agree that access for our local communities to good facilities and resources on our community school sites—

especially over the coming summer period—needs to be actively encouraged by the Executive and all our local education authorities?

Peter Peacock: I agree entirely. When we invest in schools, we make substantial commitments of public expenditure. It is right that those schools are open to the public for as long as possible, both during school holidays and in weekday evenings. In that spirit, part of the work of integrated community schools is to consider the packages that should be in place at any time of the year to support young people.

Housing (Infrastructure)

6. Susan Deacon (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps are being taken to ensure that necessary infrastructure is in place to support housing and other new developments. (S20-2924)

The Deputy Minister for Communities (Mrs Mary Mulligan): In relation to the current investment programme of Scottish Water, which is part of the overall infrastructure that is necessary to support housing and other new developments, it is estimated that some £240 million, including £41 million specifically for rural areas, will help to provide infrastructure to support further development. The Executive plans to launch two consultations to address the issue of infrastructure provision for new development. They will be called “Paying for Water Services” and “Investing in Water Services”.

Susan Deacon: I am sure that the minister is aware of and shares the growing concerns that have been expressed by many individuals and organisations about the scale and pace of infrastructure development in Scotland. For example, the matter is examined in a recent report by the Institution of Civil Engineers in Scotland. Does she agree that although increasing investment in the area is key, it is also vital for decision-making processes to be speeded up to ensure that the pace of change can be accelerated. For example, the report to which I referred identifies the need for better joined-up working and the need to examine planning and land-use issues. I ask the minister to make every possible effort to ensure that the pace of decision making is accelerated so that Scotland gets the infrastructure that it desperately needs and deserves.

Mrs Mulligan: I am aware of the report by the Civil Engineering Contractors Association to which Susan Deacon refers—in fact, ministerial colleagues will be meeting the organisation later this month. It is important for us to examine the way in which all decisions are taken, not only those in relation to Scottish Water, which is seeking to undertake a programme of work. A

working group that involves the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Communities Scotland, Homes for Scotland and the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations is specifically examining the need for support for continuing development work and that will also be part of the continuing review of affordable housing. We are taking the issue forward along a number of avenues and we take it seriously.

David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con): I am pleased to hear that the minister takes the issue seriously. The development constraints that exist as a result of Scottish Water in areas of the south of Scotland such as Scottish Borders and Dumfries and Galloway are becoming increasingly difficult. There is little prospect of any housing development, affordable or otherwise, unless there is a policy change. What discussions has Mrs Curran had with Mr Finnie on Scottish Water to ensure that there is a policy change and that greater emphasis is placed on the removal of development constraints?

Mrs Mulligan: I assure David Mundell that my colleagues Ross Finnie and Margaret Curran have had a great deal of discussion on the matter. I remind David Mundell that the reason why we are in the position that we are in is the lack of investment in water services while his party was in government. We are now addressing that and we will ensure that the water provision that we need is in place to provide for the development that the Executive is bringing about.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): I reintroduce a consensual note by suggesting that all parties agree that we desperately require more affordable housing with suitable infrastructure. Does the minister agree that one of the barriers to that is the high cost of land? If so, is that cost not due simply to the short supply of land that is suitable for housing? Does the minister agree that the remit of the Forestry Commission, which is perhaps the largest landowner in Scotland, should be extended to providing affordable housing and to using its millions of acres so that young people in Scotland can have, as well as a job, one acre to call their own?

Mrs Mulligan: I am pleased that affordable housing is repeatedly pursued in the chamber each week, because it is essential to have housing available for low-cost home ownership or to rent. As for Mr Ewing’s precise Forestry Commission example, we recently announced a project in Moray under which Forestry Commission land was made available for housing. His suggestion is not one that I would not wish to pursue.

Points of Order

15:00

Mr John Home Robertson (East Lothian) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. This seems the appropriate moment at which to raise the matter of the procedure for selecting questions for oral answer. Members may have noticed that the electronic random selection system drew my name first three times today. Dennis Canavan, who I think used to teach maths, tells me that the odds against that happening are about 1 million to one, so I just wish that I had bought a lottery ticket last week.

When some members receive several questions under the system, other members do not have the chance to question ministers at all. Like most members, I have been on the wrong side of that equation for months. It is rather like waiting for buses that arrive in convoys. I suggest that the selection procedure is one factor that is spoiling question sessions and I submit that it should be reviewed urgently now that I have had my treble chance.

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The member is right—it was his lucky day. The situation seems a trifle unusual. I have already asked staff to look into it and they will report back. All that I can say to members is that I have examined the figures, which show that each party's share of questions to date matches closely its share of questions that have been lodged.

Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (Ind): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My point of order concerns a matter of which I have given notice. For the benefit of members who wish to understand Parliament's procedures better, will you say under which rule of standing orders you closed this morning's session without hearing the substance of Mr Sheridan's point of order?

In replying to Ms Leckie and Mr Sheridan, you informed Parliament that the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body has consulted on charging for tours of the new Parliament building. My point of order does not address the substance of that decision or the debate that may surround it; rather, it questions whether the consultation procedures that were followed were compatible with the standards of accessibility and accountability that are at the core of the Parliament's ethos. In your capacity as convener of the corporate body, by describing the consultation process that was followed, will you assure Parliament that the founding principles of the Scottish Parliament have not been breached by decisions that the corporate body made in private?

Dennis Canavan (Falkirk West) (Ind): On a related point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: I will take any other points of order on the matter now.

Dennis Canavan: It may help if I make my point now, so that you can give a comprehensive reply. Like Margo MacDonald, I certainly was not consulted before the corporate body took its decision on charging people for tours of the Holyrood building. I understand that many more members were not consulted before that decision was taken. That seems to be yet another example of the corporate body sitting in private—in secret—to take decisions behind closed doors without consultation. If and when the public perceive a decision to be unjust or wrong, we are all blamed collectively. In the interests of parliamentary democracy and accountability, will you, Presiding Officer—I understand that you chair the corporate body—arrange for the corporate body to submit its proposals for parliamentary approval?

The Presiding Officer: Do we have any more points of order?

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): Under rule 8.2.6 of standing orders, I have submitted a motion that I seek your approval to debate. The motion asks for the Parliament to decide whether we are to impose a charge on the public to see a building that their hard-earned taxes have paid for.

The Presiding Officer: Is this a motion without notice or a point of order?

Tommy Sheridan: Under the point of order, I seek your approval for the motion without notice to be taken.

The Presiding Officer: On you go—you have three minutes.

Tommy Sheridan: It is obvious that the situation is fluid. Some eight minutes ago, the chief executive's office issued a press release to clarify the issue of charging. I am sure that members of the Parliament will be over the moon that they can now see what this is all about, because none of them knew about it this morning. None of them knew how much would be charged, who would be charged, the reasons for charging and why the corporate body did not fight to have an inclusive Parliament, rather than an exclusive one. In Glasgow, guided tours of the city chambers are provided three times a day, free of charge, to all members of the public. That contrasts with the exclusive Westminster, where there is charging for tours.

Presiding Officer, I appeal to you to allow a debate on this matter to take place. This decision should be taken by all of Parliament, rather than just the corporate body, because all of Parliament will have to carry the weight of it. It is absolutely

wrong and ludicrous to charge members of the public to see a wee bit or a big bit of the Holyrood building. Both wee tours and big tours should be free, because we are building a seat of democracy that is open and accessible, not a political palace that is exclusive to politicians.

The Presiding Officer: It is entirely within my discretion to decide whether to take a motion without notice. On this occasion, I have decided not to do so, for the reasons that I gave earlier.

Ms MacDonald said that she gave me advance notice of her point of order. Like Mr Canavan, she indicated that she would raise a general point about the accountability of the corporate body. Ms MacDonald's statement ran at considerable length and was dotted with cross-references. I cannot conceivably give an immediate response to it, but I shall do so at 5 o'clock. Let us move on.

Margo MacDonald: On a point of order.

The Presiding Officer: No. You have made a perfectly good point and I cannot conceivably answer it in detail without examining it.

Margo MacDonald: With all due respect, the only detailed reference in the point of order was to standing orders.

The Presiding Officer: I have made my judgment. You will hear my response at 5 o'clock.

Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine Railway and Linked Improvements Bill (River Teith Candidate Special Area of Conservation)

15:07

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The next item of business is consideration of motion S2M-1542, on the appropriate assessment of the River Teith candidate special area of conservation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament notes the 2nd Report 2004 (Session 2) of the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine Railway and Linked Improvements Bill Committee, *Appropriate Assessment for the River Teith candidate Special Area of Conservation* (SP Paper 187), and agrees that the works proposed in the Bill will not adversely affect the integrity of the River Teith candidate Special Area of Conservation.—[*Bill Butler.*]

Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine Railway and Linked Improvements Bill: Final Stage

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): The next item of business is consideration of motion S2M-1541, that the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine Railway and Linked Improvements Bill be passed.

15:08

Bill Butler (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab): The Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine Railway and Linked Improvements Bill was introduced on 15 May 2003 and 56 admissible objections were lodged. At the preliminary stage debate on 11 December 2003, the Parliament agreed to the general principles of the bill and that the bill should proceed as a private bill. That approval allowed the bill to progress to the consideration stage, to which I now turn.

The overall purpose of consideration stage was for the committee to consider the detail of the bill. Within that, there were two distinct phases. The first phase involved the committee meeting in a quasi-judicial capacity, which means that it had to weigh up the competing arguments before reaching its decisions. The second phase involved its meeting in a legislative capacity to consider and dispose of amendments to the bill.

Our first task at consideration stage was to group objections that we considered to be the same or similar and to select one or more objectors from each group to lead evidence on behalf of the group. That process ensured that all legitimate arguments would be considered, while avoiding unnecessary repetition. Eighteen groups were formed from the 52 objections outstanding at the time; objectors were consulted on the formation of those groups. Parliamentary officials held a meeting with objectors and the promoter to discuss the committee's decisions and to explain the procedure that would be followed at consideration stage.

The objectors and the promoter were invited to submit written evidence in respect of arguments, concerns and issues that had been raised in the objections, and copies of that evidence were made available to both sides so that each had the opportunity to submit rebuttal evidence. Both sides were invited to submit the names of witnesses who would appear on their behalf at the evidence-taking meetings. The committee agreed to hear evidence from all the suggested witnesses.

Before the evidence-taking meetings commenced, the committee undertook a site visit to each of the properties that had been suggested by the objectors. Those visits allowed us to meet

objectors and to see clearly, for example, the proximity of properties to the proposed line. I thank all the objectors whom we met for their hospitality as we tramped through their back gardens and for the courteous way in which they explained and presented their concerns to us. We all found the experience extremely useful in visualising the concerns that had been expressed by objectors.

We also viewed the type of freight train that would operate on the line, which was—for the benefit of the train enthusiasts among us—a class 66 diesel locomotive. We viewed the train both stationary and in operation; again, that gave us a better idea of its size and speed, and of the noise and vibration effects.

By the time that we commenced taking oral evidence at our meeting on 8 March, seven objections had been withdrawn, thereby reducing the number of groups to 11. The meetings were held in Alloa town hall on 8, 15 and 22 March.

Private bill committees at consideration stage operate in a unique way, in that they allow third parties to cross-examine witnesses. The promoter and the objectors can examine their own witnesses as well as the witnesses of the other party. The committee can also question all the witnesses. That process might appear to be cumbersome, but we found that administratively, organisationally, and procedurally, it worked well and gave all parties the opportunity to bring out key issues and to question the evidence before the committee.

Before I talk briefly to the two reports that the committee produced, I want to say something about those who were involved in the processing of the bill. First, and above all, I thank the staff of Clackmannanshire Council for their assistance in allowing us to hold our evidence-taking meetings in Alloa town hall.

As I said, the bill was the first works bill to be subjected to this parliamentary process. We acted in accordance with the standing orders and the guidance on private bills. That said, the experience was new for all involved and one that we will never forget.

The committee was impressed with the performance of witnesses, particularly on the objectors' side. Many of the witnesses were not legally represented and had no professional experience of the complex issues that were being considered or of taking part in such proceedings, which we recognised might have been fairly daunting. The arguments were competently and eloquently put, the questions that were asked were pertinent and everyone acted with due respect, courtesy, and consideration.

On the whole, and bearing in mind the fact that the parliamentary process was also a learn-as-

you-go experience for the promoter, the committee felt that the promoter did a good and reasonable job through its various agents and consultants. On a number of occasions, there was a need for supplementary evidence to be provided at short notice and, invariably, the promoter was able to meet deadlines.

I turn to my fellow committee members. I am not sure that we all knew what would be involved when we received a tap on the shoulder from our respective business managers, but a year on, we know a lot more about noise attenuation, whisky warehouses, pylons and sea lamprey than we ever thought possible or even necessary.

I warmly thank my colleagues for their participation on the committee. The complexity and diversity of the issues meant that, at times, the scrutiny process was arduous. However, given the importance of our task, there should be no doubt about the seriousness or thoroughness of our approach in discharging our duty as a committee. Without compromising that approach, I also commend my fellow committee members' willingness to attend meetings, often at short notice, in order that the process could be expedited.

Last but not least, I express the committee's thanks to the parliamentary clerking team and to our adviser. Their work was essential and their diligence was admirable.

Members are aware that there has been discussion about whether the existing private bill process is necessarily the right way in which to scrutinise major public transport projects. Clearly, my fellow committee members and I have a view on that and we have communicated that view to the Presiding Officer. I leave the matter there, other than to note that the Procedures Committee has agreed that its next inquiry will be into the private bill procedure—

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Bill Butler: I will finish my point. Mr Richard Baker is in the happy position of being a member both of the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine Railway and Linked Improvements Bill Committee and of the Procedures Committee and no doubt he will be able to give the Procedures Committee's inquiry a starter for 10.

Alasdair Morgan: I think that this is the first time that such detail about a private bill has been presented in the chamber and I seek explanation from Mr Butler on two matters. I assume that the second phase of consideration stage did not actually take place, in the sense that no amendments were lodged. Paragraph 186 of the SAK committee's consideration stage report says:

"The Committee is content that an amendment should be lodged on behalf of the promoter at the second phase of Consideration Stage."

What is the significance of that paragraph? It does not seem to be relevant to the paragraph that immediately precedes it. Did the promoter decide not to lodge that amendment?

Paragraph 197 of the same report says:

"The Committee respectfully requests a response on this issue prior to the second phase of Consideration Stage."

Was a response received and if so, what was it?

Bill Butler: Amendments were lodged by various committee members at the second phase of the consideration stage. The situation was rather artificial because all the amendments were tidying-up amendments that addressed technical matters, so they were dealt with without contest. There is an opportunity for members to lodge amendments at the final stage, but amendments can be moved at consideration stage only by a member of the committee, who has followed the entire process. No member has lodged an amendment at the final stage, so I hope that that clears up the matter.

Given the time constraints, perhaps the committee's deputy convener will pick up on Alasdair Morgan's second point in his summing up.

Members are aware that the committee published its consideration stage report in May. At the final stage, it is not our job to revisit the issues in great detail, especially as no amendments have been lodged at the final stage, as I indicated. Perhaps I can summarise the situation by saying that the outstanding objections that the committee had to consider could broadly be split into two categories: objections from businesses; and objections from residents. The concerns of businesses such as Diageo plc and Taylor Woodrow Developments Ltd were specific to their own circumstances. I refer members to the committee's report, which contains the background to those circumstances. In short, the committee was content that the promoter was able satisfactorily to rebut the cases that those businesses put forward and the objections were not upheld.

I turn to community and individual residents' objections. The committee received a large number of objections from residents whose properties were adjacent to or close to the proposed route. Most residents were concerned, understandably, about the impact of the railway's construction and subsequent operation. The major areas of concern that were identified related to noise and vibration, safety and loss of amenity. As a result of those concerns, a number of objectors were keen that changes should be made to the

proposed route of the railway. The committee examined three options: a Clackmannan bypass; a Kincardine bypass; and the Bogside alignment option. In the case of many residents' objections, the promoter did not contest the fact that the railway would have an adverse impact. However, the promoter took the view that such adverse impacts can be mitigated, so that residents would be in no worse a position than are individuals who live next to urban railways elsewhere in the country. The promoter's position was also that powers to construct public works are granted only when that can be justified by public policy and that the public interest might justify disturbance that might cause depreciation in property values. Furthermore, where there has been disturbance, compensation will be payable.

The committee, therefore, had to balance the merit of each objection against the merit of the general principles of the bill having been agreed to by the Parliament. Objectors believed sincerely that there would inevitably be adverse local environmental impacts as a consequence of the construction and operation of the railway and that those impacts were of such a magnitude as to justify either the route being amended or, failing that, the project being halted.

Once again, I stress that the committee gave serious consideration to all the points that were raised. In some cases, the arguments were finely balanced. In the case of those objectors who proposed an alternative route, the committee decided that mitigation measures that the promoter discussed in evidence and made clear could be applied led to the conclusion that the adverse affect was within acceptable limits. With that in mind—and setting the suggestions against the wider public policy benefits of the scheme and the projected costs of the various alternative routes—the committee decided that the alternative routes did not need to be explored in any more detail as part of the process.

I should make it clear to the Parliament that the committee has regard to all the evidence given both orally and in writing at consideration stage. Unanimously, the committee did not uphold the objections either on an individual basis or on a cumulative basis.

The committee was mindful that the bill process is by no means the final step in the progress of the scheme and we have made a couple of important recommendations to the promoter in that regard. Mr Rob Gibson will pick up on those points in his closing speech.

Before the Parliament makes a decision on whether to pass the bill, I should inform members that, in accordance with the habitats directive, the Parliament must satisfy itself that the proposed works contained in the bill will not adversely affect

the integrity of the River Teith candidate special area of conservation. That river is of particular importance to salmon and lamprey. In the interests of time, I advise the Parliament that the committee has explored this matter in some detail and has reported to the Parliament. The committee's conclusion was that, on the basis of evidence provided and, in particular, the recommendations of Scottish Natural Heritage, there are sufficient measures in place to deliver the mitigation measures, thereby ensuring that the works proposed in the bill will not adversely affect the integrity of the River Teith candidate special area of conservation. Furthermore, the committee recommended that the Parliament accept the view of the committee when it carries out the required appropriate assessment.

Presiding Officer, I think that I speak on behalf of my colleagues on the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine Railway and Linked Improvements Bill Committee when I say that it is with a sense of pleasure and just a modicum of relief that I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine Railway and Linked Improvements Bill be passed.

15:23

The Minister for Transport (Nicol Stephen):

This is an important and historic day. It is appropriate that we are debating such a vital issue in our final hours in this chamber. We should all thank Bill Butler, in particular, and the committee members—Richard Baker, Rob Gibson, David Mundell and Nora Radcliffe—for the huge amount of work that they have done in connection with the bill. We should also thank Clackmannanshire Council, the smallest mainland authority in Scotland. If Clackmannanshire Council can deliver a scheme such as the one that we are discussing today, that lays down the gauntlet for other authorities in Scotland to deliver other major rail infrastructure projects. Like Bill Butler, I thank the advisers, the clerking team and all the other people who have been associated with this project. The Parliament owes them all a significant debt of gratitude for their efforts.

The process has been very positive. The committee has performed a lot of close scrutiny and done a great deal of hard work. When I appeared before the committee, there was detailed questioning in relation to value for money. Key issues, such as the future of Longannet power station, were tackled. The impact on the local economy was assessed. Objectors and supporters got the opportunity to state their case and those to whom I spoke found that the experience was a positive one in which there was open access and they got the opportunity to state their cases fairly.

The new rail scheme will have many benefits, but I will mention three of the key ones. Alloa will now come back onto the rail network for the first time since 1968 and those dark days of the Beeching cuts.

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): It was a Labour Government that closed that line.

Nicol Stephen: I am disappointed that, during this consensual debate, Brian Monteith seeks to make a political point.

Members: Shame. Shocking.

Nicol Stephen: Through this new rail scheme, freight traffic will have a shorter route and traffic will be taken off the most congested parts of the rail network. That is very important for the third key reason for passing the bill. The new line will free up space on the Forth rail bridge and allow extra and improved passenger services on the Fife circle line.

Christine May (Central Fife) (Lab): I am pleased that the bill has come before the Parliament today. Does the minister agree that not only will the new line free up capacity on the Fife circle, but it might increase the opportunity for us to link the community of Levenmouth back into the main east coast rail line?

Nicol Stephen: The new line paves the way for a significant number of improvements. As well as the one identified by the member, I would like there to be a link to the freight terminal at Rosyth for access to the Superfast Ferries. There are further significant improvements that I would like to encourage during the coming months and years.

All of that will be good for Scotland and good for Scotland's economy. The scheme represents £37 million of investment, but I am sure that every member in the chamber believes that it is worth while.

We look forward to starting work on the scheme in the autumn, and to being ready for service in 2006. The new passenger service will be able to take all of us from Alloa, through Stirling, to Glasgow Queen Street station. One of the first passengers on the new service will be our Presiding Officer; I know that George Reid attended several of the committee hearings. In his former life, he was heavily involved in campaigning for the improvement.

Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab): Will the minister give way?

Nicol Stephen: I will when I have finished this moment of praise for our Presiding Officer.

I am sure that the member for Ochil would have wished to speak in today's debate, but he cannot speak or signify his support, save through the

strength of his smile at decision time. I suspect that if there was a tied vote at four o' clock, or whenever the vote is taken, we know which way he would exercise his discretion. I am sure, however, that the decision will be overwhelming and I hope that the bill is passed without opposition.

Dr Jackson: When that train has its first venture out of Alloa, will it stop at Stirling and pick me up?

Nicol Stephen: It will stop at Stirling and, if I am still the Minister for Transport, I hope to be on the train and will be delighted to welcome the member on board.

There are other schemes—

Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD) rose—

Nicol Stephen: Keith Raffan can come as well.

Mr Raffan: The minister has failed to mention someone who should be mentioned. I refer to a former colleague in the Parliament, namely the former member for Ochil, Dr Richard Simpson. I, Dr Jackson and the Presiding Officer attended many meetings at Clackmannanshire Council about this project. While the minister is doling out generous paeans of praise, I think it would be worthy and worth while that he should pay tribute to Dr Simpson, who is a member much missed in this chamber.

Nicol Stephen: I agree with everything that Keith Raffan has said. I am pleased to correct my omission by thanking Richard Simpson for all his efforts and for the significant role that he played in making the line a reality.

Other similar schemes will require private bills to deliver our new initiatives, which include the Borders rail link and tram lines 1 and 2 for Edinburgh. In due course, we will have rail links to Glasgow and Edinburgh airports and we will reopen the Airdrie to Bathgate line.

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): Will the minister give way?

Nicol Stephen: Let me just finish this point.

We need to consider how the approval procedure might be simplified and speeded up so that we can deliver more major transport projects as quickly as possible, but we should be able to move forward on that issue on a cross-party basis. The committee convener, Bill Butler, has already provided some views on that, and I know that the Procedures Committee is considering the matter. I strongly support those developments. Along with the Presiding Officer and representatives from all political parties, I will continue to try to drive the issue forward. It is important that the Parliament addresses the matter as soon as possible.

Robin Harper: In listing the rail projects, the minister missed out the Edinburgh loop, which is the cheapest and easiest of the lot.

Nicol Stephen: Robin Harper knows that I am anxious to see many improvements to the rail network; I am sorry that there are so many that I occasionally miss one out.

Our final meeting in this chamber is a time for all who have been involved over the past five years to reflect on some of the events that we have seen here, but we should celebrate and be positive about today's debate. People look to the Parliament for real achievements and for real delivery and progress. There could be no stronger and more solid example of that than the delivery of the new rail line that the passing of the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine Railway and Linked Improvements Bill will bring about.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): I should perhaps make it clear that, in the unlikely event of a tied vote in this evening's decision time, the Presiding Officer will cast his vote in accordance with precedent rather than in accordance with his personal tastes.

15:32

Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): Following the tone and tenor of the minister's speech, I pay tribute to all those who have been involved in bringing the bill to where we find it today. In particular, I thank Bill Butler, the other members of the bill committee and the committee clerks. Given that the development has been promoted not only during the tenure of the current Minister for Transport but through those of previous ministers—both those who are still members of the Parliament and those who are not—I thank Nicol Stephen and his predecessors for driving the issue forward. The bill is something that we should be rightly proud of.

Three important aspects must be mentioned. First, this is an historic event. As the minister and Mr Butler said, there is important symbolism in the bill being the last legislation that we will deal with in this chamber. Secondly, our procedures need to be considered. Thirdly, we require to consider our future aspirations for the reopened Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine line. As the minister correctly commented, it is logical that the line be extended to the port of Rosyth.

On the historic nature of the occasion, it is apt and symbolic that our final deliberations are on a positive and constructive bill that has come to fruition during both the current and the previous parliamentary sessions and during the tenure of current and previous transport ministers. The bill has rightly been supported by all parties. Much of our work in the chamber is deliberative in nature,

so it is a change to deal with a bill that is about delivery. That is something that we can be rightly proud of. It also allows us to end on a note of consensus rather than controversy. Much that has gone on in the chamber has brought this institution into disrepute—sometimes justifiably, sometimes unjustifiably—but our leaving this chamber to move to the new one is an historic opportunity to relaunch the Scottish Parliament. I therefore think that we should take cognisance of the fact that we are finishing on a constructive note and go forward to the new chamber trying to build upon that.

It is important that we consider procedures. To be fair to the minister, it has been acknowledged that our current procedures are not appropriate. To be fair to the Executive, matters are now being addressed in relation to how we consider planning overall. This summer, we will move not only into a new chamber but into a Parliament that has, I hope, enhanced powers over rail. We believe that the powers are coming, but there is a debate about the extent to which they will come and whether funds will be made available that will allow us to do anything of substance. It is to be hoped that the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine railway will be the first of many such improvements that we and future Parliaments will be able to build on.

We cannot go on dealing with such developments using the private bill process, so we must consider new methods of doing so. The minister has already commented on that and Bristow Muldoon, in his role as convener of the Local Government and Transport Committee, has also pursued the issue. With Richard Baker's knowledge of private bill procedure, the Procedures Committee must find a better way of proceeding with such matters in order to ensure that we can continue to deliver.

It is right to dwell on the blessings that the railway will bring to Alloa; other members have commented on the improvements that will affect not only people along the rail link but those who will benefit from the capacity that will be freed up on the Forth rail bridge. There are significant log-jam problems that limit the number of trains that cross the bridge, which has an adverse effect on transport in Fife. The new railway will provide an opportunity to remedy many such wrongs.

The minister is to be praised for taking cognisance of the requirement to roll the railway into Rosyth. Trans-European network grants and funding have recently been provided to areas not just in the rest of Europe but within the United Kingdom. Some of those areas are, in fact, competitors for what the port at Rosyth can offer. A press release was published just last month announcing European Union funding for rail and road projects, and I note that a trans-European programme of 30 projects will receive EU funding.

Those projects include a rail corridor that will link Dublin, Belfast and Larne, road and rail links from Hull to Liverpool, a rail line from Felixstowe to Nuneaton and a rail line from Crewe to Holyhead.

The port of Rosyth hopes to benefit from being on a land bridge that will create an opportunity for goods that are manufactured or created in Northern Ireland to be trans-shipped through the north channel, which is important to the south-west of Scotland, and on to Rosyth. If we do not allow the land bridge to be united, with a significant part of that bridge being a rail link, we will not be competitive. If exporters can access direct rail links at Holyhead or Liverpool through the ports of Larne or Dún Laoghaire in Ireland, they will use them. Unless we link the rail route to Rosyth, we will not just undermine the rail network that we are constructing in Stirling, Alloa and Rosyth, we will fundamentally undermine the port of Stranraer and the other north channel ports, because it will be significantly easier to export goods through Larne or Dún Laoghaire by rail to connect to sister ports and related ports such as Holyhead or Liverpool. The logical extension of that argument is that we should not see the passage of the bill and the construction of the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine railway as the end of the process. Rather, we should take the next step, which is to roll the railway into the port of Rosyth to allow the trans-shipping opportunities that I described.

We can look back with some satisfaction on our scrutiny of the bill. This is the last formal debate in this chamber—although the final debate will be members' business—and we can end on a positive and constructive note. I hope that all of us will take cognisance of the points that have been raised and that we will go forward leaving behind us some of the difficulties that we have had in this chamber and ready to make a fresh start in September.

15:39

David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con): I am not going to break the consensus; in fact, I will go further and agree not only with the minister but with Kenny MacAskill and even with Bristow Muldoon, which is a rare occurrence for me these days.

I pay tribute to all those who have been involved in the process, especially Bill Butler, the convener of the committee. In his usual self-effacing way he did not emphasise enough the part that he played in the process. Skill is required when nobody knows what will happen in the process that is being negotiated until it has happened. I do not think that anyone who objected to the bill can legitimately feel that they did not have a fair crack of the whip. Our convener and all those who were

involved extended courtesy to all who participated. Everybody had the opportunity to make their case and all the issues were considered as part of what has been described as an exhaustive and sometimes exhausting process.

It is clear that the process is not appropriate for taking forward such measures, because it is overly bureaucratic and too time consuming for members of Parliament relative to the contribution that they can make. We worked very hard with the expert evidence that we had so that we could deal with the issues of noise, vibration and the intrusion or otherwise of the railway. However, at the end of the day, we were no better placed than a reporter, for example, to make a final determination on the issues. I hope that that point will be considered as a matter of priority. It is unfortunate that a number of other major projects have commenced under the same process; there is no doubt that the process will be extremely demanding for members of the Waverley Railway Bill (Scotland) Committee, the Edinburgh Tram (Line One) Bill Committee and the Edinburgh Tram (Line Two) Bill Committee and that it will absorb a great deal of resource. That must be dealt with.

Sarah Boyack (Edinburgh Central) (Lab): David Mundell talked about the impact on members of the Scottish Parliament who have to deal with a relatively cumbersome procedure. Does he have any views about members of the public being involved in the procedure? Might the public inquiry process also be more straightforward?

David Mundell: It might. As I said, members of the public who were involved in the process on the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine Railway and Linked Improvements Bill were greatly helped by the convener and by the way in which they were brought into the process. However, there is no doubt in my mind that the way forward is to have a system that allows people simply and in a way that they understand to have their say. It is also important that people have information in advance.

One of the issues that we picked up was that there was, through no fault of the promoter, a great deal of confusion about the arrangements for compensation. The information about compensation was not provided to members of the public in a way that allayed concerns, which were brought to the committee late in the day but could have been dealt with earlier. There is a great deal of scope to improve the process in respect of providing information to the public about compensation.

I was particularly pleased by the flexibility that Mr Stephen demonstrated in relation to the project—I am sure that he will demonstrate the same flexibility in relation to the Borders rail project—when he made it clear in his evidence to

the committee that Scottish transport appraisal guidance assessments and other such Executive stringencies are not the overriding concern in determining whether a project should go ahead or be funded. I hope that the same attitude will apply in relation to the Borders rail link, which is a significant project that also has support throughout the chamber.

Kenny MacAskill made an important point about there being a link between Rosyth and Stranraer—which I am pleased that the Local Government and Transport Committee will visit in September, because it is Scotland's principal freight gateway—to Ireland because there is a real threat from freight going from Dún Laoghaire to North Wales and into Europe that way. A great advantage could be gained for Stranraer and Cairnryan through a link to Rosyth, so we should all argue for that.

From all the evidence that was given to the committee, I am sure that the project stacks up. I hope that many people, not just those who have been mentioned, will be on the first train. We have often heard in this Parliament about people being on the last train from somewhere or other. It will be good when people are on the first train. I hope that, wherever I might be then, I will be one of them.

15:46

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): This is the third private bill to go through Parliament, but it is the first that has dealt with transport and works. It has been an interesting, if demanding, experience to work on it. When the mountain of paper that I have collected during the passage of the bill is recycled, I will not be surprised if it causes a blip in the recycled paper market.

There are more serious issues about the process and how it might be improved and I am glad that the Procedures Committee will examine them. It should also review the situation in which the Presiding Officer finds himself as a local member who is prevented from speaking in the debate. There are occasions when we should assume that people have integrity—this is one of them. Parliament should set a precedent that local members not be debarred from speaking in debates that concern their constituents.

The three-stage process for private bills parallels the process for public bills. There is the preliminary stage, the consideration stage and this final stage. I give heartfelt thanks to the clerks and special advisers for guiding us through and assisting us in the process. I commend them for the huge amount of work that they did. I mentioned the mountain of paper, but all that paper had to be organised, presented, tabulated

and so on. Just moving paper around was a huge job, never mind doing it in a way that made it interpretable and useful.

It was a pleasure to work with my colleagues on the committee—we worked well together and I appreciated the convenership of Bill Butler.

At the preliminary stage, the committee considers the general principles of a bill and whether it should continue as a private bill, and it gives preliminary consideration to objections—basically, it considers whether they are admissible. The committee's report at the end of the preliminary stage has to be approved by Parliament before the bill can go to consideration stage, at which the detail of the bill is examined and each group of objections is dealt with.

The procedure for consideration of objections was unfamiliar, as the committee sits in a quasi-judicial way, and its role is to act as arbiter between the promoter of the bill and the objectors. I commend the way in which the objectors rose to the challenge of operating within that formal framework. I was impressed by the different groups of objectors who argued their points extremely effectively and with great courtesy, and who were extremely helpful to committee members on our various site visits, to which Bill Butler referred.

A bill committee reports on its conclusions at the end of consideration stage, having heard the arguments of promoter and objectors. There is a further opportunity for amendments to be made, and the bill arrives at its final stage to be debated by the whole Parliament. It will be obvious from the report that the committee gave a great deal of detailed consideration to the various objections and suggestions that were made by individuals and businesses that were affected by the proposed reopening of the stretch of railway line. It was our job to weigh the disbenefits to objectors against the wider benefits of the proposal. We did considerable work to satisfy ourselves that the alleged benefits were well founded.

Although I know that objectors have been disappointed that the committee eventually decided that various rerouting suggestions should not be upheld, I hope that they accept that we gave their objections serious and detailed consideration.

It was possible for the bill to deal directly only with a narrow set of matters; it was not possible to have anything in the bill on compensation, noise and vibration mitigation, safety fences and so on. However, the committee went to some lengths to ensure that the promoter gave fairly detailed assurances on those matters, which weighed heavily in balancing our conclusions.

I hope that Parliament will agree to the motions on the bill that are before it today and that the rail project will go ahead and deliver the benefits that the minister and others outlined. It is exciting to stand at this time looking forward to the reopening of 21km of railway line that will connect Alloa to the passenger network and cut many rail miles and even more lorry miles out of the delivery of coal to Longannet. It will, I hope, encourage economic development, free up capacity on the Forth rail bridge, with benefits to the wider rail network, and open up even more exciting opportunities. I commend the bill to Parliament.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call the first speaker in the open debate, I point out that I am mindful of the importance of there being a quorum when decision time comes. On the basis of the number of names that I have on screen, it appears as if decision time will be close to 5 o'clock.

15:51

Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): I am glad to speak in the final debate on the final bill to be discussed by the Scottish Parliament in this chamber. I am pleased that the bill will improve the quality of life for many, if not all, of my constituents. To take up David Mundell's point, I am not sure whether the phrase "first train to Alloa" has the same ring as "Last Train to Clarksville" but I, too, wish to be on the train, because the reopening of a railway line that was closed in the 1960s will be a tremendous thing.

During the debate on the general principles of the bill, several members spoke in favour of it and talked about the benefits that opening the line will bring. Those benefits include the economic regeneration of Clackmannanshire and west Fife, the taking of coal off the road and on to rail and the taking of freight off the Forth rail bridge, which will increase passenger services, not only on the Fife circle, but on the east coast main line. All of those benefits should be welcomed.

Kenny MacAskill talked extensively about the importance of the Rosyth ferry terminal, which is in my constituency. I say to him—if he does not already know this—that a number of the points that he raised have been discussed or are in the process of being implemented. We must remember that the Rosyth ferry terminal can be opened up in two directions by rail. The existing link from Inverkeithing could be improved, with a bit of adaptation. With foresight, we could take the line that already exists to Kincardine on to Rosyth to bring freight in from the west, not just coal to Longannet power station.

As one of the people who participated during the consideration stage at Alloa town hall, I thank my

colleague Bill Butler—or Railway Bill as I believe he is now known—and other members of the committee for the courteous way in which they conducted the hearings and helped ordinary members of the public to make known their views, particularly given that most of them did not have legal representation.

During the debate on the general principles of the bill, which was held in December 2003, I raised the issue of my constituents in the Ochil View area, which is adjacent to the railway line between Longannet and the former Kincardine power station. Ochil View is a 1980s housing development that was built on concrete rafts, which meant that the residents there had a particular cause for complaint on the grounds of vibration and—given the proximity of the line—of safety and amenity. Paragraphs 111 to 117 of the committee's consideration stage report explain why the committee could not accept the objections of the people who gave evidence as part of group 9 of objectors.

I understand from the report that the arguments about the option of a Kincardine bypass were finely balanced, with the principal argument against it being the cost of re-siting four electricity pylons, rather than the one pylon that I and my constituents believed would need to be moved. It is therefore with deep regret that I note that the committee did not uphold my constituents' concerns, which could have been completely mitigated had the committee endorsed option B.

Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I share some of the concerns that have been expressed in Kincardine. However, will Mr Barrie acknowledge that some mitigation measures have been introduced? In particular, the line within Network Rail land will be moved further away from Ochil View.

Scott Barrie: I accept that the line will be moved as far as it can be, within the possible parameters. However, in Alloa town hall on the Monday morning when the issue was discussed—although I think that it was actually the afternoon by the time we gave evidence—I pointed out that another option existed. I am disappointed that the committee felt unable to take up that option in the fine balance that had to be struck. I should put on record that those concerns are shared by people who live in Clackmannan village. They live in the constituency of Ochil, the member for which is the Presiding Officer. Because of his official role, the Presiding Officer can neither speak in nor chair this debate. However, I am glad to raise his constituents' concerns on his behalf.

The Clackmannan residents bought or built their houses after the line was closed. About 200 homes lie in proximity to the railway. None of the owners ever seriously thought that trains would

one day run again on a line that was closed in the 1960s. The objectors put up a sturdy case at the various hearings in Alloa town hall. Like my constituents, they have not opposed the principle of the railway; they have merely sought an alternative route. Members might have considerable sympathy with the argument that those constituents' quality of life will be adversely affected by freight trains passing their homes 18 times a day between 6 am and 11 pm. However, the committee has had to judge between gain for the greater public good and loss to individuals.

I am sure that members will join me in urging the promoter to introduce proposals for compensation and mitigation at the earliest opportunity. I know that Mr Reid, as the constituency MSP, will support his constituents during that process. I endorse the Presiding Officer's sentiments for my constituents and I hope that we end up with a reopened railway that will benefit everyone and disappoint no one.

15:56

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): Bill Butler and his committee colleagues will be glad that they have reached the end of their line as the final stage of this bill comes to Parliament. I offer—as convener of the Waverley Railway (Scotland) Bill Committee—my sincere congratulations to Bill Butler and the committee on their work during what I now know was a tortuous process.

As the Waverley Railway (Scotland) Bill Committee starts its journey, my committee colleagues and I will be looking to Bill Butler—or Railway Bill, as Scott Barrie called him—for any advice that he can give us on the private bill process. Any changes to the process that might result from investigation by the Procedures Committee will come far too late for us.

Wearing my Mid Scotland and Fife hat, I warmly welcome the completion of the bill. I know that members of all parties will support it at decision time today. The Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine rail link has been a dream for a long time for many people, particularly in Clackmannanshire—the wee county will at last have a rail link, which will help to release the potential of the local economy.

From a Fife perspective, I am disappointed that the rail link will not extend to the ferry port at Rosyth, which is a wasted opportunity. However, I and many members and other people outside Parliament will continue to press to make that extension a reality. I welcome the minister's comment today—just as I welcomed it during the previous debate—that he, too, sees the opportunities. However, there is a difference between seeing opportunities and seizing them.

We will ensure that the minister understands that difference.

The new rail link will take freight pressure off the Forth rail bridge and free up capacity for more passenger trains. The Executive must take the opportunity that is offered by the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine rail link to ensure that there is an increase in passenger trains from Fife to Edinburgh. Like Christine May, I urge the minister to work with Fife Council and other partners to ensure that Levenmouth—the largest conurbation in Scotland that has no rail link—will have access to the Fife circle, with connections for Leven and Thornton. Long-suffering Fife passengers deserve a far better rail service than they have at the moment. If the minister needs to be reminded of that, I point out to him that a number of those Fife passengers sit around him in the chamber. We will ensure that we continue to press the case for Fife at every opportunity.

As Scott Barrie said, the Presiding Officer is not, as constituency member, permitted to speak in this debate. However, I am sure that the Presiding Officer will agree that it is now up to the promoter of the bill to review compensation. I am sure that Mr Reid's office and Scott Barrie will work closely with the promoter and the objectors to try to reach a fair solution. Balancing public gain and private loss is never easy, but if the promoter is willing to assist, I think that all the people of Clackmannan and Fife will welcome the new rail link, which few of us believed would ever be restored.

After the bill is passed today, the imperative is to ensure that the rail link is up and running—only that will turn the dream into reality. Ensuring that that happens is important for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that, like all the other members who have spoken, I want to be on the first train.

16:00

Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I welcome the final stage of the bill and congratulate the clerks, who produced a clear report on the consideration stage, the committee members, who put in a lot of time, the promoter and the witnesses who gave evidence.

As I said in the preliminary stage debate, the link is incredibly important because it will put Alloa back on to the rail passenger network, as the minister said. It will also take coal lorries off our roads and coal trains off the Forth rail bridge, which will allow more passenger traffic into Fife. The route has enormous strategic importance for the whole northern side of the Forth estuary and is perhaps one of the few issues that is relevant to the whole Mid Scotland and Fife region. I certainly hope that the bill will be a start and that, in time,

we will be able to establish a direct link from Kincardine back through to Dunfermline, and that the development of the spur down to the port of Rosyth will be included as part of that.

With any major development in Scotland, a balance must be struck between the benefits of public policy to society, and local concerns. Judgments must be made and matters must be balanced all the time. That must be done with the pylon upgrade between Beaully and Denny, with wind farms and with rail developments. That will be at the heart of the debates on third-party rights of appeal that will follow. I do not think that any member believes in a completely unconditional third-party right of appeal, but we must get the balance right in our planning system.

The promoter struck the right balance with this scheme, but only just. There might have been fewer final objections to the overall scheme if the promoter had been a little clearer about the compensation process. Mitigation is important, but how can we mitigate some of the local effects? I am delighted that the promoter has reached an agreement with Scottish Natural Heritage on environmental management of the River Teith, which is vital, but we must also consider the commitments that have been offered to local people and ensure that the mitigation that has been promised to them is delivered.

The promoter made a number of commitments during the consideration stage and I hope that those commitments will be delivered. There were commitments to individual residents who will be affected by the route that they will be offered a choice of mitigation measures to be used on their properties; that there will be vibration testing of housing, especially at Causewayhead; and a commitment was made in Clackmannan to the important, high-quality fencing off of children's play areas and to the educational work that will be needed in the local community to advise children and their parents of the dangers of straying on to railways. All those commitments must be delivered.

When I looked through the report, I was interested to note that when the Clackmannan railway concern group gave its evidence at the consideration stage it described one of the original public meetings to discuss the route as "spiky". We must move away from spiky and confrontational public meetings at which there is a top table of folk—who will usually be in suits and will give a PowerPoint presentation—at which the body of the Kirk metaphorically throws rotten tomatoes. We must move away from them-and-us situations with developers and local people. There are participatory techniques that use community development, which can ensure that there is genuine dialogue among promoters, developers

and local communities. Such front-end development—whether of legislation or planning proposals—ensures that there is a much smoother planning system and genuine dialogue.

I hope that the bill will be passed. The Greens would warmly welcome its passing today, our last day in our temporary chamber. The bill will deliver real improvements, not only in our transport infrastructure, but in our environment.

16:05

Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the final stage debate on the bill, which is also the final debate in our temporary chamber. In my constituency, there has been concern around Causewayhead. Since we had the preliminary stage debate in December, Jim Thomson, the chair of Causewayhead community council, has attended one of the committee meetings and outlined his concerns, which were along the lines that I had represented in that earlier debate: the frequency of trains, when they would pass through Causewayhead, their speed and the effect on infrastructure.

There was also some concern near the Ladysneuk level crossing, particularly about noise levels. I see that the promoter gave a commitment to monitor those noise levels for the first year and that the predicted noise levels would be likely to trigger the requirement to offer the objectors the option of installing air conditioning. The committee has acknowledged that the objectors will be adversely affected, but it believes that the promoter has sought to address that adverse effect positively.

Alasdair Morgan's question, which seemed to be asking for information about paragraph 197 of the committee's consideration stage report, seemed to be pertinent. It is a bit of a shame that Rob Gibson, who I think will give us that information, will speak at the end of the debate, but I understand from what I have gleaned from what members have said so far that it is now up to the promoter to fulfil the commitments made during the committee meetings and to address the committee's recommendations and conclusions.

I have worked closely with the Presiding Officer, because the Causewayhead area is shared between our two constituencies. He, like me, is concerned, and we expect the commitments that we have been given to be upheld.

I will not say any more about the recommendations in the committee's report, because compensation and mitigation might be elaborated on a little more, but I will pick up a point that I also made in December. At that time, I got assurances from the minister and the bill committee that the additional freight that would go

on the line through Stirling would not have an adverse effect on passenger services through Stirling. However, I am slightly concerned. I raised the point last week that slight changes that have been made to the Edinburgh to Dunblane service, so that it now comes through Newcraighall, have meant that the train has often terminated at Stirling, stranding passengers who want to go to Bridge of Allan and Dunblane. Because even a small change has had quite a big effect on the Edinburgh to Dunblane service, I seek again the reassurance that we will not have any problems because of additional freight. In fact, the minister said to me that we were going to get an enhanced service on the Stirling line, so I hope that that will happen.

There is obviously a lot of support for the line and there are benefits to opening the route to Clackmannan. Most of them relate to the economic development of Clackmannanshire, but I hope that there will also be benefits for Stirling because fewer cars will come into the town because people catch the train instead.

Keith Raffan mentioned that a number of members and Richard Simpson were very involved in earlier meetings in Alloa. We should not forget all the people who have been engaged in work on the bill, but most of all, the bill committee. Because the Presiding Officer is not able to say it, I say to members that I am sure that he welcomes the final stage of its consideration.

16:09

Alasdair Morgan (South of Scotland) (SNP): I share other members' delight that the bill is going to be passed by the Parliament tonight. I accept the point that was made by Kenny MacAskill and others that improvements that are made in one part of the country can influence the transport situation in another, remote part of the country because they build in cross-Scotland links. That is a significant issue for transport infrastructure.

I have two points to make on procedure. I take the point that the minister, David Mundell and other members made about the need to examine the private bills procedure. In the preliminary stage debate, I quoted Keir Bloomer of Clackmannanshire Council, who said:

"The Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine railway is probably the easiest railway link in Scotland to reopen."—[*Official Report, Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine Railway and Linked Improvements Bill Committee*, 10 November 2003; c 111.]

My response in that debate was:

"if this is the easiest link in Scotland to reopen, what on earth is it going to be like once we start to reopen some of the more difficult lines?"—[*Official Report*, 11 December 2003; c 4265.]

That was before I knew that the bill committee was going to hold many very long meetings and that it

would take six months to get to this stage. What I said then applies in spades now.

We must also remember that, if many such bills are introduced at the same time, we will have difficulty in finding enough members to be on the committees that are set up to consider them. That is not just because I think that members are unwilling to undertake the work, but because of the legislative requirement that all members of private bill committees must be present all the time, to ensure that the process is not open to judicial challenge. For that reason, too, we need to re-examine the procedure.

My second point is that it is clear that any procedure that we have needs to work for all members of the Parliament. After all, we are all going to make a decision on the bill tonight. Although this is not such an important issue tonight, because the bill is not controversial, it could be important if the bill were more controversial. One looks at the Parliament's website to find out the relevant documents for a debate. When I was presented with the committee's second report in 2004, in my naivety, I presumed that that was basically that. That is what we assume when we have a report in front of us. That situation is not helped by the parliamentary habit of never putting dates on our reports, other than the year. We do not know when the report was published. One looks at the document—I actually read most of it—and at the committee minutes and one thinks, "That is it." In fact, more committee meetings were held after that report was completed. A member would have to be a real anorak to find that out, unless they were on the bill committee. We are not in the House of Commons, where the purpose of procedures is to make things as inaccessible to members as possible. We should be doing far better than that. We need to consider that bit of the procedure.

A thought occurred to me about the objectors. Although I can understand why some people felt that they needed to object, if I had a railway line at the bottom of my garden—regardless of when last a train had come down it—I would still think that there might be a chance that at some stage a train could come down it. There are other out-of-use railway lines in the country that we may wish to reinvigorate at a later stage. Tricia Marwick mentioned the line that goes to Methil and there is a short spur from Dumfries out to Maxwelltown, which might be of use for freight.

With some of those lines, although the rails are still there, the whole infrastructure is being allowed to deteriorate. In situations in which Network Rail has allowed the railway line to deteriorate to a state in which a train could not use it, even though the track is in situ, people have a reasonable case

for objecting to the line's reopening. Is there not some way of ensuring that railway lines that are still there but are not in use are at least kept free of weeds so that people know that there definitely is a railway line there that could be used by a train at some stage in the future? That would mean that when we want to reinstate such lines—I hope that we will want to do that in many cases—we will be able to do so without receiving the same number of objections.

I welcome the bill.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Trish Godman): Before I call Richard Baker, I point out that we now put dates on reports.

16:14

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): In this final debate on the bill, we have already heard members using phrases such as “coming to the end of a journey” and “reaching a destination”. In many ways, it has felt as though the journey has been challenging and long. However, it has certainly been worth while and the fellow passengers have been great. I congratulate Bill Butler, the whole clerking team and my fellow committee members on their efforts.

It became clear to me from examining the evidence as a member of the bill committee that the reopening of the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine railway line will be a huge boost to the community in Clackmannanshire and to all those who will use the new service. Of course, the line will benefit not only them but, as the minister said, everyone in Scotland. By freeing up paths on the Forth rail bridge, it will benefit rail services on the whole of the east coast line.

We heard strong evidence from Clackmannanshire Council and Scottish Enterprise on the substantial benefits that will come to the local economy as a direct result of the construction of the line. I certainly appreciate the council's argument that the lack of such a facility in the past has meant that the area has not developed as it might otherwise have done. In agreeing that the line should be built, we not only benefit passengers but give a green light to more business in the area—that has been a vital consideration. Ultimately, we agreed that the line should go ahead, and we agreed with the promoter on key aspects such as the route, because the overall benefit of the line will be so great and we were persuaded that that should be the overriding concern.

It is important to stress that we took the concerns of the objectors to the bill very seriously, as others have said. We visited many of the people who are concerned about the impact of the new line on them and their homes, and we visited

them in their homes to get a clear idea of what the line would mean to them. They were vocal and clear about their worries and about the potential for the line to impact on their lives. We carefully considered what they had to say. Ultimately, we have not been able to accede to their requests where we firmly believe that those requests threaten the economic viability of the project.

I know exactly why Tricia Marwick said that this feels like the end of the line, but it is not the end of the line for the promoter, who will act on the committee's report and provide mitigation in a number of ways for those people who will be affected by the line. Those measures are outlined in the report. Mark Ruskell referred to compensation, and we have made it clear that the promoter must be better at informing people who live near the line about the compensation that they might be entitled to. There is no doubt that in the evidence-taking on the bill objectors were given substantial opportunities to put forward their points of view, both in writing and in oral evidence, and the process allowed their views to be well aired. Of course, the promoter had more resources with which to put its case, but I do not believe that that hampered the committee's ability to weigh up the evidence.

It is important to point out that although there are perhaps some benefits in the private bill process for the consideration of transport infrastructure proposals, there are significant drawbacks—that comment echoes what others have said and follows on from Alasdair Morgan's comments. At times it seemed odd for a planning proposal to be handled by parliamentary procedure and in many ways it was an onerous task in terms of parliamentary resources. Westminster no longer considers such planning proposals and I am pleased that the Procedures Committee, of which I am a member, has decided to review the Parliament's future involvement in such processes.

For me, the most important aspect of being involved in the process is that it will result in a new railway line being built. In terms of the Scottish Executive's transport policy, that is a good thing. The reopening of the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine railway is a good thing not only for the economy of Clackmannanshire and the people in the local area who will be passengers on the new line—I hope to join them in a crowded train on the first journey—but for the whole of Scotland. I commend the bill to the Parliament.

16:18

Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): The Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine Railway and Linked Improvements Bill is, as today's debate has demonstrated, important to the whole of the region

that I represent, Mid Scotland and Fife. Like the minister, I will indulge in a moment of nostalgia—by the way, we all look forward to reading the diaries that we know he so assiduously keeps. The project has run like a thread through much of my constituency work during the past five years, so it is only right and fitting that it should be concluded in our last debate in this chamber.

I, too, thank those colleagues who served on the committee. I know how demanding and arduous serving on a private bill committee can be, but it is extremely important work. To hear the views of local people and take their objections into account is part of the democratic process. I am glad that the minister gave way to me and that I had the opportunity to intervene and express appreciation for the work that was put in on this project by our former colleague Dr Richard Simpson, the former member for Ochil, who is a great loss to the Parliament. Like me and the Presiding Officer, he was involved in many meetings way back in the early days with Clackmannanshire Council, which has been the lead authority in this crucial project.

The paradox is that although Clackmannanshire is centrally located in Scotland, it has some of the worst communication links, which have been a substantial block to its economic development. The railway line's construction will help. Many of my colleagues in Mid Scotland and Fife and I also look forward to the construction of a second Forth crossing at Kincardine, which will also markedly improve communications to and from the wee county.

The bill gives Clackmannanshire Council the compulsory purchase powers that are necessary for building the railway, for constructing a new eastern Alloa link road, for allowing Network Rail to build the linked improvements, such as signalling and track upgrades, and for ancillary works, such as closing level-crossings and footpaths and opening new footbridges.

As many members have said, the bill allows us to introduce a passenger rail link to Alloa for the first time since Lord Beeching cut services in 1968. The track will restore a much shorter route for coal to Longannet power station since freight ceased to be carried on the route in the late 1980s. This will reduce congestion on the whole rail network, as the minister said. We are all indebted to Clackmannanshire Council for its foresight in safeguarding the route from development in its 1986 local plan. That has enabled the route's reopening.

The beneficial side effects of the line's reintroduction have also been mentioned—perhaps calling them side effects diminishes their importance. The route will allow coal trains to be removed from the Forth rail bridge, which will increase the capacity for passenger services to

and from Fife. In her intervention, Christine May was right to mention the importance of bringing Levenmouth into the network.

Many members have talked about the importance of extending the link to Rosyth. Like other members, I have been involved in the establishment of the Superfast Ferries connection from Rosyth to Zeebrugge. Along with fellow European and External Relations Committee members last Sunday, I had the opportunity to travel on that ferry from Rosyth to Zeebrugge. I am glad to say that it is doing well. On board that ferry were 479 passengers, including the three of us, so the ferry was two-thirds full. The amount of freight on the ferry has also increased markedly from an initially low level.

We must do all that we can to support that ferry service. I know that several members will campaign for the rail link to be extended. When I raised that before, the figure given for the cost of extending the link was rather dramatic. Officials told me that it could cost as much as £110 million. However, I am sure that under a Liberal Democrat minister, we can bring that way down to an affordable cost, so that the link can be constructed. We are an ingenious party.

Mr Monteith: Will the member give way?

Mr Raffan: No. I will not spoil my speech, my last day in this chamber or the consensual atmosphere by allowing a partisan intervention by our colleague from wherever he is from. [*Laughter.*] I think that he is a member for my region, but he lives in Edinburgh.

The bill fulfils a Liberal Democrat manifesto commitment. We are greatly indebted to the Executive for providing funding of £30 million that has made the railway possible. I understand that it will take approximately 18 months to construct the line and that trains will run on the route from 2006. I am grateful to the minister for the invitation to join him and others on the first train service. I hope that it will not be like my recent trip to Glasgow, when standing room only was available, and that he will ensure that enough rolling stock is available so that we can all have a seat.

It is important to say that the bill would not have happened without devolution—the project had been sidelined for years. The bill will improve public transport for passengers, increase the opportunities for freight to travel by rail and bring undoubted benefits to the people of Clackmannanshire, whom I along with other members represent, and to the area's economy. I am delighted to support the bill and to see the conclusion of a long-awaited project.

16:24

Mr Brian Monteith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I support the bill. Naturally, I congratulate the committee and the bill's sponsor on all the hard work that they have put in to see the bill through. However, in case the Parliament is unaware of it, I should say that I am not a consensual politician, but a conviction politician. Unlike some members of the Parliament, I am not a conviction politician without convictions. I say that because I was surprised to hear the minister mention Dr Beeching in the debate. Many other members have committed the same sin. The minister seemed rather to crow about the opening of the line, as if the actions of Dr Beeching were all that dreadful.

I think that Dr Beeching was someone with foresight. On many occasions, he made poor and objectionable recommendations, some of which were worthy of challenge. I would go so far as to say that the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine line was a good example of such a recommendation.

Alasdair Morgan: Will the member give way?

Mr Monteith: Not at this stage—I am developing a point for the sake of debate.

However, to suggest that all Dr Beeching's recommendations should be castigated is to generalise too much. It raised my ire and caused me to make a sedentary intervention when I saw some members applaud the minister's point, even though the party to which they belong followed through Dr Beeching's recommendations. When, as a trainspotter, I watched and waved at the last train on the Waverley line as it passed by, I recalled that Harold Wilson's second Government was introducing that cut.

Alasdair Morgan: Does the member not feel that his point is weakened slightly by the fact that the Alloa to Stirling line was closed to freight in the mid-1980s, not as a result of Dr Beeching, but as a result of the Conservative Government's animus to rail freight?

Mr Monteith: I do not think that that weakens my point at all. Rather, it serves to weaken the point of the minister and the sometimes here, sometimes not member, Mr Raffan, about Beeching. It is not proper to crow about achievements on the back of Dr Beeching. The bill is worthy of support on its own merits, irrespective of what has happened on the railways before.

As a trainspotter, I know my Bo-Bos from my Co-Cos. I have driven a Deltic and I know my brushes from my shunters. I look forward to being on the footplate, if possible, of the first train that travels on the new line. If he is still in office, the minister will no doubt be a guard. It is worth our paying tribute not just to Richard Simpson, the

previous member for Ochil, but—to show that I am a magnanimous member of the Parliament—to Nick Johnston, a former regional member for Mid Scotland and Fife who also campaigned for the line.

There has been discussion of the use of bills to progress railway lines such as this. Careful consideration needs to be given to that issue not just by the minister but more broadly, as part of the examination of our planning laws. It is notable how quickly the bill has progressed. Members of the bill committee believe that people with objections were able to raise them and to feel that they were heard. The comparison with the way in which motorways are treated suggests that the process can be speedier, but given that there is a significant consensus behind the bill it might be a poor example. We may need to consider introducing an inquiry system for future bills like the Waverley Railway (Scotland) Bill, the Edinburgh Tram (Line One) Bill and the Edinburgh Tram (Line Two) Bill. Such a system might be more amenable.

There are other areas in which I must spoil the self-congratulation. We should not welcome the line without considering the cost. When Keith Raffan would not take an intervention from me, I was hoping to make the point that, when we started talking about the need for the line, the cost was estimated at £14 million. Since John Prescott's intervention, which delayed the ability of the Parliament to move forward, that cost has risen to more than £30 million. As far as I can tell, that point has not been commented on in the debate. It is a disappointment that the cost has more than doubled in such a short time. We must ensure that, in future, the delays that can beset improvements in transport infrastructure that receive cross-party support do not lead to the doubling of costs and that improvements are brought about far more quickly.

Despite the comments about Beeching and my concerns about the cost, I welcome the bill. It will bring much-needed improvement not just to Clackmannanshire, but to Fife and other parts of Scotland. It is well worthy of Parliament's support.

16:31

Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): I hope that I will not take up the full seven-minute allocation available to me.

I welcome the bill. Its passage—which I am sure will happen unanimously in due course—is a good way for the Parliament to end its stay in the Assembly Hall. When we go down to the new Parliament building, I hope that several more transport infrastructure improvement decisions will be taken.

I echo the thanks that people have given to the committee members, who showed considerable dedication in scrutinising the bill. The various objectors received a fair hearing and detailed consideration was given to all the points that they made. Much credit is due to Bill Butler, as convener of the committee, and to the other members of the committee—Richard Baker, Rob Gibson, David Mundell and Nora Radcliffe. When they were asked to serve on the committee, it is probable that none of them appreciated the volume of work that they were undertaking, which it has taken them a considerable part of the past year to do. Credit must be given to them for their dedication and for the outcome of their work, which is the recommendation that we pass the bill today.

I noted in particular Bill Butler's reference to the dedication of members who stood by a railway line to watch a freight train roll past in order to consider fully the effect of the noise. I just hope that they were not so dedicated that they took note of the wagon numbers as they passed by. I am assured that that was not the case.

The benefits that the completed line will bring will be considerable. Primarily, the benefits will be to Clackmannanshire and the Forth valley area. Once the line is completed, it will enhance the transport systems of the area and the ability of Clackmannanshire Council and neighbouring authorities to develop the economy of the area in a sustainable manner. As many others have said, the line will also produce benefits for other parts of the central belt of Scotland, including alternative routes for taking coal to Longannet and a reduction in the need to move freight across the Forth rail bridge, thus enhancing the possibility of more passenger rail services across the Forth bridge. That change will benefit many services in Fife.

The bill represents a major step forward in overall Executive transport priorities as well as in the priority set by the Labour-Liberal Executive to reopen railway lines throughout Scotland. It sets a marker for making progress on a number of other key projects, none closer to my heart than the reopening of the Bathgate to Airdrie line, which will be developed in due course.

I welcome the cross-party consensual approach to many such transport projects. Irrespective of party, most of us in the chamber recognise that Scotland's transport infrastructure is not currently of sufficient capacity and quality to ensure that the Scottish economy can grow into the 21st century. Railway enhancements will help to create a transport infrastructure that the Parliament will be proud to have brought about and from which Scotland will be able to benefit, both economically and environmentally, because passenger and

freight journeys will be transferred from road to rail. That is important.

I refer briefly to the private bill procedure, which many members have mentioned. It is worth reflecting that the procedure is largely similar to the one that was in place in the 1840s when the Kincardine-Alloa-Stirling line opened. It is right to say that we should review the procedure, which has been very time-consuming for a number of members. I know that members are in the Parliament to do a job, but the committee members have probably been taken away from several other key aspects of their work loads and many other members who serve on private bill committees, such as Tricia Marwick, who is a member of the Waverley Railway (Scotland) Bill Committee, will have to bear an increased work load. We should probably move towards having an inquiry process that is similar to the one that is in place for road projects to hear from objectors to proposed railway enhancement projects. I acknowledge that Kenny MacAskill has taken a constructive approach to supporting moves towards a reform of the procedure. I welcome that, and I hope that we can move forward on a consensual basis.

I echo the comments that Kenny MacAskill and others have made. We should extend the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine line in due course and reconnect Rosyth into the railway network, to maximise the port's economic benefit.

When the Parliament moves to the new building at Holyrood, it will be judged on the delivery of projects that will improve Scotland's transport infrastructure. I hope that the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine project will be delivered as planned in the projected timescale of 2006 and that it will be the first of many such enhancements to Scotland's transport infrastructure.

16:36

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):

There have been several useful and informed contributions to the debate and I take the opportunity to respond to some of the points that have been raised.

The Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine Railway and Linked Improvements Bill Committee was thorough in its approach throughout consideration stage. On the basis of that, I believe that it has produced a fair, objective and thorough report, although I accept that the objectors will be disappointed with the report's conclusions.

The convener, Bill Butler—Railway Bill—referred in his opening speech to issues about consultation and compensation. Objectors expressed several concerns about the promoter's performance on consultation arrangements. Although the

committee indicated in its report that it was satisfied with the adequacy of the accompanying documents to the bill, one of which sets out the promoter's arrangements for consultation, the promoter could have been more forthcoming in explaining to objectors the basis on which compensation would be paid. Some objectors had to go to unnecessary lengths to extract information from the promoter on the matter.

The committee asked the promoter to set out how it intends to explain more clearly the basis on which compensation may be paid. The promoter responded positively to the committee and offered to provide a leaflet on the matter, which would be widely distributed. Objectors have been informed of the promoter's intentions.

I understand that the promoter has awarded the contract for phase 1 of the design and build and that, during that phase, the promoter will work with the contractor to develop a consultation strategy for the remainder of the project's duration. In tandem, the promoter will commence detailed discussions with landowners who will be directly affected by the works, to discuss the possibility of obtaining land and rights by agreement, rather than by exercising the compulsory purchase powers that are in the bill. Those discussions will continue until land acquisition is complete.

Continuing consultation and dialogue between the promoter and individuals about the detailed design of the project and the specific mitigation measures that will require to be put in place will be an issue. The identification and agreement of mitigation measures will be a key element of those discussions. During this first phase, the discussions will revolve around concepts—for example, whether noise mitigation is required and whether the landowner would prefer physical mitigation, such as a wooden noise barrier, or financial compensation in lieu of physical works. Once the second phase of the design-and-build contract commences, such agreements relating to physical mitigation measures can be finalised. It is expected that consultation on detailed mitigation matters—for example, the exact position and colour of noise barriers—will continue for approximately one year from the start of the second phase.

Along with the specific consultation with affected landowners, the promoter has undertaken that there will be more on-going general public consultation to ensure that the wider community is fully informed about the project's progress and any direct impact that it might have on their lives, such as road and footpath closures. That public consultation exercise is about to commence with a leaflet being issued to communities along the route, advising of the forthcoming ground investigation works that require to be carried out in advance of the detailed design.

I am certainly encouraged by that, and I hope that the spirit of consensus that the promoter has expressed on paper converts into consensual working on the ground, meaning that objectors and other affected residents along the route are able to achieve appropriate measures to minimise the adverse effects of the railway during its construction and operation.

The members of our committee have been able to deal with the bill within a parliamentary year. Our committee has been working right through to the beginning of June, with extra meetings right up until the last minute to deal with matters such as the Balfour Street level-crossing and the River Teith candidate special area of conservation.

On a personal note, it is gratifying to see the rail network in central Scotland taking new, dynamic, shape. However, we in the north have to press the Scottish Executive to meet our rail needs next. While other central belt projects are on line, the Inverness to Aberdeen improvements are now urgent. I hope that the Aberdeen-based Minister for Transport, Nicol Stephen, will make that a priority of his. Those of us who live in the far north know that the routes to Inverness from the south and the north-east need to be in good condition if travellers are to be funnelled north. Since the lead time for planning, approval and parliamentary scrutiny is many years, we think that it is necessary to speed up the plans for the Inverness to Wick services and to get them into the next rail development plan, which is due to be published before 2007.

To return to the bill, in the light of the reports to the Parliament of the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine Railway and Linked Improvements Bill Committee, I invite the Parliament to agree to the two motions in the convener's name.

Presiding Officer's Ruling

16:40

The Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): I have reflected on the run of points of order that I had this afternoon and I will deal with them now.

The Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body has a democratic mandate. It is elected by members to make decisions on your behalf. It makes hundreds of decisions a month. If they had to be taken individually on the floor of the Parliament each time, we would have time for nothing else. The SPCB is entrusted to make those decisions and I believe that it has the trust of Parliament. Members regularly consult informally, as I do, on a range of issues. I am perfectly confident that, on the issue of access to Holyrood, there is preponderant support for the position of the SPCB.

I will repeat what I said earlier: access to the chamber, to committees, to the petition process and to members is, and always will be, absolutely free and in accordance with the principles of this Parliament. Tours provided by the education service remain absolutely free. Most important of all, tours conducted by members throughout the complex are absolutely free.

However, apart from being a working Parliament, the building is also a work of art, and there will be those who want that to be specifically explained to them. That means professional guides and, of course, they cost money. That is why we charge only to break even. Otherwise, that facility would have to be subsidised at considerable cost to the taxpayer.

I hope that that is absolutely clear, and I have arranged for a note to be placed at the back of the chamber that spells out the arrangements in some detail.

Carolyn Leckie (Central Scotland) (SSP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: You cannot make a point of order in the middle of a statement by the Presiding Officer.

Carolyn Leckie: I am sorry.

The Presiding Officer: I will now respond to the second point, which was part of Mrs MacDonald's point of order. I suspended this morning's meeting of Parliament under rule 7.4.1(e) of standing orders, which says:

"The Presiding Officer may, if he or she considers it appropriate, suspend a meeting of the Parliament".

I think that there was a preponderance of support for the position that I have just explained and I intend to move on.

The last bang of the gavel. The last decision time. The last day on the Mound. Later this month, we start Scotland's biggest ever flitting. Staff will be moving down the Royal Mile at the end of July and members will follow a month later. We meet in Holyrood for the first time in September, with our new home being opened by the Queen in October. It will not be a building site; as the Auditor General said in his report this week, it will be a building of real quality that will meet the aspirations of the people of Scotland.

It is up to all of us in the chamber to rise to those aspirations. It is not buildings that make a Parliament but the men and women who are elected to represent the people. Holyrood will succeed to the clarity of our vision, the depth of our scrutiny and the quality of our argument.

Have a good break and come back focused on building a better Scotland.

Business Motion

16:48

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S2M-1551, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a timetable for legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Justice 1 Committee reports to the Justice 2 Committee by 17 September 2004 on the Advice and Assistance (Scotland) Amendment (No. 2) Regulations 2004 Amendment Regulations 2004 (SSI 2004/305).—[*Tavish Scott.*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

16:48

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh):

The next item of business is consideration of two Parliamentary Bureau motions. I ask Tavish Scott to move motions S2M-1548 and S2M-1557, on the approval of Scottish statutory instruments.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the draft Town and Country Planning (Electronic Communications) (Scotland) Order 2004 be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish Outdoor Access Code: Proposed Code (SE/2004/101) be approved.—[*Tavish Scott.*]

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

Motion without Notice

16:49

The Deputy Minister for Finance and Public Services (Tavish Scott): I would like to move a motion without notice to bring forward decision time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): I am minded to accept such a motion. Is it agreed that we take such a motion?

Members indicated agreement.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees under rule 11.2.4 of Standing Orders that Decision Time on Thursday 1 July 2004 be taken at 4.49 pm.—[*Tavish Scott.*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:49

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S2M-1542, in the name of Bill Butler, on the appropriate assessment for the River Teith candidate special area of conservation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament notes the 2nd Report 2004 (Session 2) of the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine Railway and Linked Improvements Bill Committee, *Appropriate Assessment for the River Teith candidate Special Area of Conservation* (SP Paper 187), and agrees that the works proposed in the Bill will not adversely affect the integrity of the River Teith candidate Special Area of Conservation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The second question is, that motion S2M-1541, in the name of Bill Butler, that the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine Railway and Linked Improvements Bill be passed, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the Stirling-Alloa-Kincardine Railway and Linked Improvements Bill be passed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S2M-1548, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on the approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the draft Town and Country Planning (Electronic Communications) (Scotland) Order 2004 be approved.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S2M-1557, in the name of Patricia Ferguson, on the approval of an SSI, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish Outdoor Access Code: Proposed Code (SE/2004/101) be approved.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will allow the chamber to clear before the final item of business.

Argyll and Clyde Clinical Review

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Murray Tosh):

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S2M-1530, in the name of Frances Curran, on the Argyll and Clyde clinical review. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament rejects NHS Argyll and Clyde's consultation on its clinical review; believes that this consultation is flawed from the outset as it neither consults the people who live in Argyll and Clyde, nor those who use the NHS, about what kind of services they need; notes that the consultation announces a raft of severe cuts and then has the audacity to attempt to consult people on which services they would like to see cut; considers that the proposals for cuts in this consultation should be rejected outright and, furthermore, that NHS Argyll and Clyde should withdraw this consultation and begin a new consultation with the people they serve on what kind of NHS is needed for the 21st century; believes that the experiences of Argyll and Clyde reflect a Scotland-wide crisis in the NHS, and further believes that a national conference of campaign groups, trade unions, NHS professionals, professional organisations and community representatives should be convened to develop a strategy to protect and improve the NHS in the absence of adequate action by the Scottish Executive.

16:51

Frances Curran (West of Scotland) (SSP):

The first point to make is that there is absolutely no confidence in the public consultations of Argyll and Clyde NHS Board. During the previous consultation, 84 per cent of women respondents said that they wanted to keep consultant-led services at the Rankin maternity unit in Greenock. Despite that view being widespread in the community, the health board decided to downgrade the maternity service anyway.

The current so-called consultation document is not a consultation. It is not so much a document for dialogue between the health board and the people of Inverclyde as a statement. It announces the effective closure of six hospitals: the Vale of Leven hospital in Dumbarton, the Inverclyde royal hospital in Greenock; the Ravenscraig hospital in Greenock; the Dumbarton joint hospital; the Victoria infirmary in Helensburgh; and the Argyll and Bute hospital in Lochgilphead.

The health board's strategy is not to consult about local services but simply to provide an opportunity to let people sound off and sign petitions. Every local paper has had a half-page advert asking for people's views and explaining how they can get in contact and attend the consultative meetings that will be held. However, the board intends to carry out the cuts anyway. There can be no confidence in what is just a sounding board. The health board's approach is completely cynical.

According to the local branch of the Royal College of Nursing, the consultation document was not developed and produced through partnership agreements or with staff involvement. Many staff believe that the consultation is not a genuine attempt to gauge local views and many potential options have been ruled out already. The RCN is absolutely right in its summing up of the document.

In today's debate, I call on the Minister for Health and Community Care to instruct the health board to withdraw the consultation document. The proposals are a disaster waiting to happen. The health board area includes Greenock, Dumbarton and the surrounding areas, which have some of the worst deprivation and poverty statistics in Scotland. The health board needs to take into account the rural nature of much of the wide geography that it must cover.

The consultation document proposes the closure of Inverclyde royal hospital and Vale of Leven hospital as general hospitals. Last year, 21,000 people were admitted to those hospitals. Where are those 21,000 people supposed to go if those hospitals close? The answer, apparently, is that they will go to the Royal Alexandra hospital in Paisley. However, members will search the document in vain to find out what the alternative proposals are, where the spending will come from or what measures will be taken to provide those extra beds. That is without taking into account the issue of transport or the pressures on the ambulance service.

As it is Wimbledon week, I shall paraphrase John McEnroe: they cannot be serious. More than 500 beds are due to close in the other four hospitals, including elderly care beds, dementia beds and psychiatry beds. I want to ask the health board where the 500 people who are currently occupying those beds are supposed to go. The answer given in the document is care in the community. That is fine, but where? There is no detail on housing in Helensburgh, but there is a big question mark there because the hospital is being closed. There is no detail on care packages or on who is to pay for care. If I had a relative in one of those beds now, I would be very worried indeed about where on earth they are supposed to move to.

There are no proposals in the consultation document, but we are supposed to agree to the document and the cuts and trust the health board to come up with an answer. The health board says that people are spending less time in hospital, and that is true. It says that technology allows more out-patient diagnostic services and more day surgery, and that is fine. If people spend less time in hospital, that is great. If more can be done with day surgery, that is brilliant, but let us develop the

practices now. Let us shift the balance in the health service now and let the health board prove that there will not be the same need for those beds, as its strategy suggests.

To downgrade two major hospitals and offer a diagnostic and day care service in their place is a major experiment that involves people's lives. The hospitals are to close within two years—that is what the strategy says—yet the alternative services will take between two and 15 years to develop. That does not add up in my book.

We need today's debate in Parliament because the health board is the messenger. It carries the policy and the message from the Labour Minister for Health and Community Care. Members of the health board are appointed by the minister and they are responsible to the minister and to the Executive, not to the people of Argyll and Clyde, whom they are supposed to serve.

The minister has the power to stop the proposals. He can stop the consultation in its tracks and go back to the drawing board. There are things that we need to discuss, such as the working time directive, the role of consultants and whether the balance is right in the move towards specialisation. Does the minister acknowledge that a significant number of the doctors whom we train in Scotland do not stay in Scotland when they graduate because there are not enough jobs? Let us discuss that. He and his colleagues in the Labour-Liberal Executive hold the purse strings. In my opinion, what the debate is really about—although it is covered up by clinical words—is money. The health board itself has stated:

"From a financial perspective alone, NHS Argyll & Clyde simply cannot afford to continue as it is. We currently spend around £40 million each year more than we receive from the Scottish Executive."

The matter is in the minister's hands, and he must not fail the people of Argyll and Clyde.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I have a long list of members who wish to speak, so I would be grateful if members could restrict their comments to four minutes. I was going to say that I would prioritise local members, but since virtually all those who wish to speak are local members, that will not be much of a concession.

16:58

Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity that the motion affords us to debate the clinical strategy. Although the motion is about Argyll and Clyde as a whole, I will not surprise anybody here by focusing my remarks on Inverclyde royal hospital. In doing so, I declare an interest. Inverclyde royal hospital is my hospital. It is not just in my constituency; it is in my community. It is where my mother went when she

recently broke her hip and where my wife went when she broke her shoulder. Indeed, as a result of the maternity contingency plans, it is my grandchild who is likely to be born in Paisley and not in the Rankin unit this autumn. When the stress of fighting the continued plans from the health board to centralise the services finally gives me a heart attack, Inverclyde royal is where I want to go.

In the last ever parliamentary debate in this chamber before we hand it back to our theological friends, I suppose that it is appropriate to ask, "Why are we here?" How did we arrive at a situation where, on one hand, the Government—or, to be more precise, the taxpayer—is putting more cash than ever into the national health service and, on the other, our services seem to be disappearing?

The root of the problem, as I have long argued, is NHS work-force planning. I have spoken countless times in the chamber about the impact that that is having on services. I take some comfort from the fact that the British Medical Association and Sir John Temple now publicly acknowledge the importance of the issue. The Health Committee is set to question the health industry's key players as part of its major work-force planning inquiry.

The issue is not just about money—I wish that it was, but if it was that simple, we would have solved it. If politicians are good at anything, it is giving more money to the national health service.

If the problem of centralisation is the same throughout Scotland, the proposed solutions are not. Other areas are responding better by, for example, sharing services between hospitals. However, Argyll and Clyde NHS Board's plans are almost all one-way traffic. It seeks to cram most of those in need of emergency or in-patient services into a hospital that is already struggling to cope with its current numbers—Paisley Royal Alexandra hospital is full to bursting. We all agree that the strategy has weaknesses, but if we are to expose them, we need to muster support, knowledge and expertise.

Our local newspaper, the *Greenock Telegraph*, has to be congratulated on leaving the health board in no doubt about the strength of local feeling. Such support is essential, but on its own it is not enough. We must also back up our passion with precision. In other words, we must engage the health bosses on their own terms and challenge their arguments and the assumptions on which they rely with cold, hard facts. In order to frame our arguments, I have been speaking to academics, clinicians, trade unions and the many others who deliver our health services locally.

Tomorrow, I will make the case for Inverclyde royal to Dr Andrew Walker, the top academic who is charged with independently evaluating the plan. Although I would not seek to pre-empt his expert analysis, I am convinced, after examining the strategy in some detail, that it is seriously flawed and that a better way forward can be found.

A number of clinicians are ready to stand up and be counted. Leading Inverclyde general practitioner and chair of the local health care co-operative, Dr Mustafa Kapasi, and senior consultant surgeon and clinical director of surgery at the Inverclyde royal hospital, Mr Ian Morrice, have both assured me that they are prepared to challenge the plans and play their part in drawing up credible alternatives. I now hope that others will come on board, because there is a big job to do.

The health board's proposals are the product of many officials working over many months—those are two luxuries that we will have to do without when we draft our alternatives. I therefore look forward to the Minister for Health and Community Care outlining how our efforts will be supported in terms of time, resources and expertise. I would also welcome an undertaking that the minister will ensure that equal weight is given to any alternative plan and to the health board plan.

Finally, we need a guarantee that the consultation process will be worthy of the name. I agree that the process is a complex one, but my bottom line is that closure is not an option. There shall be an Inverclyde royal hospital.

17:04

Mr Stewart Maxwell (West of Scotland) (SNP):

I thank Frances Curran for securing this important debate. It is the last parliamentary debate in this chamber and it is a crucial one; it is certainly one of the most important debates in the Parliament this week and for many weeks.

The health service is a crucial safeguard for all of us in our time of need—from our most elderly relatives to our youngest relatives. The health service is a safety net for us all, which is why so many members feel so desperate about the situation—not only in the west of Scotland and in Argyll and Clyde but throughout Scotland.

I pay tribute to all the MSPs from every party, party activists, community activists, doctors, nurses, other medical and health staff, the local press and members of the public who have been involved in the campaign north and south of the river—whether it be in the areas of Inverclyde that Duncan McNeil mentioned or right up into the areas of Argyll that are also affected by the changes. NHS Argyll and Clyde covers a massive area—from Barrhead to Oban, and Tyree to Dumbarton, and it includes Paisley and Inverclyde.

That is an enormous geographical area, which is why the centralisation of services will not work.

Before there was any loss of service and before the cutbacks started, the travelling time to Vale of Leven for many people was enormous. If someone came from Campbeltown or Oban, the travelling time was ridiculous to start with. The situation now, particularly for those from parts of Argyll, after cutbacks, rationalisation or centralisation—whatever one calls it—is much worse. We have already seen the loss of accident and emergency services and maternity services, to name but two, but now there are proposals to remove even more services, including elderly care, care for the mentally ill and even chiropody services. Frances Curran mentioned a number of others. Many services seem to be going from the NHS Argyll and Clyde area.

Health board managers have to explain their proposals properly. In their documents that they have produced, they seem to be saying that they are taking things away, but what will be in their place? People are worried about their services. If elderly units are to be closed and chiropody services are to be taken away, managers must explain what the alternatives are. I do not see the detail on the alternatives in the documents.

Inverclyde and the Vale of Leven have been offered either an ambulatory care and diagnostic unit or an intermediate hospital. I attended a public meeting not so long ago at which a letter was read out from local doctors who said that even they did not know what an intermediate hospital was. If they do not know what it is, how on earth are the rest of us supposed to understand what it is? I understand what an ACAD is, because I have seen the fights over them in Glasgow, in particular on the south side of Glasgow, where the Victoria infirmary is to be replaced by an ACAD. ACADs are hospitals with no in-patient services and no accident and emergency. Frankly, I do not think that they offer the hospital services that are needed north or south of the Clyde.

The Royal College of Nursing made important comments about the consultation process. I was concerned by some of the things that it said and two of the comments in particular struck me. The RCN stated:

“the document was developed and produced without staff involvement or through partnership arrangements”.

That is a disgrace. If the managers are not involving the staff in the process, what on earth are they doing? The RCN also stated that there was a

“lack of clarity in the consultation document about how current services will be provided in the future and ... that it seems likely fewer services will be provided locally than at present.”

That is the point that I was trying to make about the document: all we can see are cutbacks. We cannot see the clear vision. The reason why we have health board managers is to provide that vision. If the managers cannot provide it in the documents, frankly, I do not know whether they are doing their job properly.

If the services go, many people will have to travel to either Glasgow or Paisley. For people on the north of the Clyde, there is a superficially attractive solution in the transport corridor north of the river. I can see why it might be attractive, but more distance will be added to the journeys for people from the more distant parts of Argyll. Given that Greater Glasgow NHS Board is cutting back and centralising its services, it will be no solution for Argyll and Clyde to say that people can go to Glasgow.

The process that is going on in Argyll and Clyde—but also in every part of Scotland—is of great concern to people all over Scotland. The people of Argyll and Clyde deserve no less than that we find an answer that saves their services.

17:08

Miss Annabel Goldie (West of Scotland) (Con): I, too, commend Frances Curran and congratulate her on the passion of her speech, because she is striking a chord that resonates within every person in the chamber and in the areas that are affected.

Hospital provision is now a vital issue, not just for Argyll and Clyde but for a wider part of Scotland. Those of us who attended the meeting of the save Stobhill campaign on Monday evening will be aware of how intense passions are in respect of Greater Glasgow NHS Board's proposals. That situation is echoed throughout Scotland. The minister must be sensitive to that and be willing to show a listening ear, because the themes that are emerging on this broad base are common to all areas.

Health care for local communities is disappearing or is in threat of disappearing and local communities feel more and more distant, not just from the care but from having a say in the kind of care that they need. There is increased centralisation. Questions arise, such as what the role of the health boards is, what the role of Government is, and what the role of clinicians is. There is a feeling that patients have too little say and Government has too much control. For that reason, my party supports foundation hospitals. We believe in trying to offer greater choice and giving patients the opportunity to have a greater say on the provision of care. It is important that we understand the general backdrop against which the debate takes place. It is easy to be critical of

Argyll and Clyde NHS Board—I share many of the criticisms that Frances Curran articulated—but the board is purely a bureaucratic deliverer of what it is told to provide within a fixed package of resource. That goes right to the heart of who the provider is—it must be Government.

I have read the summary of the consultation document and it seems to me that the proposals are a threat to six hospitals, which will affect hundreds of thousands of people in an area with difficult geography. We should not forget that the geography of the Argyll and Clyde NHS Board area is particularly challenging, which gives rise to problems for communities in accessing the care that they need. A three-month period for a consultation on such proposals is simply unacceptable.

I turn to the specific proposals for Inverclyde royal hospital and the Vale of Leven hospital. We cannot deny those areas the hospital care to which they are entitled. The consultation presents the proposals as an option, but I share Frances Curran's concern about what people are being consulted on. People are being told, "Here it is—take it or leave it." That is not good enough. There are legitimate arguments about the kind of care that the population mass in Inverclyde and in the Vale of Leven are entitled to expect. The proposals place a question mark over the current provision from those hospitals, with a view to concentrating everything in the Royal Alexandra hospital in Paisley. In my opinion, that would be impossible because the location of that hospital is difficult, development is constrained by the site and access is problematic—it is one of the most difficult hospitals to get to.

The review is not shaping the future; for the area concerned, it is hospital provision meltdown. The proposals are not safe or accessible and they are not acceptable. The consultation should be extended to at least six months. Ideally, the minister should intervene to revisit what the health board is talking about before the consultation process continues. What is at stake is far too important and enduring for the future of the area concerned to leave to something as unacceptable and inadequate as the current proposals.

17:12

George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD): I, too, congratulate Frances Curran on bringing the subject before Parliament. The issue is of deep concern to all members who represent patients and other constituents in the Argyll and Clyde NHS Board area. My constituents are asking me why on earth they are being asked to accept a reduction in local health services and greater centralisation of services at a time when the Executive is pouring record amounts of public

money into the NHS. They are concerned, if not horrified, to learn that, according to evidence that has been presented to the Parliament's Audit Committee, one of the main reasons for that is the substantial cost of funding new pay modernisation contracts for consultants, GPs and junior doctors. Along with rising prescribing costs, the new contracts are swallowing up the vast bulk of the £2 billion of extra funding that will be spent on health services in Scotland through to 2006.

The problem is particular to Scotland. Executive figures show that the NHS in Scotland has nearly 30 per cent more doctors and nurses per capita than the NHS south of the border, which means that the costs of pay modernisation have a disproportionate impact on health board budgets. Those are the issues that drive the agenda behind Argyll and Clyde NHS Board's clinical strategy review—it is not driven by the needs of patients in the health board area. Certainly in my constituency, patients want the best possible care delivered as locally as possible, but they are being offered further centralisation of health services and poorer local services. The review is driven by the need to meet the terms of consultants' and doctors' contracts, aided and abetted by the demands of the Royal College of Physicians for specialisation by consultants.

When the people of Scotland agreed to pay more taxes for their NHS, they expected in return more operations, shorter waiting times and better patient care. I do not believe that they expected their hard-earned cash to be swallowed up in modernisation costs and in payments to consultants and doctors. In many cases, those payments have represented considerable rises in people's salaries, with little left over for service improvements. That appears to be the reality today.

I have grave concerns about the proposals in the strategy—in particular, the proposal to close the Argyll and Bute hospital, a hospital that is held in high regard throughout Argyll for its provision of mental health services. It is essential that those services continue. We are also deeply concerned about the loss of consultant-led services at Inverclyde royal hospital. Many of my constituents are wholly reliant on the services provided there.

I do not have time to go into the detail of the proposals, but I leave the minister with one final thought. When Beveridge set up the NHS in 1948, it was said that he had to stuff the doctors' and consultants' mouths with gold to achieve his vision. Cynics might suggest that history is repeating itself.

17:16

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): Like others, I start by congratulating Frances Curran on securing what I consider to be an extremely important debate. There is no doubt in my mind that there is considerable anger and dismay at the proposals emanating from Argyll and Clyde NHS Board in its clinical strategy review. I share that anger. Many people have found the attitude of Argyll and Clyde NHS Board to be breathtakingly arrogant. Let me explain why. In so doing, I will acknowledge that, yes, if one was drawing boundaries for health boards from scratch, one would not choose to create the present Argyll and Clyde boundary. There are relatively few economic, social or transport links between the communities that make up the Argyll and Clyde NHS Board area. I accept that the geography is extremely challenging. However, those points must not be used as excuses for a lack of imagination and a lack of responsiveness to people's needs.

Argyll and Clyde NHS Board's proposals are, I believe, an insult to the intelligence of the people in my local community and the communities of many other members. We will leave no stone unturned in opposing the proposals. We will do so in partnership with many local organisations, such as the Vale of Leven hospital services forum, community councils, Save Our Services, local authorities and the local press.

I will deal first with the proposed closures of Dumbarton joint hospital and Helensburgh Victoria infirmary, especially in relation to provision for the care of the elderly. No discussions took place with either local authority in advance and no discussions took place with any of the relatives, who found out about the proposals through the local press officer. Some 18 months ago, elderly people were all reassessed and a number of them were relocated in the community. It would therefore appear that some elderly people with medical needs remain in those facilities. Surely they are not candidates for community care. In any case, what a way to treat elderly people!

What about the range of out-patient services that are currently delivered from Dumbarton joint hospital and Helensburgh Victoria infirmary? The strategy is silent on what will happen to them. That runs entirely contrary to the minister's response at question time today, which was about providing local services. Is he aware that substantial capital funds have been invested in the services of both those hospitals? That perhaps suggests that Argyll and Clyde NHS Board is incapable of forward planning.

Let me now deal with the proposals for acute medicine. We have been given options. Did members know that? Well, they should not kid

themselves, because the options are not options at all. Under the first option, we are offered an intermediate hospital at the Vale of Leven, with major services provided at the RAH in Paisley. Stewart Maxwell is right to ask what on earth an intermediate hospital is. Health professionals struggle to come up with a consistent definition. Most say that such a hospital is GP led. Is the minister aware that a third of GPs in the area are set to retire in the next five years? The net effect of that will be to remove more services from the local area—not specialist services, but basic services. Again, that runs contrary to the minister's expressed view.

I will deal briefly with the Glasgow option. I am talking not about Gartnavel, which is 20 minutes down the road, but about the Southern general hospital or Glasgow royal infirmary—as will be discovered, the option of Gartnavel is tucked away as a footnote. That is reason enough to withdraw the consultation document, of which it was famously said by a health board official in response to criticism:

“It's not flawed; it's just not absolutely clear.”

It is absolutely clear that 88 per cent of health professionals and local people who were surveyed by me and John McFall want a north-of-the-river solution. I will be clear about that solution. The starting point is maximising the services that are delivered from the Vale of Leven hospital and giving us access to Gartnavel hospital or the Golden Jubilee national hospital for services that cannot be delivered at the Vale of Leven. That is not simply a superficial option; it is a real option. The issue is quite simple: it is about providing a service that is 20 minutes down the road or one that is two and a half hours away in Paisley. There is no contest. Paisley is a tolled bridge too far.

17:21

Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I, too, commend Frances Curran for securing the debate and pay tribute to George Lyon's reasoned and powerful argument on behalf of his constituents. Duncan McNeil's comments about Inverclyde royal hospital allowed me to recall the fact that that hospital saved my father's life, which I do not think it would have been able to do if it had not been on his doorstep.

I am not keen to repeat the words and sentiments of other members, especially as I agree with almost everything that has been said, perhaps excepting what was said in support of foundation hospitals. Instead, I will progress the argument to slightly different territory.

I accept that the demographic trends throughout Scotland are not the only trigger for the proposals, but I am sure that the centralisation plans will—

sadly—exacerbate the population trends in the longer term. In essence, there will be a double hit on Inverclyde and the Vale of Leven, which will affect west central Scotland and Argyll in particular. I do not think that we are talking about a consultation—it looks as if two unacceptable options have been tabled in the hope that people will be fobbed off with the least objectionable one. In conscience, that cannot be allowed to work, especially as the effect of the moves will be materially to increase distances and travel times for many patients and visitors.

I accept that the proposals are out for consultation between 14 June and 17 September and urge everyone to involve themselves in the process and expose what is being planned, bearing in mind the critique that I have just given and the absence of Government involvement. There is a case for being indignant about a situation in which wider policy failure provides the excuse for change and in which Argyll and Clyde NHS Board uses as justification the projections that there will be fewer children and young people and more older people and that the overall population will reduce by 5 per cent over 15 years.

Surely a Scottish Government should have targets and should take steps to tackle, halt and turn around those so-called inevitabilities and surely Argyll and Clyde NHS Board must know that older people do not travel as well as young people. I am sure that my father would not have survived if he had had to travel in the crisis that he went through. Surely the board knows that clinical excellence is eroded and nullified if patients face long journeys and are likely to have fewer visitors. From my perspective, we are beginning to see a pattern in operation in the NHS Argyll and Clyde area.

The whole focus for acute care is moving not even centrally within Argyll and Clyde, but as far to the east of the board's area as it is possible to get. Obviously, I worry about that. I have always believed that the accepted priority was to provide quality services as close as possible to the patient. If health care services are perceived to be below par, Scotland—and rural Scotland in particular—has much less chance of attracting the economically active people that it needs to bring about regeneration. The aim must be to reverse the demographic and population trends so that our services can be boosted.

I worry when I see the direct threat to clinical services and the resultant damage to the economy that will come from that threat, especially when that is happening at the same time as the Westminster Government is committing itself to building more houses in the south-east and is paying higher salaries to NHS and other public service personnel who work there. That begins to

make our diminution and centralisation of services look as though it could go even further. We need to put down a marker and propose a system that will reverse those trends, hold on to the services that we have and accept no diminution and centralisation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before I call the next speaker, I advise members that an additional member with a constituency interest has been added to the list of speakers. I am therefore minded—and the minister has agreed—to accept a motion without notice to extend the debate. I think that it may have to be extended for about 10 minutes.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by 10 minutes.—[*Jackie Baillie.*]

Motion agreed to.

17:25

Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab): I, too, congratulate Frances Curran and, indeed, Duncan McNeil, who made excellent speeches, rightly defending the interests of the local people who use our hospitals and those NHS employees who work in our local hospitals and clinics.

Like everyone else, I want to ensure that we have excellent hospital and local services that are readily and easily accessible to their surrounding communities. That should be, and is, our goal and aim, but we must acknowledge that some changes have been forced on us—for example, the falling population and the welcome and sensible reduction in the hours worked by junior doctors, although that has caused other problems. In addition, the Inverclyde royal hospital has, for a considerable time, had difficulties with unfilled vacancies for consultants and other staff. There are problems that need to be addressed realistically and comprehensively.

As other members have said, the board has presented its views on how things can be changed by way of a document that it has called a clinical strategy, which is out for consultation during the summer holidays. In a press release on the strategy, a spokesman for NHS Argyll and Clyde stated:

“The overall aim of the consultation plan is to enable the greatest possible number of people with an interest in the future shape of Clinical Services in Argyll and Clyde to learn about, debate and contribute their comments and suggestions on the proposals.”

That leaves me with some unease. Many interested people and groups will want to do much more than debate and offer their contributions and suggestions on the proposals; those who use the services and those who provide the medical and

other skills will rightly and properly want to help to shape the strategy and the kind of NHS that it will create. Annabel Goldie is right that three months is not long enough. I agree with her that the consultation period should be at least six months.

The strategy is called a clinical strategy, but I believe that it is not that: it is a managerial strategy, in that it considers how to organise the services with an eye to the finance. The patients—the users of services—and their communities must play a huge role in shaping local NHS provision. Our constituents want ready and local access to primary care services and hospitals.

I strongly challenge the board's seeming commitment to the centralisation of services. Board members appear to believe, along with other boards in Scotland, that centralising services is the only answer to the problems of the NHS. A fair and genuine consultation will allow that approach to be analysed and other prescriptions to be tabled for serious consideration. Regional and local hospitals can be adapted, along with expanded primary care and GP-led services, to accommodate about 96 per cent of the treatments that local communities require. Centralisation is only one option.

I have no doubt that Duncan McNeil has driven from Greenock to the Royal Alexandra hospital. I have driven from Port Glasgow to it and I know that you, Presiding Officer, have done the same, although you had some difficulty because it was not signposted and you lost your way—it is not an easy journey. However, one of the seven principles that are at the heart of the strategy is access. How accessible is the RAH for someone who lives even 20 miles from Paisley?

I also have grave concerns about the RAH's ability to cope with the additional numbers. I do not have the pleasant experience of no complaints from patients from the RAH. Waiting lists are long in some disciplines, there are problems with access and every service seems to be stretched, so how will it cope with extra patients? I have a duty to defend those in the RAH area whom I represent from an influx of new patients that will cause even greater delays in accessing services.

Another concern is the small number of comments on those patients with mental illnesses who will always require to be treated locally in a hospital. Care in the community, if it is planned and administered carefully and sympathetically, is fine for some, but it is not fine for all. The clinical strategy document contains four lines on that subject.

I have every intention of submitting my response to the so-called clinical strategy. Like Duncan McNeil, I am already listening carefully to constituents' views and concerns about their NHS.

Accessibility is, and always will be, at the heart of my approach. There must be local accessibility to both hospital and primary care in an NHS that responds actively, sympathetically and honestly to the needs and aspirations of our local communities.

17:30

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The review is disastrous. It is a draconian solution that is based on concern about financial budgets rather than on concerns for the health care of the people of Argyll and Clyde.

It is obvious that the desire to retrieve the £35 million overspend has resulted in a totally blinkered approach that shows no awareness of the real geographical and logistical problems that patients and their families face. Why should people face continual downgrading of acute services? Nothing else is being talked about. Given that millions of pounds have been spent on the NHS, we should be talking about upgrades.

The truth is that the review is all about mismanagement of money rather than about good management of proper health services for the people of Argyll and Clyde. If the review is carried out, it will have the effect of closing all acute services except those in Oban. Although closure there has been put on hold for the time being, people are extremely worried about the future of services. All emergency and out-of-hours services will be transferred to Paisley, but how will Paisley cope if that happens? In a supplementary to a question that I asked about Argyll and Bute health services, Duncan McNeil pointed out that the Royal Alexandra hospital in Paisley was already overstretched without its having to cope with a greater influx of patients.

Surely it cannot be acceptable to the people of the west of Scotland, from Tiree to the outskirts of Glasgow, that all their health services are being downgraded. Even if the population diminishes, the situation will obviously not be enhanced by removal or relocation of adequate health facilities. People in Helensburgh, Dunoon, Campbeltown, Lochgilphead and Oban should be able to look forward to improvements in the facilities that they already have. Health should be more, not less, accessible and the standard of the services that are provided should be higher, not poorer.

In spite of the overspend in Argyll and Clyde, there has been no significant upgrading of the existing facilities, which must be a cause of concern. Perhaps there was always a secret plan to centralise services: if so, people should be told. The health board has said that it needs to make tough decisions and the decisions that it has made are indeed tough for the patients and the

professionals in the hospitals. The review also says that decisions should be flexible enough to adapt to changing needs and new opportunities. Why cannot the NHS in Argyll and Clyde understand that, by removing local facilities, it is reducing the possibility of new opportunities, because the thrust of development is already limited?

Mr Neil Campbell has told Oban hospital that it will not lose its acute services as long as it stays within its devolved budget, but why is the NHS Argyll and Bute hospital in Lochgilphead being threatened with closure? That hospital has provided vital psychiatric services for many years and has always worked within budget. What will happen to the people who require such services? Will they be sent to Dykebar hospital, which has a history of problems? That would be no solution.

What will happen to the people of Helensburgh if the Vale of Leven hospital closes? They do not even have proper public transport to get to Paisley. The people of Dunoon are worried about what will happen if Inverclyde royal hospital is downgraded; their excellent maternity services at Dunoon hospital have already been downgraded. The unfortunate truth of the matter appears to be that, under the present Government, the only concerns of this aggressive health board are budgetary. The Government wants central control.

There are 100,000 people in Inverclyde, 60,000 in the Vale of Leven and another 60,000 in Argyll. That adds up to 220,000 people, all of whom may have their services downgraded. For once, I agree with John McFall MP and Jackie Baillie MSP, who have been vocal in campaigning to defeat the health board's plans.

People are losing trust in NHS Argyll and Clyde. Only last January, the medical acute assessment unit was opened at the Vale of Leven hospital. NHS Argyll and Clyde promised that it would be a model of care for the future and that it would be sustainable in the long term. Only six months later, the people in charge have changed their minds. How are people expected to trust the health board after that? In spite of the best efforts of the staff of the Royal Alexandra hospital, it is bursting at the seams.

Devolution was meant to deliver a better standard of living for Scottish people, but the prospect of an acute-services-free zone between Inverness and Paisley after five years of Labour-Liberal Government will hardly achieve that end.

17:35

Allan Wilson (Cunninghame North) (Lab): Thank you, Presiding Officer, for recognising my local interest. I thank Frances Curran for the opportunity to express that interest and I thank the

Minister for Health and Community Care for letting me express it. I have received representations on the consultation process that we are discussing tonight and I have concerns about it. Like many members, particularly Jackie Baillie, I am concerned about ensuring that it addresses what we might call, for the purposes of this debate, cross-border issues.

I represent and live in Cunninghame North, which is of course in Ayrshire, but like Duncan McNeil, my two sons were born in Argyll and Clyde—in Paisley maternity unit, to be precise. I was a regular attender in casualty departments when I played football and, by and large, it was the Royal Alexandra hospital that put me back together again. Despite the fact that they live in Ayrshire, many of my constituents use services in Inverclyde as well as the local primary care services that are provided so well by Ayrshire and Arran NHS Board. The clinicians who were mentioned by Duncan McNeil provide and use services in Inverclyde although they live in Largs, Skelmorlie and Cumbrae—which is known to you, Presiding Officer.

My point is that the issues require consultation between boards as well as within boards. For all the reasons that have been mentioned by everyone else, the matter requires strategic consideration rather than a piecemeal approach to the decision-making process within boards. If clinicians argue, as some do, that there should be no district general provision west of Paisley for my constituents, I submit that that proposal should be subjected to wider scrutiny than is proposed in the west of Scotland. I know that the minister will want to ensure that that is indeed what happens.

17:37

Carolyn Leckie (Central Scotland) (SSP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. The speeches so far have demonstrated the seriousness of the issues, so I hope that the minister will take all the remarks on board, that we will achieve a halt to the terms of the consultation and that there will be a serious consultation about the needs of the population in the area, taking into account cross-border issues and the impacts on neighbouring health boards. Once again regional planning, which is supposed to be the Executive's policy, is completely absent.

I will make a comparison. Argyll and Clyde NHS Board has a £40 million per year deficit, which it proposes to address with 1,000 beds' being cut; 1,000 beds for £40 million. I cannot help but draw a comparison with the Healthcare International hospital, which was purchased by the Executive for £37.5 million in 2003 and which had already received £29 million of public money—a total of £66.5 million for running 60 beds, which is the equivalent of £1,108,000 per bed, not including

running costs. It seems that the cost of an NHS bed in Argyll and Clyde is £39,643. The figures do not add up. Wayne Rooney was valued at £80 million the other week. One thousand beds in Argyll and Clyde are equivalent to one of Wayne Rooney's legs—surely we cannot defend that situation.

A question arises. When hospitals, departments, wards and services are being cut and centralised at a rate of knots throughout the country, how can the bail out of the Abu Dhabi Investment Company in 2002 be justified as value for money? The proposal to increase the number of beds at the HCI hospital beyond 60 is ironic—at best, it is questionable—when local hospitals and services are being razed to the ground. We should kick out the privateers, although I suggest that they got quite a good deal.

I am seriously frightened for the future of the NHS. The failure to implement effective, proactive and resourced work force planning has led to the convergence of measures such as the GP contract, the consultant contract, the new deal for junior doctors and so on. Individually, those measures would be challenging, but together they put unacceptable pressure on the NHS. The number of junior-doctor hours that have been lost through the working time directive is 470,000. That is enough of a managerial problem in itself.

That all takes place when health inequality has increased and when inadequate measures are being taken to reverse health inequality. In Lanarkshire, 5 to 10 per cent budget cuts have been announced and the closure of Coathill house is planned for 31 July. As that closure is taking place without public consultation, it raises another recurring theme. I suggest that health boards are panicking and cutting short the already inadequate consultation process to rush such measures through and save money.

The Executive's statistics show that although 60 per cent of Lanarkshire's population is in deprivation categories 6 to 9, it has the lowest numbers of practice nurses per head of population and, in effect, no additional funding of primary medical services to take account of that deprivation.

There are many issues and not enough time. That is why I have attempted at Parliamentary Bureau meetings to persuade the Executive to have a full parliamentary debate on securing the NHS's future with services that are provided in a way that communities support and which makes visible inroads into poverty-related ill health. That surely needs to be the first debate in the new Parliament building.

I ask the minister to do all that he can in the summer recess to prevent some of the disasters

that might befall us. Health professionals, trade unions and all the people to whom I speak are terrified of a bad winter and the impact that that would have on top of all the changes and convergence. I ask the Executive please to schedule a full parliamentary debate, because the NHS's security, future and preservation are at stake. We need to acknowledge the seriousness of the situation.

17:42

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Malcolm Chisholm): I congratulate Frances Curran on securing this important debate and I welcome the opportunity to participate. I recognise the passionate speeches that have been made and endorse the emphasis on the importance of meaningful public involvement. All views—not just comments on the proposals in the consultation document—can and should be expressed as part of that involvement.

Members will be fully aware that the Executive has strict guidelines on how consultations should be undertaken. In formulating final proposals on any major service provision, we expect NHS boards to listen to and take account of the views that all stakeholders express. I welcome the news that NHS Argyll and Clyde has commissioned Dr Andrew Walker from the University of Glasgow to undertake an independent review of how those views have been taken into account.

Members will know that the time for me to express a view is when any proposals come to me following consultation. I will consider carefully the supporting evidence and the report of the independent review, as well as all representations that I receive on the matter.

As I have said repeatedly, I will not simply rubber-stamp NHS boards' proposals. I will want to be assured that all views have been taken into account in drafting the proposals and that the consultation process has been fully consistent with Executive guidance. I also guarantee that I will not be prepared to endorse any solution that does not ensure high-quality, safe and sustainable services for Argyll and Clyde.

Members will remember that a few months ago I did not rubber-stamp the maternity service proposals from Argyll and Clyde. I said that I was unconvinced by the planning assumptions about the number of women who would choose to have their babies in Paisley rather than Glasgow, and I asked Argyll and Clyde and Glasgow to undertake more detailed work on the pattern of patient choice between the two services. As a result, women are now being given genuine choice between consultant-led delivery in Paisley or Glasgow with local antenatal care.

I cannot comment in detail on Argyll and Clyde's proposals at this stage, but I can mention some of the key drivers for change to which boards throughout Scotland must respond. They include—crucially—clinical safety, meeting quality standards, sustainability, work-force regulations and training requirements. More generally, we should be mindful of the geographic and population density issues that make the organisation of services in Scotland significantly different from that in England.

"Partnership for Care: Scotland's Health White Paper" emphasised the importance of providing services as close as possible to people's homes. The NHS is making progress in bringing many services closer to local communities. For example, it is becoming standard practice for services such as chemotherapy and haemodialysis to be provided locally. More chronic disease is being managed in primary care.

However, we cannot ensure high-quality, clinically safe local services in every case. In 2002, the Temple report recognised that. More recently, the British Medical Association has spoken about the need to consider seriously the risks that are sometimes associated with providing local services and the alternatives that might be available. As John Garner, the chair of BMA Scotland, said this week, as politicians we must be careful not to rush to defend buildings and services that may be out of date when the real issues are quality of service and patient safety. Likewise, those issues of safety and quality, rather than the desire to cut costs, must be the drivers of any changes that health boards propose. In particular, I expect every NHS board to demonstrate a two-way flow in service change. Some specialisms may best be provided from one more central location. At the same time, other services must go local wherever possible.

George Lyon: The minister will be aware of the Auditor General's report on day surgery, which demonstrates that Argyll and Clyde NHS Board has the poorest record of any health board in Scotland on meeting the 98 targets that were set by the United Kingdom Government. One of the biggest challenges before the board is to up its game in that area.

Malcolm Chisholm: That is certainly one of many challenges that the board faces. I recognise that in Argyll and Clyde there is a background of many years of mismanagement, especially of finances, which makes life more difficult for Argyll and Clyde than for other NHS boards.

I will give a good example from Argyll and Clyde of new local services: the new mid-Argyll project. This innovative new service model, redesigned from a patient's point of view, is an entirely appropriate response to local needs and will

secure high-quality, sustainable health and social care services for the local community for the next 30 years and beyond. I am very much looking forward to travelling to Lochgilphead later this month to cut the sod for the new mid-Argyll hospital, which will be at the centre of the new development.

Frances Curran went beyond the situation in Argyll and Clyde and talked about a crisis and a lack of action in the health service more generally. However, no serious commentator would dispute the fact either that record investment is being made in our health service or that that has produced many improvements. The question is how to spend this record amount of money to best effect and to accelerate the dissemination of good practice that is undoubtedly to be found in abundance. That means making world-class specialist facilities available to all, alongside community facilities at local level. There should be extra bed capacity, when it is needed, but there should also be recognition that modern medicine will see an increasing amount of community and day treatment.

Carolyn Leckie: My question relates to the specific point of specialisation versus generalisation. Does the minister think that at the moment the balance between specialisation and generalisation is right, or does he agree with us that there needs to be a greater emphasis on generalisation, especially to meet the needs of rural communities?

Malcolm Chisholm: In general terms, I do not think that the balance is right. Certain services must move to more specialist centres because of the overriding need to ensure clinical safety and quality of care, but many services should be moving in the opposite direction. This is a dynamic process. As I said at question time, we must ensure that we get the balance right. The objective must be a patient-centred NHS that improves the experience of patients, takes account of modern clinical practice and puts clinical safety and the quality of care first. There should be local access wherever that is consistent with those objectives. More generally, the approach means having complex solutions for complex situations, in which the objective is always better outcomes for patients.

Mr McGrigor: I welcome the news about the new community hospital in Lochgilphead, but where will the psychiatric patients from the Argyll and Bute hospital in Lochgilphead go?

Malcolm Chisholm: I am deliberately avoiding commenting on the details of Argyll and Clyde NHS Board's proposals, because they must come to me at the end of the day. However, it is a fact that there are far more in-patient mental health beds in Argyll and Clyde than elsewhere in

Scotland. Some of the thinking behind the proposals relates to developing care in the community, as has happened in other parts of Scotland. I cannot comment more finally than that.

The extent of the change required in Argyll and Clyde and elsewhere has highlighted the need for further work to provide a national policy context for the detailed planning and service redesign efforts at local and regional level. That is why I have responded by developing work on a national framework for service change, which will explore and advise on strategies to secure a sustainable configuration of health services in Scotland and it will recommend how sustainability might be supported and enhanced through improved integration of care.

The national framework for service change will identify those services that need to be delivered at national, regional and local levels in a way that will help ensure that patients get the treatment they require when and where they need it, delivered to nationally agreed standards in an equitable and cost-effective manner throughout Scotland.

Although my time has more than passed, I assure members that no health issue is more important to me than the reconfiguration and redesign of services, which I recognise as the most controversial of all health issues in Scotland at present. I make it clear at the very end of my speech that that does not mean that every decision that is taken by every NHS board in Scotland will be the right one. Ministers will listen to clinicians, to other staff, to communities and to politicians to determine the right outcome.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As a West of Scotland member, I would have wished to speak in the debate, but I do get to speak the last words in this chamber, which are that I now close this meeting of Parliament.

Meeting closed at 17:51.

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