



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 31 October 2013

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Thursday 31 October 2013

CONTENTS

	Col.
GENERAL QUESTION TIME	23853
BASF Paisley.....	23853
Hospital Services (Rural Areas)	23854
Cities (Economic Growth).....	23855
East Ayrshire Council (Meetings)	23856
“NHS financial performance 2012/13”	23857
Royal Mail (Renationalisation).....	23858
Cyclists (Safety Improvements).....	23859
Telecare.....	23860
FIRST MINISTER’S QUESTION TIME	23862
Engagements.....	23862
Prime Minister (Meetings).....	23866
Cabinet (Meetings)	23869
Fuel Poverty (Energy Prices).....	23870
Public Body Boards and Senior Management (Representation of Women)	23872
Council Tax Freeze (Financial Benefits)	23873
FOLIC ACID AWARENESS CAMPAIGN	23875
<i>Motion debated—[Malcolm Chisholm].</i>	
Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab).....	23875
Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab).....	23877
Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)	23878
Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con).....	23879
Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP).....	23881
Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab)	23882
Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP).....	23884
The Minister for Public Health (Michael Matheson).....	23886
PLAY STRATEGY ACTION PLAN	23889
<i>Motion moved—[Aileen Campbell].</i>	
<i>Amendment moved—[Liz Smith].</i>	
The Minister for Children and Young People (Aileen Campbell).....	23889
Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)	23895
Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab).....	23899
George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)	23902
Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)	23904
Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)	23907
James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)	23910
Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP).....	23913
Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab)	23915
Fiona McLeod (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)	23916
Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP)	23918
Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab)	23921
Richard Lyle (Central Scotland) (SNP).....	23923
Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP).....	23925
Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con).....	23928
Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)	23930
Aileen Campbell.....	23933
PARLIAMENTARY BUREAU MOTION	23938
<i>Motion moved—[Joe FitzPatrick].</i>	
MOTION WITHOUT NOTICE	23939
<i>Motion moved—[Joe FitzPatrick]—and agreed to.</i>	
DECISION TIME	23940

Scottish Parliament

Thursday 31 October 2013

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

General Question Time

BASF Paisley

1. George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions it has had with management at the BASF manufacturing plant in Paisley. (S4O-02522)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The announcement of the proposed closure of BASF's facility in Paisley, with the possible loss of 141 jobs, is a great blow to the workforce and my thoughts are with the workers and their families at this time.

Scottish Enterprise has been in close regular contact with BASF in Paisley over the past four years and has worked with the company on its restructuring programme and sustainable site project. That has included financial support such as regional selective assistance, a research and development grant and an organisational development grant. SE has also provided various forms of specialist support such as training and advice.

Meetings took place between SE and BASF in June and August this year to discuss on-going support for the site. Following the announcement last week, SE met the Paisley site director on Thursday 24 October.

In addition, the First Minister spoke with Michael Heinz, member of the board of executive directors at BASF, last week and informed him that Scottish Enterprise would work with local management in Paisley in response to the announcement. The First Minister has also promised that partnership action for continuing employment assistance will be offered to any affected employees.

George Adam: I thank the cabinet secretary for his answer. I am sure that he agrees with me that the job losses are significant and that the families who will be affected need as much support as possible. Would he also be keen to visit the plant with me in the near future to hear from the individuals concerned?

John Swinney: I accept Mr Adam's point. It is a very serious situation when any employment loss takes place and the Government does all that it can in such situations to provide support in any way possible. The points that I made in my original answer about the availability of Scottish Enterprise

and PACE support to assist in the matter reflect the Government's position.

I would be delighted to join Mr Adam on a visit to the plant to meet the employees and to ensure that all the steps that can be taken to support individuals are taken in this difficult situation.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): The cabinet secretary will be aware that I have written to him on this matter. I welcome the contact that the Scottish Government has made with BASF and with Renfrewshire Council and I welcome the cabinet secretary's commitment to visit the plant.

I believe that there is still a demand for the products that are made in Paisley and I urge the Scottish Government to do all that it can to find an alternative buyer or an alternative use for the site. Given that the plant has employed generations of the same families in Paisley for more than 60 years, could the Scottish Government ask BASF to consider what legacy—financial or otherwise—it will leave the community should the closure go ahead?

John Swinney: The Government will take a range of steps to try to address the situation. I am sure that Mr Bibby appreciates that the Government endeavours to avoid industrial closure wherever possible. There are a number of examples of where we have worked extremely hard—sometimes successfully, unfortunately sometimes unsuccessfully—to avoid closures by companies. However, companies have to assess market conditions and they can remain in operation only if they have successful and profitable businesses.

I will certainly discuss the issues that Mr Bibby has raised with the company as part of the visit that I make with Mr Adam. I am delighted to do all that I can to try to help out in this situation and, as we have seen from the recent events in Grangemouth, it is possible at times for Government to deliver positive solutions when industrial threats are levelled. We cannot do so in all cases but we will endeavour to achieve that in this circumstance.

Hospital Services (Rural Areas)

2. Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what emphasis it places on the delivery of hospital services in rural areas. (S4O-02523)

The Minister for Public Health (Michael Matheson): The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that all communities in Scotland receive high-quality and sustainable healthcare services. National health service boards have a statutory obligation to provide—and are accountable for—those services that they

consider necessary to meet all reasonable requirements for their areas.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to service provision and health boards are expected to design and put in place those service models that best reflect local community circumstances.

All NHS boards' service provision, whether in rural or urban areas, should match the aims and ambitions of the healthcare quality strategy and make measurable progress towards the 2020 vision.

Graeme Dey: Is the minister aware of plans by NHS Tayside to close Little Cairnie hospital, in Arbroath, in my constituency, and move the palliative care that it provides to Arbroath infirmary? Does he agree that such a move should go ahead only if it leads to better facilities for patients and their families, which match the best facilities that are available elsewhere in Angus?

Michael Matheson: I am aware that NHS Tayside is considering services in the area. The board has confirmed that no decision has been taken regarding the future of Little Cairnie hospital. However, it has identified an opportunity to make further service improvements in Angus South in the fields of palliative and cancer care. It has had early discussions with Macmillan Cancer Support on a proposal to introduce three palliative care in-patient suites in Arbroath, with an adjacent day assessment and treatment facility, which would significantly improve the range of assessment and diagnostic and treatment options that are available in Angus South.

Alongside that, the board is looking at how it can develop treatment services in conjunction with Ninewells hospital's oncology service, which would also help to enhance services locally.

NHS Tayside is clear that any changes to services must be made in conjunction with the local community, and with good local engagement with the community. I expect the board to act in that way in its consideration of Little Cairnie's future.

Cities (Economic Growth)

3. Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it plans to introduce a scheme for local authorities similar to the city deal programme in England. (S4O-02524)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities (Nicola Sturgeon): Local authorities in Scotland already benefit from many of the flexibilities of the city deals that the UK Government is considering for city regions in England. The Scottish Government is always willing to listen to practical suggestions for

assisting cities' efforts to promote economic growth. In that regard, I very much look forward to continuing dialogue within the Scottish cities alliance.

Sarah Boyack: The city deal for Leeds is expected to generate around 60,000 new jobs, and the deal for Manchester is expected to generate £1.2 billion in new investment, through the earn-back tax increment finance scheme. Those are just two examples.

What powers does the Scottish Government think that it could transfer to local government? What is being done to talk to the United Kingdom Government about new initiatives that we could provide for our local authorities, to enable them to generate new investment in jobs and infrastructure, to support our local economies in Scotland?

Nicola Sturgeon: As I said, we remain open to discussing with cities how we can further empower them to grow their economies and serve the people whom they represent. The issue is under active discussion and consideration in the Scottish cities alliance, in which the City of Edinburgh Council is an active participant. Glasgow City Council is also discussing city deals in some respects. We discussed the matter at the most recent cities alliance meeting and I have every expectation that we will do so at the next one.

Sarah Boyack mentioned Manchester. It might be worth pointing out to her that under arrangements in the deal that has been struck with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, the organisation that stands to benefit the most is Her Majesty's Treasury. We need to ensure that, in taking forward plans or proposals, we do not disadvantage ourselves in any way. Of course, the position would be different in the context of an independent Scotland, where we would have full control over tax revenues and greater opportunities to use them for the benefit of people in Scotland. I ask the member to bear that point in mind.

We are not just open minded; we are considering and discussing the issues in detail with the cities. I will be more than happy to keep the member updated as discussions progress.

East Ayrshire Council (Meetings)

4. Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when it last met East Ayrshire Council and what matters were discussed. (S4O-02525)

The Minister for Local Government and Planning (Derek Mackay): The Scottish Government meets Scotland's councils regularly, to discuss a wide range of issues. There was a meeting with East Ayrshire councillors and officials

on 16 October to discuss the town centres review and the regeneration capital grant fund.

Willie Coffey: The minister will be aware that there has been significant investment in Kilmarnock's public buildings and environment in recent years. Despite that investment, much more needs to be done to help Kilmarnock to make progress after the loss of 700 jobs at Johnnie Walker. Will the minister agree to meet me to discuss how best the Scottish Government can assist East Ayrshire in developing its economic strategy?

Derek Mackay: I am very happy to accept that invitation to meet Mr Coffey to discuss those matters, and to indicate that I will go to East Ayrshire next week to work in partnership with others, including the council, on regeneration and town centre matters. I look forward to that and I will ensure that an invitation is extended to the constituency member and others and that we will carry forward discussions to achieve the objectives that the member has suggested.

“NHS financial performance 2012/13”

5. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when it will respond to the Audit Scotland report “NHS financial performance 2012/13”. (S4O-02526)

The Minister for Public Health (Michael Matheson): The Public Audit Committee is due to consider the Audit Scotland report “NHS financial performance 2012-13” at its meeting on 6 November 2013. At the meeting, the Auditor General for Scotland will give evidence on the report and then the committee will consider what action, if any, is required. Following the committee's deliberations, the Scottish Government will respond formally to the report.

Claire Baker: NHS Fife is not only one of the national health service boards that received brokerage to break even last year but one of the five health boards that are underfunded according to the NHS Scotland national resource allocation committee target allocation. NHS Fife received brokerage of £1.4 million this year and £1.1 million last year and Audit Scotland is raising concerns that it will prioritise paying back the loan rather than investing in services, while NHS Fife continues to be underfunded by £12 million according to the NRAC formula. What steps are being taken to deliver funding parity for NHS Fife? When does the minister expect that to be achieved?

Michael Matheson: I am sure that the member will welcome the fact that for the fifth year in a row all our NHS boards in Scotland have reached a break-even position and have been able to manage their budgets effectively, and that

includes NHS Fife. The NRAC formula has been in place for several years now and we are moving towards a level of parity across all the boards, but it has to be done in a way that does not financially disadvantage some of the other boards at the present point. That process will continue over the next couple of years to ensure that we have parity across all the NHS territorial boards.

Annabelle Ewing (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP): On the key issue of the actual level of resource funding that is being made available, will the minister confirm what that figure is for NHS Fife? Presumably, increased flexibility in repayment arrangements would be possible in respect of the brokerage, as there has been for NHS Tayside.

Michael Matheson: We work with all boards to help to ensure that they can reach break-even positions within their budgets. As the member will be aware, we have kept to our manifesto commitment to pass on all the Barnett consequential for the health budget to our territorial boards where that has been possible. It is also worth noting that in the draft budget for 2014-15, NHS territorial boards will receive an allocated increase of 3.1 per cent in 2014-15 and 2.7 per cent in 2015-16, which represents a real-terms increase that will be allocated directly to protecting front-line services.

Royal Mail (Renationalisation)

6. Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the costs and processes involved in renationalising the Royal Mail in an independent Scotland and whom it has consulted. (S4O-02527)

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth (John Swinney): The Scottish Government is in contact with a range of relevant stakeholders about the future of the postal service. The cost of securing a publicly owned mail service in Scotland will be based on the value of the assets at the time.

Iain Gray: The day after the First Minister made his surprise commitment—by which I mean that it was a surprise to the cabinet secretary—I heard Mr Swinney explain on the radio that he would achieve that promise by using Scotland's share of the proceeds of the Royal Mail sale to buy back Royal Mail assets in Scotland. The problem with that, of course, is that because Royal Mail was so foolishly sold off at a bargain-basement price, those assets are worth at least 70 per cent more than when the First Minister made the promise. How does he now plan to pay for it?

John Swinney: That is a very interesting take on this question. I thought that Mr Gray lodged his question because he was going to set out the

Labour Party's willingness to work with us to bring this asset back into public hands.

Mr Gray bemoans the sell-off of the Royal Mail at an undervalued price. The shares were sold off at a price of between 260p and 330p and they are now trading at 530p. I did not take that decision; the useless United Kingdom Government took that decision. That lot over on the Labour side want to allow the United Kingdom Government to carry on taking useless and stupid decisions about the future of our country.

If Mr Gray wants to come here and offer a helpful intervention in the process, he should do what the member of Parliament for North Ayrshire did—who is a Labour MP, I might add—and support the renationalisation of the Royal Mail.

Cyclists (Safety Improvements)

7. John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind):

To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to improve safety for cyclists. (S4O-02528)

The Minister for Transport and Veterans (Keith Brown): We are improving road safety for cyclists through a wide range of measures around the three Es—engineering, education and enforcement. We are increasing investment in cycling infrastructure, with additional funding of £20 million over the next two years being announced in the draft budget on top of the £58 million already allocated since the 2011 spending review, and we have developed road user awareness campaigns to foster mutual respect on the roads.

The Scottish Government's road safety framework to 2020 includes commitments on education and training, improved signage, consideration of cycling in the context of roads maintenance and design, and the use of 20mph zones in all residential areas. A broad portfolio of approaches is needed and will continue to be developed to improve cyclist safety.

John Finnie: I thank the minister for that detailed response. Police Scotland has record numbers of officers at the moment. In the past, police officers engaged with primary schools on cycling proficiency. Things have moved on, but there is surely an opportunity for the police to engage with young people on road safety. Will the minister get in touch with Police Scotland and the Cabinet Secretary for Justice to encourage that approach, which could only enhance community safety?

Keith Brown: The police have a major role to play in the enforcement measures that I mentioned in my first response, but it is also the case that substantial initiatives are under way to ensure that all children get the chance to have on-the-road safety training. Previously, training was

often done in the playground, whereas now it is done on the road. That is the right way in which to proceed.

On safety in general, we have seen a decrease in fatalities; the figure is down to 174 people from the previous 185. We have seen decreases in total casualties, child casualties, child fatalities, pedestrian casualties and motorcyclist fatalities. The stand-out is the increase that we have seen in cyclist casualties, so there is no question but that we must give the matter further attention. The best way in which to deal with the matter is to make sure that every child has the chance to have on-the-road training, which will reassure both them and their parents that it is safe to cycle.

Telecare

8. Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con):

To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to develop telecare services for people across Scotland. (S4O-02529)

The Minister for Public Health (Michael Matheson): Telecare can and does support more people to live independently at home and in their community. We are keen to promote that message during the first Scottish telehealth and telecare week, which we are in the middle of.

However, I recognise that more can be done to develop telecare, and to help to drive it forward the Scottish Government, along with NHS Scotland and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, published "A National Telehealth and Telecare Delivery Plan for Scotland to 2015: Driving Improvement, Integration and Innovation", which set out our ambitions for the growth of telecare services across Scotland. That included work with Scotland Excel on a procurement framework for telecare. With the involvement of all 32 local authorities and a number of housing associations, that has ensured that the latest technology is available at the lowest possible price across the country.

Nanette Milne: The Accounts Commission reported today that Scotland's local authorities are increasing charges for services such as elderly home care, meals on wheels and emergency alarms in order to plug a shortfall in their finances that has been caused partly by the council tax freeze. The national telehealth and telecare delivery plan for Scotland includes a recommendation that the Scottish Government engage more effectively with councils and the housing and care home community to expand the use of telecare for elderly and vulnerable tenants and residents. What implications will increased charges for elderly residents have on the use of telecare for the elderly in Scotland?

Michael Matheson: The strategy that I mentioned is exactly the way in which we intend to take this forward with our partners in local government and the health service. It is important that telehealth and telecare are not looked upon as an alternative to care, because they are there to help to support other forms of care including services such as meals on wheels and home care.

The approach that we are taking is to take telehealth and telecare forward on an incremental basis so that we can ensure that we get real benefits for both the individuals who use the service and the service providers. The strategy is set out in a way that helps us to make sure that we achieve that across the country with all the partners who can assist us in delivering on it.

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): That ends general question time. Before we come to the next item of business, I am sure that members will join me in welcoming to the gallery the ambassador of Croatia, His Excellency Ivan Grdešić. [*Applause.*]

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Engagements

1. Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what engagements he has planned for the rest of the day. (S4F-01630)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): First, I welcome Cara Hilton to the chamber and congratulate her on her election. Based on her election literature, I am looking forward to her support at the budget for the key policies of this Government.

Johann Lamont: If the First Minister's budget includes a commitment to address the question of the bedroom tax, we will, of course, support it.

Does the First Minister agree with his energy minister, Fergus Ewing, that a freeze of gas and electricity bills is unworkable, or does he agree with his employment minister, Angela Constance, who welcomed the idea?

The First Minister: I welcome Johann Lamont's conversion to the Scottish National Party budget and I look forward to her support. I thought that her conversion to the council tax freeze was perhaps a one-off, and now I realise that there will be a full-scale conversion of the Labour Party to key SNP policies.

Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): Answer the question!

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Mr McNeil, enough.

The First Minister: Let us look forward to that unanimity developing in this chamber.

As has been said, we will consider seriously all proposals to help with household incomes. I have to say, however, that the Labour Party should at some point give credit for the fact that, by the end of the current parliamentary session, the council tax freeze will have saved the average family in Scotland £1,400 in total over the period.

Johann Lamont: One would think that, having had a fortnight off, the First Minister might have had a think about doing his job properly. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Johann Lamont: The First Minister would do well to listen to the lesson of Dunfermline. The people of Scotland want Scotland off pause; they want him to stop obsessing about independence, and for him to do his day job. As a bonus, he might, once in a while, answer a question. I asked

him what his view is on the energy freeze, and he said nothing.

Let us look at Nicola Sturgeon's proposal for a price cut in relation to energy. She said that she would pay for it by moving green charges from the bill payer to the taxpayer: paying Peter by robbing Peter. What she did not say is that the same report that gave her the idea also tells us that breaking up the single United Kingdom energy market could result in higher bills for Scots. Indeed, Citigroup estimates that it would cost the average Scottish family an extra £225 a year. I think that that is a better definition of unworkable. Rather than the bill payer or the taxpayer footing the bill, why will the First Minister not stand up to the big six energy companies on behalf of the people of Scotland and back a freeze?

The First Minister: First, I will address my two weeks off. Along with others, I devoted a huge amount of time during the past two weeks to helping to save Grangemouth, which is a key part of the Scottish economy. I am not quite certain what Johann Lamont's role was in that, but I thought that her silence was meant to be helpful.

Johann Lamont derides Nicola Sturgeon's proposal, but that has not been the view of people who are concerned about energy poverty in Scotland. They recognise that taking the energy efficiency schemes and supplementing the energy efficiency programmes that we have kept in Scotland while they were abolished south of the border will not only save £70 a year in electricity bills, but will allow us to have a fuel poverty programme that is better integrated. We believe, and I think that we are right, that we are better having the Government, the third sector and the fuel poverty organisations administer that programme rather than leaving it to the big energy companies.

I had a meeting with the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets yesterday and it showed me some figures that are extremely frightening. The regulator—Labour's regulator—suggests that over the next two winters, we are facing a lack of margin of supply over demand that could result in brownouts and perhaps even in blackouts. That means a lack of electricity supply. One of the things that will happen, if we approach that situation of low margin, is that prices will increase exponentially as people try desperately to get that last kilowatt of electricity.

Two things are necessary if competition in this market is to be applied properly. First, there has to be a surplus of supply over demand so that companies compete to supply people with electricity; and secondly, there has to be transparency in bills so that people can make that choice. That is why the Scottish Government's proposal to reduce electricity bills, in line with all

our other action on household incomes, is a practical step. That is why we have real, thought-out ideas for getting the energy market under some sort of control.

Johann Lamont: First, on the issue of Grangemouth, the First Minister's comments were unworthy of the significance of the issue for the people of Scotland. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Johann Lamont: On Grangemouth, my only focus is to ensure that a workforce that has been loyal throughout this period is treated with respect. On that, across the chamber, I am sure that we are agreed.

If the First Minister imagines that what he has given as an explanation of his policy and that of the big six will wear with families across Scotland who are being ripped off day and daily, he needs to go out and speak to people in our communities about their experience.

Let us get this right, because I think that the First Minister agrees that the Tories have got their energy policy wrong. David Cameron says that he wants to move green charges to general taxation; Alex Salmond also rejects the policy and says that he wants to move green charges to general taxation. It would almost seem that Alex Salmond is closer to David Cameron than most of the Tory Cabinet—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order. Settle down.

Johann Lamont: I know that they do not like to hear it.

Who also backs the First Minister's position? The big six energy companies. Even an ex-Tory Prime Minister, Sir John Major, is more radical than the First Minister. He wants a windfall tax on the energy companies. What does the First Minister want? He wants to give the self-same companies a cut in corporation tax 3p lower than whatever George Osborne sets it at. Once again, why will the First Minister not stand up to the big six energy companies and back a price freeze?

The First Minister: First, it was Johann Lamont who argued that we had spent two weeks doing nothing. I merely pointed out that most people would say that the action that the Scottish Government took, with others, was successful in saving a key part of the Scottish economy and thousands of jobs. That was a reasonable point to make. Perhaps, on reflection, she should not have introduced the subject into this question time.

On the energy bills, I am not certain that Johann Lamont appreciates that the green charges in energy bills are a separate thing from the fuel poverty charges. We think that the fuel poverty charges should be taken into general taxation.

That is supported by a number of the third sector organisations that are concerned with these issues because it is a more efficient, fair and equitable way to attack fuel poverty in Scotland. It would also result in a £70 reduction in energy bills, which, by definition, seems rather better than a freeze in energy bills.

We have said that we would consider any proposals and we will consider any proposals, but I do not think that we have had an answer yet to the problem of an energy freeze in 2015 or beyond. What will happen if energy companies, as they are doing now, put up energy bills before the freeze comes into place? What happens if they put up bills after the temporary 16-month freeze? If Labour can explain how it will tackle that issue, I am sure that we will give it the most active consideration.

The Conservative Party's attitude to the issue has been belated and blasé. To announce a competition report now seems far too late. However, we should remember who created the energy market that we have at present. It was the Labour Party that removed price controls from Ofgem just after 2000. It was the Labour Party that created a market that had the big six energy companies in control.

It really is a bit rich for a party which has opposed every action that the SNP has taken successfully on household incomes, which created the mess of the energy market that we are now in, and which created jointly with the Tories a situation which has left so little capacity that England could be facing blackouts twice over the next five years, to come to this chamber and complain about a proposal from the SNP that everybody agrees is practical and enforceable and which will actually reduce energy bills by £70 a year. Given the new unanimity of backing the council tax freeze and backing our action to save family budgets across Scotland, let the Labour Party back our action to address fuel poverty in Scotland as well.

Johann Lamont: For the avoidance of doubt, it is now clear that Alex Salmond's position on the freeze on fuel is argued in the exact same terms as David Cameron and the six big energy companies. What a counsel of despair; we cannot take on those big companies because they will do bad things just now to stop measures being effective in the future. He should stand up to them, not explain away what they are doing to the people of this country.

The First Minister says that he wants Scotland to be a progressive beacon. Let us look at his record. During the banking crisis, he stood up for Fred Goodwin and the bankers. At the height of the Milly Dowler phone hacking scandal, he stood shoulder to shoulder with Rupert Murdoch. Now,

as families throughout the country are being ripped off for electricity and gas, he stands with the big six energy companies. Is not it the case that the First Minister, who has cut £1 billion from anti-poverty schemes, does not stand with the families or with the pensioners who are unable to heat their homes this winter? He stands with the energy companies who are ripping them off, by offering them bigger tax breaks than even the Tories are.

The First Minister: From the party that knighted Fred Goodwin, whom Alistair Darling had as a key economic adviser throughout the financial crisis, that is incredible. The central point is that Johann Lamont seems to have forgotten that we in this Parliament do not actually have the power over energy bills. Incidentally, unless I misheard her, she said that there will be a "fuel" price freeze as well. We are talking about electricity prices, as every family in this country knows, and I can tell her that just about every family in Scotland would like this Parliament and this Government to have control over electricity regulation in Scotland, because every family in this country knows that with Scotland's vast array of energy resources it is an absolute disgrace that we have fuel poverty. Every family in Scotland knows that we have maintained the fuel poverty programmes in the face of cuts from Westminster, and every family knows that a £70 cut in annual electricity bills is better than a freeze that may or may not be delivered, when prices could increase before or after it takes effect.

The day that Johann Lamont includes among her new-found welcome for SNP policies support for the freeze on the council tax, I will tell her something for nothing: we look forward to the day when the Labour Party realises that the best way forward is to take control of the electricity markets and to take energy policy under the control and jurisdiction of this Parliament, so that we can act effectively in the interests of the Scottish people.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

2. Ruth Davidson (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the First Minister when he will next meet the Prime Minister. (S4F-01631)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): No plans in the near future.

Ruth Davidson: Today is the last day of consultation on police counter closures. When I asked the First Minister earlier this month about the decision to shut a third of police stations to the public, he justified it on the grounds of the number of people who were using them—in other words, on the footfall analysis. When did that footfall analysis take place and were all police stations included?

The First Minister: That was in the proposal. Over a four-week period, a number of stations were surveyed and the statistics were given. The survey was not comprehensive, but the matter is subject to consultation. All of that is in the documentation that was available to everyone three weeks ago. If I remember correctly, that was one reason why I advised members of the Scottish Parliament to do their constituency duty by making representations based on their local knowledge, as indeed they should do.

However, there is also no doubt that, as Ruth Davidson will remember from the survey, some stations that were surveyed recorded just one visit from the public for core police business over the four-week period. It is right and proper that Police Scotland is having the consultation, and it is right and proper that members of the Scottish Parliament and others, including local communities and community councils, make submissions and representations to the consultation.

If the survey has established that some police stations had only one visit on core police business over a four-week period, I do not think that even Ruth Davidson would seriously argue that there should be a police officer or member of staff behind the desk rather than in the community doing effective police work on behalf of the people of Scotland.

Ruth Davidson: The figures that the First Minister has given are slightly at odds with the figures in the Police Scotland internal business case for cutting these services. The internal business case shows that some of the information dates back as far as 2009. That is an important point, because that was before more than 60 stations were shut completely or had their hours reduced, which will inevitably have affected the number of people going to the police stations that were left—the very stations that the First Minister now wants to shut to the public.

Even worse, for some rural stations, a footfall analysis was not done at all—Police Scotland just guessed. It is no wonder that the internal business case says that the accuracy of the returns submitted and the ability to draw significant and accurate data is caveated due to the varying quality of the returns. In other words, police stations are set to close to the public because of out-of-date information that might never have been right in the first place.

The First Minister's case for closing the police counters was based solely on the numbers. Does he agree that the flaws in the numbers now mean that his case has collapsed and he should save our stations?

The First Minister: The information was freely available three weeks ago, as I said in my first answer to the question by pointing out that the survey had different applications over different stations. That was contained in the documentation. However, that does not alter the fact that a number of stations were surveyed over the four-week period and, of those, some recorded just one visit from the public for core police business. That is in the documentation. I am sorry that Ruth Davidson has not managed to get to that paragraph, but it is definitely there in the documentation.

For the purposes of the consultation, it would be reasonable for any member of the Scottish Parliament—even a member for Glasgow, such as Ruth Davidson—to make proposals and, having looked at the figures in the consultation document, to point out those issues. Ruth Davidson has an eye on public spending, so she would recognise that it would not be the most sensible use of resources to have an officer or member of staff behind a counter in those stations that the survey showed had had only one visit on police business over a four-week period. Would it not be sensible to submit those points to the consultation process? That is exactly the purpose of a consultation.

The proposals come against the reality that, as we are suffering huge budget cuts from Westminster, in Scotland we have chosen to accent the front line. We have more than 1,000 more officers in place in the communities and on the streets of Scotland than there were when we took office. There has been a dramatic decline in police numbers south of the border, whereas in Scotland what is declining is recorded crime—we have the lowest crime rate for almost 40 years. All of that tells us that we can trust Police Scotland to do an effective job on behalf of the communities of this country.

The Presiding Officer: I will take a constituency question from Paul Martin.

Paul Martin (Glasgow Provan) (Lab): On Friday 18 October, eight-year-old Broagan McCuaig was attacked by two American bulldogs in the Garthamlock area of my constituency. I am sure that all members will want to wish Broagan a speedy recovery, but there is much more that we in this Parliament could do. Does the First Minister agree that there needs to be more effective legislation in place to deal with dangerous dogs? Will he agree to meet me and other interested parties to discuss the matter further?

The First Minister: If I may, I will give Paul Martin a comprehensive reply on what is a very serious issue.

I agree with Paul Martin, and the sympathy of the whole chamber will go to Broagan and her

family, as she recovers from the ordeal. The two dogs involved in the attack have been put down, and the man and woman who owned the dogs have been charged by the police with offences under dangerous dogs legislation.

More generally, Scotland's approach to dealing with the problem of dangerous dogs has focused on measures to prevent attacks from happening in the first place. All parties in the Parliament supported the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010. We fully support local authorities making best use of that preventive regime. Alongside the dog control regime, there are long-standing criminal laws going back to the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 that hold to account owners who allow their dogs to be dangerously out of control. The control notices contain a number of conditions on owners and their dogs, including a requirement to keep dogs under control. Breaching a dog control notice is, of course, a criminal offence.

Those are the measures that the Parliament has put in place, in combination with local authorities. I will be very glad to meet Paul Martin and his constituents if that would help to further discussion on the issue.

Cabinet (Meetings)

3. Willie Rennie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD):

To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S4F-01632)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Issues of importance to the people of Scotland.

Willie Rennie: This weekend, the First Minister will be heading to China on his first visit to the country since he snubbed the Dalai Lama on his visit here. The First Minister shamed Scotland with his treatment of the Tibetan spiritual leader when he kowtowed to the Chinese consul general. We are told that the First Minister is heading east this weekend, but we have not been told what he will say on human rights. What will he do differently on his visit to China this time to be clear on human rights while developing economic partnerships?

The First Minister: I will do what I have done on all my visits to China: I will meet representatives of human rights organisations before the visit, I will make speeches and I will make representations. Those are all on the public record, if Willie Rennie cares to look at it. That is a much more effective way to proceed on the matter.

I am not sure whether Willie Rennie wants me to go to China. I am meeting representatives of human rights organisations beforehand, and I have made a number of what some people have said were pretty significant speeches and representations on human rights when I have

been in China before, because I think that it is vitally important to have that engagement. It is vitally important for economic reasons, obviously, but it is vitally important anyway. When Willie Rennie tells me what exactly it is in the points that I have made in the past or in meetings with human rights organisations that he objects to, perhaps he will come to the chamber and give me a bit more information to go on.

Perhaps I should take ideas from Mr Rennie as to what he would do if he were in my position going to China next week. Would he go to China at all?

Willie Rennie: I will certainly tell him that.

Thubten Samdup, the Dalai Lama's northern Europe representative, said that the First Minister had "buckled" under pressure from the Chinese Government in relation to the Dalai Lama. The Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister met the Dalai Lama, whereas the First Minister did not. The United Kingdom Government has shown that it is possible to be firm and clear with China on human rights and Tibet while nurturing strong economic links. They were prepared to be firm with the Chinese while working with them.

The last time the First Minister visited China, all he did was give the Chinese Government a book. To send a clear message to China, will the First Minister commit today to meet the Dalai Lama? That is what he could do—if he is listening. Will he commit today to send a clear message and to meet the Dalai Lama at the next possible opportunity?

The First Minister: I will raise the matter of human rights in China. I shall send Willie Rennie a reference from the BBC website regarding what was raised with the then Vice Premier, now the Premier, Li Keqiang, when I was in China. Once Willie Rennie sees that, perhaps he will come to the chamber and retract the suggestion that we did not raise the issue of human rights in our visits to China.

Professor Alan Miller, who I met before previous visits to China, very much agreed with the approach that the Scottish Government took in putting forward our argument about economic progress and human rights going together. I trust that Willie Rennie has examined the speeches in which I made that point. When he sees the exact reference on the BBC website, given what he has just said inaccurately to the Parliament a few minutes ago, he will perhaps have the grace to apologise at a suitable moment for his mistaken remarks.

Fuel Poverty (Energy Prices)

4. John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish

Government will take to protect people affected by fuel poverty, in light of recent price rises by energy providers. (S4F-01637)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): We have invested more than £220 million on fuel poverty and energy efficiency programmes since 2009. That is an estimated total net saving to household incomes over the lifetime of the measures of more than £1 billion. In exact terms, there have been 540,000 energy efficiency measures such as draft proofing and loft insulation. We will spend about £0.25 billion over the next three years on fuel poverty and energy efficiency.

I contrast that with the actions of the Government in Westminster because, since 1 April, there is no longer any Government-funded fuel poverty programme south of the border.

John Wilson: The most recent Scottish Government figures show that nearly 30 per cent of households in Scotland are living in fuel poverty. Does the First Minister agree that the fact that the energy companies have, once again, increased prices by an unaffordable amount while wholesale prices have risen by only 1.7 per cent is yet another insult to low-income households, which are continually subjected to the whims of a dysfunctional energy market despite living in a resource-rich Scotland? Does he also agree that that is further evidence of the need for the powers of independence to eradicate fuel poverty in Scotland?

The First Minister: We need a sustainable solution to the problem of energy bills. That is why, with the powers of independence, which John Wilson rightly refers to, we will remove the cost of energy-saving measures and the warm homes discount from household energy bills.

I will point out again what is absolutely essential if we are to get sanity in the market once we have the powers to do so. First, we need a surplus of energy supply over demand so that companies have to compete to sell people energy. Secondly, we need proper efficiency and competition measures in the marketplace.

It is crucial that we recognise that, under the current course of action—the structure of which was set initially by the Labour Party and which has been carried forward by the coalition Government—according to the figures from the official regulator, England is heading towards at least brownouts and perhaps blackouts twice over the next five winters. We have not been in that situation since the three-day week in 1974 but, yesterday, the Office of the Gas and Electricity Markets told me that that is the risk if we assume economic growth into its figures. That is an extraordinary position for the security of energy supply.

We have had the Home Secretary talking about Scotland's security under independence, but the Tory Government cannot even guarantee the security of electricity. One of the benefits that we would have from independence is from the fact that we have a 20 per cent margin of electricity supply over demand—[*Interruption.*] The Tories should relax. Given the difficulties that England will face in electricity supply, the Government and I have absolutely no intention of turning off the supply. On the contrary, we will be delighted to sell them our renewable electricity.

Public Body Boards and Senior Management (Representation of Women)

5. Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government will take to deal with the reported underrepresentation of women on the boards and senior management teams of public bodies. (S4F-01642)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): On Tuesday, the equalities minister, Shona Robison, will host a summit on women in public life, bringing together a range of stakeholders. That will help to shape further actions from the Scottish Government to identify ways to address the barriers that prevent women from coming forward and from being appointed to boards.

We believe that at least 40 per cent of public board membership should be female. The legislative competence for introducing quotas currently lies with Westminster, as Jackie Baillie well knows. However, Shona Robison is working on seeking a section 30 order to request that those powers be transferred to the Scottish Parliament so that we can address the issue.

In the new atmosphere of consensus, I look forward to Jackie Baillie joining the mainstream and supporting that transfer of powers to the Parliament.

Jackie Baillie: As ever, I thank the First Minister for that response. Increasing female representation on boards and in the senior management teams of public bodies is a shared ambition across the chamber. However, I have to say that it is disappointing that the Scottish National Party and the First Minister default to their usual position that they do not have the powers, because there are things that we can do.

Can we assume that the First Minister supports his own Government's diversity strategy, which was launched five years ago and includes a target—[*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order. Ms Baillie, one moment. Will Mr Smith and Mr FitzPatrick settle down, behave themselves and allow Ms Baillie to ask the question?

Jackie Baillie: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

Can we assume that the First Minister supports his own Government's diversity strategy, which was announced and launched five years ago and which includes a target of 40 per cent of applications for board appointments coming from women? Will he tell us why his Government failed to reach that target, with the number of applications short by something like 25 per cent, given the fact that he already has the powers to do something about it?

The First Minister: I am sorry that Jackie Baillie thinks that I default to a position just because it is true. I default to the truth.

I look forward to Jackie Baillie supporting the section 30 order. I say that I think that we need the power in the context of wanting to see the 40 per cent target achieved, but Jackie Baillie does us less than justice on the progress that has been made. I have in front of me the number of applications and the number of new appointments, which Jackie Baillie rather slid over in her interpretation.

The percentage of female applicants for boards rose from 29.8 per cent in 2006-07 to 34 per cent. I accept that that is not 40 per cent, but it represents progress. That was the figure for applications. *[Interruption.]* I am coming to the number of appointments right now; I am glad that the point has been raised. The percentage of females who have been appointed has gone up from 35 to 38 per cent. *[Interruption.]* After Labour's abysmal record, which we inherited, we are more than halfway to our target of 40 per cent.

Council Tax Freeze (Financial Benefits)

6. Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what the average financial benefit for households is from the council tax freeze. (S4F-01649)

The First Minister (Alex Salmond): Over the six-year period for which the council tax freeze has been in place, the average band D household has benefited from cumulative savings of almost £680. That same household will have benefited from the extending of the freeze for the lifetime of this session of Parliament by around £1,200.

Christina McKelvie: I thank the First Minister for that answer; I am sure that that information provides much-needed relief for families in Scotland who are struggling with the better together parties' commitments to continue to squeeze their budgets.

Can the First Minister take some comfort from the commitment that Labour published last week to support the universal benefits that the SNP Government has protected, or does he think that

what Labour says in elections is different from what it says in the chamber?

The First Minister: I am trying to reconcile the varying positions of Johann Lamont, who said that she did not say a "something for nothing" society when she did say a "something for nothing" society.

When I heard Johann Lamont say on television on Sunday that she never said that some people get "something for nothing", I was moved to go to the Labour Party website to find her speech from last year. When I did so, I got the message, "Oops! The page you are looking for cannot be found."

Luckily, our ever-searching staff had taken a screen grab. Of course, the speech included the phrase:

"Scotland cannot be the only something for nothing country in the world."

Indeed, so significant was her speech that Johann Lamont actually won an award for it from *The Herald*—she won the award for political impact of the year for hitting out at Scotland's "something for nothing" culture.

On one hand, we have Labour's position in the by-election, which was to support the council tax freeze. Then we have Labour's position with Unison, which is to oppose the council tax freeze. Last year, Labour talked about "something for nothing"; now that has been eradicated from the Labour Party website. I say to Christina McKelvie that I think that the problem is that Labour has been caught saying one thing in public and then saying another thing in public.

Folic Acid Awareness Campaign

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-07713, in the name of Malcolm Chisholm, on the folic acid awareness campaign. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

I invite members of the public who are leaving the gallery to do so as quickly and quietly as possible.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament congratulates the Scottish Spina Bifida Association on its work in providing advice, advocacy and support for people who were born with spina bifida and/or hydrocephalus and for their families and carers; understands with concern that, in Scotland, 52% of women are not aware of how they could help prevent spina bifida; welcomes the National Folic Acid Awareness campaign, *Are You Getting Enough?*, which will be launched by the association on World Spina Bifida Day on 25 October 2013; hopes that, in order to help prevent spina bifida and other neural tube defects, the campaign will encourage a greater number of women in Edinburgh Northern and Leith and throughout Scotland to learn about the importance of taking folic acid prior to pregnancy, and supports the association in its aim of ensuring that folic acid awareness should be part of family planning education throughout Scotland.

12:35

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab): I am pleased to speak to my motion. I think that this is the first time that the Parliament has discussed issues that relate to spina bifida, so I will begin by talking about the condition. The term "spina bifida" is Latin for "split spine" and refers to a fault in the development of a baby's spinal cord. The neural tube, which goes on to become the spine and brain, fails to close properly—that fault may occur as early as 28 days after conception.

Spina bifida is, along with its associated condition, hydrocephalus, the most common and severe birth defect in Europe. Moreover, Scotland has historically had a higher prevalence of neural tube defects than anywhere else in Europe. The conditions profoundly affect the lives of more than 3,500 children, young people and adults in Scotland.

A woman usually does not know that she is carrying a baby that is affected by spina bifida until she has her 20-week scan. She might then have only 48 hours to decide whether to keep or abort her child, which is by then fully formed. That is an extremely traumatic situation for the mother.

Most people who have spina bifida are born paralysed from the waist down, and also suffer severe bladder and bowel problems. Eighty per cent have hydrocephalus, which causes a range of neurological conditions. There is no known cure,

and both conditions cause lifelong and complex disabilities. However, a significant number of affected pregnancies could be prevented; I will come back to that key point.

The Scottish Spina Bifida Association is the only charity in Scotland that is dedicated to providing advice, advocacy and support for people who are born with spina bifida and/or hydrocephalus, and for their families. I am delighted that some of its supporters are in the gallery today. I had the privilege of hosting a reception in the Parliament yesterday evening, which a number of MSPs attended. The Minister for Public Health, Michael Matheson, spoke at it, along with a wonderful 10-year-old girl from Glasgow called Ella, and Dr Margo Whiteford, who is a clinical geneticist from Glasgow with spina bifida and who I am pleased to say is also in the gallery.

Dr Whiteford is the SSBA's chairperson; earlier this year, she became president of the International Federation for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus. To reflect that wider focus, the association decided that Scotland should for the first time mark world spina bifida and hydrocephalus day, which was on 25 October. The day serves to remind the public and policy makers of the need to increase awareness of the conditions, in order to help to improve the lives of people who live with them.

The association's contribution is its major public health campaign, which is entitled, "Are you getting enough?" The campaign was triggered by the shocking statistic that only 48 per cent of women in Scotland are aware that they could help to reduce the risk of their pregnancy being affected by spina bifida by taking a folic acid supplement before conception.

Most women do not start taking folic acid until they have tested positive for pregnancy, when it is often too late to prevent spina bifida. There is strong evidence that taking folic acid—vitamin B9—at least three months before conception can help to reduce the risk of spina bifida and other neural tube defects by 72 per cent. The association's campaign is about getting that message across to women who are planning a pregnancy or who might become pregnant. It is also about making folic acid awareness part of family planning education throughout Scotland. The campaign builds on the advice that has been issued by NHS Health Scotland that every woman who might become pregnant should take a daily tablet that contains 0.4mg of folic acid before they conceive and during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. It is easy to buy folic acid tablets and many multivitamin formulas also contain 0.4mg of folic acid. Women who are eligible for the healthy start scheme can also get free vitamins containing folic acid, vitamin C and vitamin D.

Some women are at increased risk of having a baby with a neural tube defect. They include women with diabetes, women who are taking anti-epilepsy medication, women who have coeliac disease and women who have a partner who has a neural tube defect or a family history of such defects. They should ask their general practitioner to prescribe the higher daily dose of 5mg. Moreover, women who are very overweight are at greater risk of having babies with spina bifida, so the advice is that they should seriously consider trying to lose weight before planning a pregnancy.

People can also get folic acid through their diet, in which it is known as folate. Good sources of folate are berries, oranges, peas, lentils, granary and wholemeal breads and fortified breakfast cereals. However, supplementation is still required for maximum benefit.

In relation to fortification, the Food Standards Agency has for some years recommended mandatory fortification of bread or flour with folic acid in order to reduce the risk of neural tube defects. That recommendation has been reinforced by the scientific advisory committee on nutrition. The Scottish Spina Bifida Association strongly supports fortification, because it would help to avert the risks that are associated with unplanned pregnancies. I believe that ministers are considering fortification; I hope that Michael Matheson has something to say about it in his reply to the debate.

I am grateful for the opportunity to use the debate to raise awareness of these little-known conditions. As my motion indicates, I also wish the Scottish Spina Bifida Association every success with its campaign to encourage greater numbers of women, in my constituency and throughout Scotland, to understand the importance of taking folic acid prior to pregnancy, in order to help prevent spina bifida and other neural tube defects.

12:42

Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab): I apologise because I have to leave early for another meeting at 1 o'clock.

I congratulate Malcolm Chisholm on securing the debate and I commend all those who have been involved in the folic acid awareness campaign for their efforts. In particular, I pay tribute to the Scottish Spina Bifida Association. I hope that the launch of its campaign last Thursday, on world spina bifida day, was a success and that it will lead to change.

The question for Parliament is this: what should that change look like and how can we help make it happen? We know that the better women who are expecting babies manage their health, the better the outcomes are for everyone. We can prevent

illness and long-term conditions, ensure a better pregnancy for mother and child and give every baby a better start in life. As the Scottish Spina Bifida Association makes clear, we can reduce the number of pregnancies that are affected by spina bifida and other neural tube defects.

Let us be clear: support for children with spina bifida is better than ever. Our understanding of spina bifida and neural tube defects has improved, medical technology has advanced and paediatric neuroscience has evolved. However, there is a strong case for prevention; taking folic acid in the right quantities is the key to that.

There is no shortage of information about the importance of folic acid and foods that are sources of vitamin B, but that information has to get to women who are expecting children and couples who are thinking about starting families. There are examples in the health service of best practice—of how that information can be presented in an accessible and instructive way. We need to learn from that best practice, and we can make a real difference by raising public awareness more generally and, I hope, getting the message to people pre-pregnancy. This is not about lecturing the public; it is simply about explaining how a readily available substance in the right amounts benefits them and their children.

My appeal today is that the Government and the chief medical officer work constructively with campaigners. We have seen progress on fortified foods; now, we have to see progress on public awareness. The will is there, the science is sound and the benefits cannot be ignored.

12:44

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I offer hearty congratulations to Malcolm Chisholm for giving us the opportunity to discuss this important topic. He suggested—I cannot rebut this—that this is the first time that the subject of spina bifida has been debated in the Scottish Parliament.

Malcolm Chisholm's motion focuses—as did his speech—on the need to ensure that women are better informed. I suggest that there may be a marginal benefit in ensuring also that men are better informed, despite their comparatively modest role in bringing children into the world. Partnerships are the best environment in which children come into the world, and I hope that the presence of men in the public gallery and in the debate shows that we, too, are interested.

In bringing the debate to the chamber, Malcolm Chisholm has forced me to consider the matter in a material way for the first time, and to look at the Scottish Spina Bifida Association's website. I found the website to be engaging, interesting and

informative, because of its focus on the “Are you getting enough?” campaign to raise women’s awareness, which is absolutely excellent.

The website mentions the role that diet can play in increasing the amount of folic acid that we all—women in particular—take. Looking at the list of foods that help us in that way, I found nothing but things that I am rather keen to eat. The list includes broccoli, brussels sprouts, liver—not everyone’s favourite, but I love it—spinach, asparagus, peas, chickpeas, brown rice and fortified breakfast cereals. Indeed, I went away and got a wee recipe for chickpea curry from Nigella Lawson’s website; I am now feeling hungry just thinking about it. Furthermore, a quick calculation has shown me that it costs about £1.20 per serving to make a chickpea curry, so it is not only good for you but economically effective too, which is important in these straitened times.

Even more important is that the list mentions fortified breakfast cereals. One cereal that delivers a wide range of benefits is, of course, porridge. If porridge is made from oats that are not overprocessed, it contains a decent amount of folic acid. For pregnant women, porridge is an excellent way to start the day, because it apparently reduces the risk of constipation, which is one of the side-effects of pregnancy. It will always top up the body’s folic acid, and it is a natural weight-loss agent because it fills you up and makes you less hungry. I commend porridge as one of the ways forward.

Food helps, but it is not in and of itself the complete answer; we also need supplements to ensure that we have appropriate folic acid input. I have seen a complex range of figures for people with different pre-existing conditions, and there is some indication that overconsumption of folic acid could cause problems in relation to the suppression of vitamin B12 deficiency.

Advice from professionals is important, and the motion focuses on how advice can be given as part of contraceptive and birth control advice. That is an excellent basis on which to deal with the problem.

12:48

Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): I also offer my thanks to Malcolm Chisholm for bringing the debate to the chamber and for highlighting the welcome addition of the national folic acid awareness campaign “Are you getting enough?” as one of the measures that can contribute to prevention of spina bifida.

I also thank Malcolm Chisholm for hosting yesterday evening’s excellent reception, which gave us so much interesting information about the Scottish Spina Bifida Association and its campaign

to educate women on the importance of taking folic acid before pregnancy and during the early months of pregnancy in reducing the incidence of neural tube defects such as spina bifida and hydrocephalus. I learned that milling flour removes folic acid, and that to replace it by fortifying flour in bread might be a very sensible idea.

I was also delighted to meet my North East Scotland constituents Wendy Hulse and her son Jay from Aberdeen, who are enthusiastic supporters of the SSBA campaign. I have apologies to offer them from their constituency member Mark McDonald, who is unable to attend this debate because of other parliamentary commitments.

Spina bifida is one of the most common birth defects, with a worldwide incidence of about one in every 1,000 births. In Scotland alone, more than 3,500 people, from children to adults, live with the condition every day. In the United Kingdom, it is a startling statistic that every day, two babies are conceived with a neural tube defect such as spina bifida, which demonstrates just how prevalent the conditions are.

Although there is neither a single cause nor any known way to prevent it entirely, there is—as we have heard—evidence to suggest that dietary supplements that contain folic acid can help to reduce the incidence of spina bifida.

The message that needs to be put across is that women in Scotland who are sexually active and who are at an age when pregnancy is possible need to be aware that they can go some way towards reducing the possibility of having a child with a neural tube defect if they take folic acid. Common sense dictates that every woman would want her child to be safe and healthy, and anything that can contribute to making that a reality should be part of any form of family planning. If using folic acid for three months prior to conception can reduce the occurrence of neural tube defects by a staggering 72 per cent, that fact needs to be communicated effectively and forcefully.

As Malcolm Chisholm says in his motion, 52 per cent of women in Scotland are unaware that folic acid can be a part of preventative measures, so that lack of knowledge has to be addressed. That is why I welcome the SSBA’s latest campaign, “Are you getting enough?” The campaign is accompanied by a glossy leaflet showing a bare-chested Scotsman in a kilt, which certainly helps to grab one’s attention. If placing such a leaflet in surgeries, health centres and maternity clinics succeeds in getting women to pick it up and read it, the first step in the campaign has been achieved.

The leaflet contains easy-to-read material in which the facts are put across in a lively yet informative manner, giving clear guidance on the effectiveness of folic acid. Further information is given on the recommended dosage of folic acid tablets, which should be higher for women who have diabetes, who have coeliac disease, or who are taking anti-epilepsy medications—as we heard from Malcolm Chisholm. I therefore commend the SSBA for what I hope will prove to be a very effective campaign.

We could also learn something from the United States, where folate fortification of grain-based products including breakfast cereals has been mandatory since 1998. I would welcome hearing the minister's views on such action when he sums up.

The motion also mentions the great work that is undertaken by the families and carers of individuals who have spina bifida, and in that context I pay tribute to the family group in my home city of Aberdeen, which meets monthly and which has been offering support since the 1960s, and to institutions such as the Persley Castle nursing home in Bucksburn, which specialises in the care of people with spina bifida.

Finally, I am sure that colleagues will join me in congratulating the organisers of world spina bifida day, which is now in its second year, and in wishing them well for the future as they work to raise awareness of the condition and of how its incidence can be reduced. I congratulate Malcolm Chisholm on bringing the issue to our attention.

12:53

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): In welcoming the debate, I join my colleagues in congratulating Malcolm Chisholm on securing it. Spina bifida is a very important issue, so I am rather surprised that this is the first time that we have debated it in the chamber. I certainly do not think that it should be the last time. I was also surprised that Nigella Lawson merited a mention in the debate but rather less surprised that it was Stewart Stevenson who managed to mention her.

I apologise to Malcolm Chisholm and to the Scottish Spina Bifida Association for being unable to attend last night's reception. The SSBA is an organisation that I know very well because it is based in my constituency, in Cumbernauld. I have been very happy to visit it many times and, indeed, I have visited it previously with the Minister for Public Health.

Under the direction of its chief executive, Andy Wynd, the SSBA is playing an outstanding role in supporting families where someone has spina bifida. If members have been unable to visit the

SSBA headquarters, it is well worth a visit—it is an excellent facility. When families learn that they have a child who has spina bifida it must be a very frightening time for them and the facility is a very welcoming place. The association is also doing great work to raise awareness of the condition, through the folic acid awareness campaign that is the subject of this debate.

The most recent figures in Scotland confirm that around one in 1,000 pregnancies is affected by spina bifida. Some people might consider that rate to be fairly low, but last year there were just under 60,000 births in Scotland, which suggests that around 60 children were born with spina bifida. We must remember that the rate is higher in Scotland than it is elsewhere, as Malcolm Chisholm said, and that the condition can be very severe and have a huge impact on the life of the person and their family—I am sad to say that some people who suffer from the condition die in infancy. We must remember that there are individuals and families behind the figures, who are struggling with a serious condition.

That is why the folic acid campaign is so important. We do not know what causes the condition, and research continues, but we know that folic acid supplements can reduce the risk of spina bifida affecting an unborn baby. As Malcolm Chisholm said, where there is no family history of spina bifida it is recommended that women take a dose of 400 micrograms a day; where there is a history of spina bifida a dose of 5mg is required.

That approach helps to reduce the occurrence of neural tube defects by some 72 per cent but, despite the guidance that is out there, only about half the women who become pregnant take folic acid before conceiving. It is important to emphasise that those women are planning to become pregnant, which suggests that there is some way to go to raise awareness of the issue more generally.

I welcome the Scottish Spina Bifida Association's efforts. It would be helpful to know how the Scottish Government can support the campaign and what it is doing to improve uptake of folic acid. I look forward to hearing what the Minister for Public Health has to say in that regard, and I again congratulate Malcolm Chisholm on securing this important debate.

12:57

Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab): I congratulate Malcolm Chisholm, as other members have done, on bringing this debate to the Parliament, which is about furthering awareness of an issue of which many people in Scotland are perhaps not as aware as they should be.

People might have heard of spina bifida, but many will not understand its causes and how it might be prevented. The Scottish Government began its report “Improving Maternal and Infant Nutrition: A Framework for Action” by saying:

“The Scottish Government wants to ensure that all children have the best possible start to life”.

I think that all members can agree on that. In the report, the Government recognised that the diet and nutritional health of the mother before conception and during pregnancy are key factors in the health of the foetus.

An individual’s socioeconomic status can be a determining factor in many issues to do with health. That is the case for pregnant mothers. The growing up in Scotland study survey found that 81 per cent of women who had lower-level standard grades had taken folic acid when they were pregnant, compared with 96 per cent of the women who were educated to degree level. Some 81 per cent of women in the lowest income group had taken folic acid, compared with 97 per cent in the highest income group. The figures show that some children are already at a disadvantage when they are born into this world.

In the same study it was found that only 48 per cent of women took folic acid prior to their pregnancy but 90 per cent took folic acid during their pregnancy. However, we should note that not all pregnancies are planned and that that could affect those figures.

The Scottish Spina Bifida Association’s “Are you getting enough?” campaign highlights an issue that has been prevalent in Scotland for some time now. According to Eurocat—European surveillance of congenital anomalies—Scotland had in 2010 a higher prevalence of neural tube defects compared with other European nations. Although the national health service has produced guidelines to inform women about neural tube defects, over 50 per cent of sexually active women are not taking folic acid on a regular basis. However, it is thought that compliance with the NHS guidelines could see cases of neural tube defects reduced by up to 72 per cent. If we are to tackle this problem, we need to ensure that we give expectant mothers fair and equal treatment to ensure that each one’s child is born with the best possible chance in life.

Although the taking of folic acid before and during pregnancy does not totally remove the risk of a child contracting spina bifida, it reduces the risk significantly. Dr Margo Whiteford, consultant and chair of the Scottish Spina Bifida Association, states:

“It just reduces the risk, probably between two-thirds and three-quarters.”

I reiterate how vitally important the Scottish Spina Bifida Association’s “Are you getting enough?” national folic acid awareness campaign is in drawing attention to the necessity for every woman who is planning to become pregnant or who is sexually active and might become pregnant to take folic acid as directed by their GP. I am pleased to note that Michael Matheson, the Scottish Government’s Minister for Public Health, has backed the campaign, which endorses the NHS guidelines.

13:02

Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP): I join others in congratulating Malcolm Chisholm on securing this most important debate and in welcoming the Scottish Spina Bifida Association’s campaign.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to take part in this debate on the importance of folic acid, a subject about which I have been concerned for a number of years. Folic acid, or vitamin B9, was identified in the late 1930s as part of the great increase in understanding of the vital nutrients naturally present in food that happened in the years between the wars. Folic acid was isolated in spinach leaves in the early 1940s, but it was not until 1960 that deficiency of folic acid was linked to neural tube defects in babies.

We all recognise that spina bifida and hydrocephalus are devastating conditions that cause paralysis and bowel problems, and often cause neurological problems. Nevertheless, the good news is that 72 per cent—nearly three quarters—of cases could be prevented by the simple act of adding folic acid to flour. The problem is that neural tube defects happen early in a pregnancy—often as early as the 28th day after conception—so unless folic acid supplementation is started before conception it is all too easy to miss that very small window in which a baby can be protected. That is why countries as diverse as Canada, the United States, South Africa, Chile and Australia have opted for mandatory supplementation of flour with folic acid. That ensures that all women in those countries of child-bearing age are getting the folic acid that they need in their diets.

Of course, as always with supplementation, there are risks that must be weighed in the balance. For example, in supplementing flour with folic acid there is a risk for the group of elderly people who have pernicious anaemia, whose symptoms could be masked by that supplementation. Any move to supplement flour with folic acid would therefore need to be accompanied by measures for health professionals to tackle pernicious anaemia, which is a vitamin B12 deficiency. However, that is

entirely manageable, and with proper guidance to GPs it could be dealt with relatively straightforwardly.

It is important to point out that fortification of food is the norm and that it has been so for many years. Many foods in Scotland are already fortified. For example, by law in the UK, iron, thiamine and niacin must be added to flour as they are removed with bran during the milling of wheat. Margarine is also fortified by law with vitamins A and D.

Food supplementation has been with us for decades and dates back to the days of rationing, when the UK Government, armed with the knowledge that had been gained by scientists in the 20s and 30s, understood the consequences of rationing. It did that because of the work of, among others, our own John Boyd Orr in Glasgow—one of the foremost nutritional scientists of the 20th century and a man known as the father of modern nutrition. He knew that many people in Scotland had too little money to feed themselves and their families properly.

It is well known among health professionals that advice and knowledge are eagerly seized upon and utilised by the most educated and well-off sections of the population. Anne McTaggart mentioned that in her speech. That is not a bad thing, because if even one child is protected from a neural tube defect, we should be delighted. However, the danger—it is one that we, as legislators, have to consider—is that we leave the poorest and most vulnerable women and children in our society behind and unprotected.

If we fail to fortify flour with folic acid, we run the very real risk that people who do not have the money for folic acid supplements—we should not forget that the advice is to take folic acid supplements for at least three months before the woman gets pregnant, which is often an open-ended commitment—will not get the protection that better-off parts of the population receive. Many of those women are too pushed to think about supplementation, but they and their children need protection too. In addition, we must not ignore the fact that many pregnancies are not planned and therefore women will not have been taking folic acid as recommended. Supplementation would protect them as well.

The Food Standards Agency in Scotland recommends mandatory fortification of bread or flour with folic acid, and it has done so since 2009. I am pleased to say that that is also SNP policy. I do not need to remind the minister of that. In a motion that I put before national conference in October 2006, conference agreed that the

“SNP supports the addition of folic acid to flour and/or other grain products sold in Scotland to dramatically reduce the

number of children born in Scotland who suffer from neural tube defects.”

That is the great point—neural tube defects would drop like a stone if folic acid was added to flour and products made from flour.

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

Stewart Maxwell: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I know that the Scottish Government is considering, along with the other Administrations, the addition of folic acid to flour, and I would be delighted if the Minister for Public Health could indicate when he expects a decision to be taken.

I feel very strongly that the addition of folic acid to flour and flour-based products in Scotland would be an extremely important step in protecting the health of every baby in Scotland, and I am sure that we all agree that it is something that we should support.

13:07

The Minister for Public Health (Michael Matheson): Like others, I congratulate Malcolm Chisholm on securing time for this debate. I thank all the members who have spoken for their speeches, which I listened to closely.

I am sure that all members recognise that having a child or family member with a disability can be hugely challenging for parents and carers and the family as a whole, and the work that the Scottish Spina Bifida Association does is essential in supporting families with children who have spina bifida. The presentation last night by the parents of Ella, a 10-year-old child who came along, clearly demonstrated some of the challenges that they have faced and also some of the ways in which they have been assisted by the Scottish Spina Bifida Association. However, no one could be left in any doubt that, when it comes to having a discussion on spina bifida or any other issue, Ella would have the last word. She is clearly a very inspiring young 10-year-old.

I am sure that members will note with concern that some 52 per cent of women in Scotland are not aware of how they could prevent spina bifida and other neural tube defects. The Scottish Spina Bifida Association’s national folic acid awareness campaign—“Are you getting enough?”—is an important part of its work. It aims to encourage a greater number of women across Scotland to learn about the importance of taking folic acid prior to and during the early stages of their pregnancy.

It is known that not having enough folic acid during pregnancy is the most significant risk factor for spina bifida. As a Government, we are clearly committed to improving the health and wellbeing of the Scottish population as a whole and ensuring

that children get the best possible start in life. That is why we published “Improving Maternal and Infant Nutrition: A Framework for Action” back in January 2011. That framework for action is to be implemented by health boards, local authorities and others, with the aim of improving the nutrition of pregnant women, babies and young children. It is the first framework of its type that looks at the nutrition of mothers before and during pregnancy.

During pregnancy, there is an increased demand for several key nutrients such as vitamin D and folate. The increased demand for vitamin D and folate cannot be met from food sources alone, which is why it is recommended that all pregnant women take a daily supplement of each in addition to increasing their dietary intake. As Malcolm Chisholm said in his speech, the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition recommends that, before conception and until the 12th week of pregnancy, women should take a folic acid supplement of 400 micrograms per day to reduce the risk of having an infant with a neural tube defect. In addition, women are advised to eat foods that are rich in folate and folic acid to increase their nutrient intake to 300 micrograms per day for the duration of their pregnancy. Some of the recipe ideas that Stewart Stevenson offered are a good example of how women can do that.

NHS Health Scotland has launched an updated leaflet with information on folic acid before and during pregnancy. The leaflet, which is free and widely available, provides basic information on folate from foods, folic acid supplements and fortified food products, and recommendations on intake for women before pregnancy and up to their 12th week of pregnancy. Its recommendations are in line with the SACN recommendations, and advice is also available to professionals on the advice that they should provide on folic acid to ensure that all health professionals see themselves as having a role in promoting folic acid supplements.

Through implementation plans provided by our NHS boards, we are aware of the specific work that the boards are undertaking to raise awareness of folic acid supplementation before and during pregnancy, which is mainly targeted at particular groups including women who have experienced pregnancy loss or who are at high risk and attend pre-conception clinics.

In Scotland, women and babies who are at the greatest risk of poor health outcomes are the least likely to access and/or benefit from the antenatal health care that they need. That can significantly hamper the contribution that maternity care services can make to improving health and reducing health inequalities. We know that just having access to antenatal care is insufficient; it needs to be accompanied by a focus on the

continuous and effective assessment of health and social need to identify any prevention and early intervention actions that are needed before babies are born and in the early days of their lives. We need to know what to do more effectively, and maternity care staff need to work in partnership with each other and with women and their families to address the issues effectively.

That is why NHS boards have an antenatal access HEAT—health improvement, efficiency, access to services and treatment—target, which means that at least 80 per cent of pregnant women in each of the lower quintiles will be booked into antenatal care by the 12th week of gestation by March 2015. That will ensure improvements in this area.

A number of members referred to the fortification of flour and products made from flour, and the chief medical officer, the Food Standards Agency in Scotland, I and the Scottish Government as a whole are clear that the fortification of bread or flour with folic acid is an important way of increasing the folic acid intake of women who might become pregnant. I am also clear that it would be an effective way of reaching sections of the population with the lowest folate intakes.

We are working with our colleagues in other parts of the United Kingdom to develop a UK-wide approach to mandatory fortification and we are actively considering the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid with our partners in other parts of the UK. I have requested further advice from the Food Standards Agency in Scotland on this matter and I expect it to provide updated information early in the new year.

We as a Government very much welcome the Scottish Spina Bifida Association’s national folic acid awareness campaign, which is very much in line with the advice that we provide. I wish it well with the campaign and it can be assured that we as a Government will continue to look at what measures can be taken to reduce the incidence of neural tube defects in Scotland, including the possibility of taking forward mandatory fortification of flour and bread with folic acid.

13:15

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Play Strategy Action Plan

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Good afternoon. The first item of business is a debate on motion S4M-08099, in the name of Aileen Campbell, on the play strategy action plan.

The Minister for Children and Young People (Aileen Campbell): Maria Montessori said that

“Play is the work of the child.”

If we are a country that truly wants to become the best place to grow up in, we need to become a nation that values play as a life-enhancing daily experience for all our children and young people in their homes, nurseries, schools and communities. Despite our political differences across the chamber, I know that we all share that ambition.

Our aims for our children and young people in Scotland are stretching and aspirational but, as I have said, when it comes to our nation’s future, we should never shy away from ambition. I say that as the Minister for Children and Young People and as a parent to my wee boy, Angus.

Play is the universal language of childhood. The activity exists for its own sake but it also has a fundamental role. All children and young people should have the opportunity to play every day, which is why we published Scotland’s first national play strategy in June and the action plan, which sets out how we will achieve that vision, on Monday.

I was particularly pleased to launch the action plan at the Yard—Edinburgh’s fantastic and inspirational purpose-built indoor and outdoor play centre for children with additional needs. I want that to send a strong signal that the strategy is for each and every child across Scotland; I appreciate the Conservative amendment, which highlights the need to focus on children with additional needs.

The strategy articulates the critical importance of play, as well as our obligation to protect our children’s ability to play. It sets Scotland on the right course for achieving the best for all our children and it draws together many strands of work that are happening across the Government, such as the work that planning colleagues are doing to highlight best practice in recognising the importance of play spaces when designing places and the work that my colleague Shona Robison is doing in her sport portfolio and her development of a youth sport strategy.

The perfect illustration of the links between play and sport is Judy Murray’s set4sport initiative, in which she outlines the games that she played with

Andy and Jamie Murray. That shows the importance of laying firm foundations with play in the earliest years to the pursuit of success in elite sport later. We in Scotland are lucky to have a play ambassador in Judy Murray.

The action plan sets out specific actions and timescales and it gives details on who is responsible for delivering elements of the plan, which include: the provision of information to parents on how to access cost-effective materials for play; building and showcasing examples of effective play practices in schools; publishing a resource on children’s rights for the education sector; delivering the strategic planning for play award; and supporting innovative projects. Work is under way to develop an implementation plan to take forward the action plan.

The motion congratulates the play sector on its work—we could never have developed the strategy without it. I take the opportunity to thank all those who worked tirelessly to develop the strategy and the plan and those who will have a key role in implementation. Many of the people involved are in the public gallery, and I thank them for their on-going passion for and commitment to play.

The word “play” belies the topic’s seriousness and its crucial importance to the fabric of society. It is not airy-fairy or frivolous—it is a fundamental part of childhood and it is crucial for the positive outcomes of our nation’s future. Play helps children to make sense of the world and helps their cognitive development. It helps them to develop problem-solving skills and to express their thoughts and feelings, and it helps with literacy and numeracy. We must never forget that play is also about fun.

Play is an essential part of childhood. It takes place in the home from birth, through formal and informal learning and in community settings through the use of public spaces and services. Our role as parents, carers and service providers is to enable and facilitate play. As politicians, policy makers, planners and practitioners, our role is to embed play at the heart of decision making throughout our society and to provide the catalyst for cultural change.

Play comes in many forms. It can be active, passive, solitary, independent, assisted, social, exploratory, educational or just fun. It can happen indoors and outdoors; it can be structured, creative and messy, and it can be entirely facilitated by the imagination or involve using the latest gadget. What is important is that children and young people have the freedom to choose how and when they play and that it does not always have to be led by adults.

Play remains important for all ages and stages and abilities. It is important throughout infancy, childhood, the teenage years through adolescence, and beyond into adulthood. As George Bernard Shaw said:

“We don’t stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing.”

The importance of play in children’s and young people’s daily lives and to healthy development has become increasingly recognised in recent years. A growing body of evidence supports the view that playing throughout childhood is more than an innate behaviour; it also contributes to quality of life and a sense of wellbeing.

Children’s play is also crucial to Scotland’s wellbeing—socially, economically and environmentally. Our people are our greatest resource, and the early years of life set the pattern for children’s future development. Research tells us that early childhood experiences shape developing brain architecture and whether our children grow into healthy and productive members of society.

Our early experiences have a much greater lasting effect than most of us would assume, and play, as a first step in learning, delivers economic benefits by helping children to develop the skills that they need for learning. The potential for savings of up to £9 per £1 invested shows that our commitment to play is right for children and our economy. Scotland’s chief medical officer has also made very clear the importance of play, stating:

“Investing in children’s play is one of the most important things we can do to improve children’s health and wellbeing in Scotland.”

Play is also important in forming healthy attachments in the earliest years. One of the best ways to connect emotionally and physically with children is through play.

For all those reasons, we have developed and continue to develop our award-winning play, talk, read campaign, which articulates the importance of people playing, talking and reading with their wee one from day 1, and empowers parents with hints and tips on things to do with their bairns.

Seeing the difference that play can make in a child’s development is delightful and wonderful, and it benefits the whole family through supporting bonding and building relationships. I am the mother of a lively and active two-year-old, and it is a sheer joy to watch his development though playing. Numerous studies, including the growing up in Scotland study, show that play is a crucial factor in a child’s educational achievement. The benefits from playing and having fun should not be underestimated.

The play, talk, read campaign is in full flow, and we could not let a debate pass in the Parliament about play on 31 October without mentioning Hallowe’en. The “30 things to do at Halloween before you’re 3” list is proving as popular as ever, with tips on how to get messy, read spooky books with mum or dad, carve turnip lanterns and, of course, go dooking for apples.

On a more serious note, I have seen play being used to great effect in prisons. For example, the Scottish Pre-School Play Association’s work in Dumfries prison enables and strengthens relationships and builds attachments and bonds beyond the prison walls between parents and their children. The fathers who I saw appreciated the chance that they got to be with their child and to interact with them in a positive way. They are being given skills in parenting that they possibly never experienced when they were growing up. That builds up their confidence and self-esteem, and the children get the benefit of being with their parent in a normal setting, which means that they are not unnecessarily punished for their parent’s wrongdoing. Play is a simple tool, but it has a profound and long-lasting impact when used in that way.

I have described how play is a child’s job, but it is also a child’s absolute right. Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that every child has the right

“to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.”

Scotland warmly welcomes the UN general comment on article 31, which was adopted by the UN committee in 2013. The general comment provides interpretation of the article in detail, and it aims to raise awareness of its importance, to promote a richer understanding of the content and to provide guidance for its implementation. The general comment also provides a really useful and tangible example of the importance of the UNCRC and making rights real.

The general comments act to stimulate debate, and they help to identify some of the key aspects of policy and practice that must be considered when working to improve the lives of our children and young people.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): On the UNCRC, is the minister still considering changing the wording in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill to “having due regard to” as opposed to just taking it under consideration?

Aileen Campbell: The Education and Culture Committee has taken a lot of evidence on that, and the process will be on-going through the stages of the bill. We are certainly very firm in the way in which we have laid out our commitments to

the UNCRC, which is the most appropriate way to recognise rights and make them real.

We should also recognise that play as a concept is not a static entity. As generations pass and the years roll by, play evolves and changes. I am sure that many of us remember playing outside around our homes and communities, and I am sure that many of us also recognise that children play outdoors less and less. Children's natural range has shrunk over the past few generations, with many venturing no further than their back gardens unsupervised. Moreover, we live in a digital age. TV, computers, tablets and a range of other technological advances increasingly see children playing inside on their own. That is not wholly bad, but we need to be alert to the consequences.

Through the play strategy and action plan, I want to see children play outside more often. We need to encourage our children to get outside and to start exploring the often wild open spaces that Scotland has in abundance. We must change the culture of the perception of children as a problem in public spaces, characterised by the "No ball games" signs we still see in communities, and we must reinforce the message that children have the same right to use public spaces as every other member of society.

We must also recognise play within the built environment. The quality of our surroundings has a fundamental influence on how we behave, and we must work to create places that provide the opportunities for active and healthy lifestyles—places that are safe, welcoming, attractive and pleasant; places where we respond positively to our surroundings and to each other. That is encapsulated in our policy statement on architecture and play, "Creating Places", which was published in June.

The Government also places significant emphasis on the importance of the quality of our streets and spaces. "Designing Streets" is the Scottish Government's policy on street design, which is aimed at refocusing the role of our streets and places to serve people first and allow children to have access to safe and vibrant streets where there is ample opportunity and incentive to play and engage with their surroundings, whether in structured or informal situations. The play strategy brings together developments in planning and architecture and shows that play is not just about the play sector, but is part and parcel of what many different portfolios, departments, agencies and professions need to consider as part of their work.

It is also important that we dispel some of the myths around outdoor play and promote the long-term benefits of exposure to risk, both to physical health and to developing resilience and mental wellbeing. Parents' perception of risks is often

higher than the reality, and that should be weighed against the benefits of outdoor play.

In my role as minister I have seen some of the very real benefits of outdoor play. That includes schools that have greened up their playing spaces, such as Rigside primary in my constituency and many other schools, and have witnessed a subsequent improvement in pupil behaviour, and organisations that have got children climbing trees, digging for beasties and jumping in puddles, such as the Jeely Piece Club in Castlemilk and many others across Scotland.

Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Does the minister take a view on the prevalence of "No ball games" signs in many areas, which often act as a deterrent to outdoor play for children and which, in many cases, should now be removed?

Aileen Campbell: Absolutely. As I said, people should view open spaces as being equally for the benefit of children across the country and should allow children to access them as adults can.

I return to outdoor learning. I was pleased that Scotland's eight to 12-year-olds were outperforming those in other parts of the United Kingdom in a recent research project by RSPB Scotland in terms of connection with nature, although we have a way to go to match our Nordic neighbours. Our play strategy should be an incentive to grow that appreciation of nature.

Many members will have seen a recent BBC report on the latest findings on physical inactivity rates of children. The study states that half of all UK seven-year-olds do not get enough exercise and that girls are far less active than boys.

Play should also be seen through a preventative and early intervention lens. By getting more children out to play, we can reduce and reverse negative health impacts. It is important to remember that we are not starting from scratch; we have a professional and vibrant play sector that supports and delivers quality play to children every day. As I said, it has contributed to our national strategy.

The previous £4 million go play fund developed an outcome evaluation framework to allow play providers to clearly articulate the benefits of play. The framework is now widely used and recognised, and it has been successful in securing significant additional funding for the delivery of play projects.

We have further supported play through our £3 million go2play fund, which supports community-based free play, development of innovative projects and the transformation of 30 school playgrounds into natural play spaces. That investment has enabled projects around Scotland

to ensure that play is advanced by a dedicated and professional workforce.

During national play day at the beginning of August, I joined play rangers from PEEK—Possibilities for Each and Every Kid—which operates in the east end of Glasgow. They were doing their bit to allow children to access the areas around them and to reclaim those spaces for positive use.

I have made clear the importance of play and the Government's commitment to supporting children to play every day. I recognise the passion and commitment from all MSPs and from the play profession—it is an exciting time for play, and we have the opportunity to build on the strategy. I look forward to hearing the comments from members on all sides of the chamber as we seek to develop the play strategy in the years ahead.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the action plan, *Play Strategy for Scotland: Our Vision*, which sets out specific actions, timescales and responsibilities for delivering support for play; agrees that play helps to ensure that children have the best possible start in life and are ready to succeed and that it can make them successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens; further agrees that play is absolutely vital to a child's wellbeing, that it contributes to the development of physical, cognitive, emotional and social skills and is an important tool in tackling poverty and health inequalities; believes that it is therefore vital that all children and young people should have the opportunity to play every day; supports the collaborative multiagency approach to improving the life chances of all children as the right way forward, and congratulates the work of the play sector in helping to improve support for play.

14:45

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I doubt that anybody will quibble with the central ethos of the play strategy that we are debating this afternoon, as it goes without saying that play is part of the general wellbeing of each child and is essential to the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of the nation at large—as it has been throughout time. On that basis, we are happy to support the Scottish Government's motion.

In doing so, however, we want to dig a little deeper into the main reasons behind the publication of what is becoming a national play strategy, and the issues that arise from them. First, there is a sizeable number of people—whether they speak as individuals or as groups—who consider that the existing situation does not provide adequately for children's needs. Secondly, there is concern that the play strategies in local councils—or in most of them, at least—are not working well enough when it comes to providing for all those children.

It is important that we consider those contexts, as well as the central mantra of the Scottish Government, which dictates that Scotland must be the best place in the world in which to grow up.

I said that I thought there were two main reasons behind the calls for change: too many individuals and groups have anxieties about existing practice; and there are concerns over the ability of councils to make effective provision. As a result, there are demands for greater statutory provision. I can understand that, but, as ever, when there are demands for greater statutory provision, there is the threat of an accompanying cost and potential bureaucracy. Perhaps even more challenging, there is a need to be crystal clear when it comes to the definitions.

I raise that point because there is an interesting and complex debate taking place just now with regard to the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill on whether the all-important issue is the child's "wellbeing" as opposed to their "welfare". That debate has thrown up philosophical tensions between theory and practice. I think that all of us would view "wellbeing" as having a deeper and more holistic meaning, and yet its definition—most especially in law—is much less clear than the definition of "welfare" in existing legislation.

Following on from that, there is a concern that the more one tries to make statutory provision for an outcome where the meaning is open to several interpretations, the more difficult the territory becomes for those who are providing the service. In his intervention, Ken Macintosh made a very good point about the use of words and how we interpret legislation.

The minister herself said that the strategy attaches a very wide definition to the term "play". She said that play can be

"active, passive, solitary, independent, assisted, social, exploratory, educational or just fun."

That view is absolutely right, and I have no problem with it. However, if we are going to encounter difficulties regarding that very broad definition, we must be a little cautious about taking things a bit too far down the road of statutory requirements.

There is a balance to be sought to ensure that no-one's rights are undermined while allowing the necessary—indeed, the traditional—notion of freedom of expression in play. The legal technicalities of the debate, which at times threaten to tax the minds of all the members of the Education and Culture Committee, are serious, and—almost ironically—they are not simple child's play.

The issue is partly about understanding why the Scottish Government has decided to adopt a national play strategy as opposed to concentrating on encouraging better guidelines to be implemented in local authorities. I know that the minister will say that they are complementary—of course they are—but I am interested to know why the balance has to be more on the strategy side than on feeding the local authorities with better opportunities.

I do not think that there can be any argument at all that this comes back to the fact that too many people are uncomfortable with the status quo. I presume that that is why the Government decided on a national strategy. That point has been made by the substantial number of groups that have lobbied heavily in this area and, obviously, it is important that we listen to their views.

The concerns of parents are absolutely paramount. It is hard to deny that those concerns have been growing in recent years, especially when it comes to the pressures on play areas in many local communities and the pressures on local authorities, which may not always see play as a priority when it comes to the very tough budget decisions that they have to take. A sizeable number of communities are concerned about the lack of suitable play facilities and, in some cases, the lack of facilities that are fully safe.

The Scottish Government has gone to great lengths to set out a list of the main objectives and has provided us with some guidance as to the likely timeframe for each, which is helpful. I note that £90,000 has been set aside; an awful lot of working groups have been suggested, and I will watch with interest how they all come together. However, some of the work that the Scottish Government says still needs to be done is already partly established.

I provide just one example of that in relation to recommendation 7.5, which says that there should be an audit of

“current levels of community access to school grounds”

and community campuses and how well used they are. Such an audit is absolutely the right thing to do. I flag up the fact that at the meeting earlier this week of the cross-party group on sport, Patricia Horton of sportscotland gave us a pretty comprehensive presentation—a copy of which I have with me—on just how far sportscotland has got already in undertaking that audit. Sportscotland has provided very useful information about the inventory of the school estate as it is now—the inventory has been updated—and how the school estate is currently being used. The priority is to ensure that when local councils review the matter, they turn their attention to the qualitative impact of the use of those facilities.

That important study is well under way, and the Government needs to pay some attention to it.

On the same theme, given that the Scottish Government's commitment is to a strategy that goes up to the age of 18, we need to be much more focused about how we can cater better for the sports and leisure interests of our older children, especially those whose school is in the older part of the school estate, where playing fields or leisure facilities may be slightly further removed and off site.

At the meeting of the cross-party group on sport, we also had an interesting presentation from the Scottish Futures Trust about better planning—the minister referred to this in her speech—for community schools, playgroups, nurseries, open spaces for young children and so on. We were provided with a very interesting set of slides on community campuses where a much more attractive environment has been laid out and which now work better. The responses from parents and from people who work on those campuses have generally been very positive.

However, in my opinion, there is a very substantial issue about the accessibility of some of the bigger sports complexes. That issue is especially pertinent when it comes to older children. It was reported to us that some facilities seek fees that are well beyond affordability for some groups, which is having a detrimental effect. I know dealing with that is not the Scottish Government's responsibility, but we have to be mindful of the issue when it comes to planning.

Aileen Campbell: I take on board Liz Smith's points. I know that we have an ideological difference when it comes to the approaches in the bill, but she is keen on culture change and there has been an emphasis on that, too. She should remember that the strategy provides us with a platform for bringing about that culture change across the whole country. The play sector values the play strategy because it gives the sector another tool in its armoury to help it to explain the importance of the role of play within wider society and the benefits that she described that play can bring to the lives of children and adolescents.

Liz Smith: I thank the minister. I do not disagree with that.

There are some deep-seated issues, and I heard the minister say earlier that she believes that in some situations risk has perhaps been overstated. As somebody who is very much involved in the same debate in relation to outdoor education, I fundamentally agree with that, but we should not underestimate the fear of many parents, staff and people in the voluntary sector, who are deeply concerned about that risk and where, given their responsibilities, it places them.

In my last minute, I turn to our amendment. I was struck by an article in *The Courier* earlier in the month that looked at the difficulties that are faced by disabled children when they engage in play. There were comments about the lack of ramped access to parks and about the fact that picnic benches do not always have space to allow children in wheelchairs to access them. Furthermore, in some cases, the see-saw or the swings were not properly available to those children. I take those points on board, because it is very important to ensure that children who have disabilities or additional support needs—and their parents—do not in any way feel excluded.

I gently advise that we need to discuss just a little bit more some of the effects that the action plan might have on other aspects of legislation.

I move amendment S4M-08099.1, to insert at end:

“but recognises the concerns being expressed by KIDS and Capability Scotland that there should be additional focus on the needs of disabled children so that they ‘have the same play opportunities as their non-disabled friends’.”

14:56

Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I am pleased to open for the Labour Party in this debate and to welcome the publication of the Scottish Government’s play strategy and action plan. I have worked with children and young people and have been involved in developing services to meet their needs, and nowadays I take great pleasure in watching my grandchildren play, so I can say with certainty that play is a serious subject.

Scottish Labour agrees that there is a need for a play strategy—there was a pledge to that effect in our 2011 manifesto. Play forms a fundamental part of a child’s educational, social and emotional development, and we look forward to it becoming a priority in action as well as in word.

I particularly welcome the plan’s inclusive vision of improving the experiences of all children and young people, irrespective of disability or background.

Some people may not realise how important play is. For those who do not know much about the issue, it can be easy to dismiss play and question why it merits a strategy at all, since we all know that children like to play and, indeed, will play given the slightest opportunity. However, play can have a huge impact on children’s confidence, their quality of life, their educational attainment and their health and wellbeing.

Nowhere is that more evident to me than with my own grandchildren. Four-year-old Keir’s favourite day at nursery is the weekly outing with

his class to the local community woodland, to play, explore and learn outdoors. He comes home with lots to talk about, eats double helpings at tea and goes to bed tired and happy. My three-year-old granddaughter Aila loves going with her mum and her chums to the soft play centre, where she can climb, run, jump and fight, and in so doing develop her social skills, confidence, co-ordination and fitness. Two-year-old Gracie so loves jumping in muddy puddles in Princes Street gardens that I had to go to the shops to buy her some dry clothes—but that is a gran’s prerogative. Each child learns skills and life lessons as they play, which will help them to develop and grow into healthy and happy young people and adults.

The United Nations endorsed the value of play by including the issue in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which stipulates that children have the right to relax, play and join in a wide range of cultural and other recreational activities. The Education and Culture Committee continues to debate the extent to which the UNCRC should be incorporated in Scots law, and I look forward to further consideration of the issue when the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill is debated by the Parliament.

I am sure that members of all parties agree that investment in children and families is one of the most crucial investments that politicians can make and brings short-term and long-term dividends that impact on the wider community and the economy. As we progress the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill, I do not doubt that we will debate how best to make that investment and who should be the beneficiaries. We will consider how to use the resources that are available to us to protect and nurture our most vulnerable children and young people, and to ensure that all children and young people have the chance to live fulfilled and healthy lives and become responsible citizens.

Scottish Labour thinks that play makes a contribution to reducing the gaps in health and attainment that too often set in at a very early age and can have long-term consequences for individuals, communities and the organisations that are charged with planning and delivering services to meet need. That is crucial. Therefore, although play might seem incidental to high-level objectives, I welcome the recognition in the action plan of the role of play as part of a wider strategy of early intervention and prevention, to tackle the inequalities that are caused by poverty and deprivation.

For many parents on low incomes, it can be hard to provide for play at home or to pay for access to groups and facilities. Save the Children has highlighted the importance of play being available in the wider community to all children, but especially to those who are disadvantaged.

Research for its report “Thrive at Five: Comparative child development at school-entry age” found that children growing up in poverty are more than twice as likely to experience developmental difficulties by the time that they reach school age than their better-off peers.

That is where community facilities and services can have a huge impact. Access to toys, books and support provided in community settings is a really effective way of supporting social, educational and health outcomes for children and their families. Such services are often seen as a soft target when savings have to be made. For that situation to change, the action plan must create a culture in which the value of such services is recognised by policy makers.

The play strategy itself is a positive step forward, but it is being implemented at a time when the funding settlement for local government is one of the tightest that we have seen. As a local councillor in Fife, I am acutely aware of the difficulties in finding the money to meet community aspirations for safe and sustainable indoor and outdoor spaces where children of all ages can have fun, keep fit and meet up with their friends. The impact of welfare reform, coupled with the severe budget pressures already facing local authorities, mean that managers and politicians are having to examine every area of spend, so it is perhaps understandable that the resources available to support play are being squeezed.

Fife Council has invested funds in free swims in the school holidays and quid-a-kid sessions at the local leisure centres. The council regards that as an important investment in health and wellbeing, but the youngsters simply enjoy the chance to have fun. It is clear that when resources are tight we must make the most of every opportunity to be creative in providing sustainable local facilities. I acknowledge the action plan’s recognition of the role of communities in developing and supporting play opportunities.

Over the past few weeks, I have had occasion to be out and about in Fife. Being mindful of the debate, I got to thinking about all the different places where I saw children playing in both informal and formal settings, what they were playing and who they were playing with, and about what constitutes a high-quality play environment and how much it costs to build play parks. I am sure that we have all witnessed the expensive gift sitting neglected while a child plays with the box and the wrapping paper. Building on that logic, how often do we involve children in imagining and planning play spaces? Would they always want swings and roundabouts? What are the alternatives? Could we encourage planners and developers to be more imaginative when building new housing estates? Could we deliver more play

value for the money that we spend? I hope that the action plan will help communities and councils.

Aileen Campbell: I made it clear in my opening speech that the strategy was not just about the play sector but about bringing lots of different departments together. For example, “Designing Streets: A Policy Statement for Scotland” is about a commitment from architects around Scotland to ensure that they all understand their role in creating spaces that children can play in and enjoy. The strategy is therefore about a much more holistic approach to play that includes more than just the play sector.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): I must ask Jayne Baxter to draw to a close.

Jayne Baxter: Okay. I thank the minister for her comments.

There are some big aspirations in the action plan, and I hope that the minister will return to the chamber in the future to keep Parliament updated on them. Scottish Labour supports the action plan in the hope that it will create the change needed in organisations to drive forward the strategy with the same energy, imagination, excitement and creativity that we see from our children when they play.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now come to the open debate. I remind members that if they wish to speak in the debate, they should press their request-to-speak buttons. That is particularly relevant if they have made an intervention.

15:03

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I welcome this debate and the Government’s play strategy action plan. The Scottish Government says that it wants Scotland to be the best place in the world to grow up in, which is a bold and ambitious statement. However, as the minister correctly said, we should never shy away from being ambitious about our children, because we must ensure that we can build everything that we can for them as they are our future.

After listening to Jayne Baxter’s speech, I think that her family is similar to mine. She said that her grandchildren go and play and learn to fight, which is similar to my family’s get-togethers at times. How many times have our children come in with a grazed knee or having fallen out with someone? However, that is all part of growing up; it is about learning life skills and what the big, bad world is all about. Playing helps young children to move on in their lives.

Some people might say that I have never lost my ability to play, and that might be confirmed by one look at my office in the Parliament or my constituency office, which some constituents have

said looks like a 13-year-old boy's bedroom. I add that it is all football stuff, in case anyone thinks anything else. What George Bernard Shaw said might not be true of me.

The action plan sets out how we can deliver on Scotland's first play strategy, which was published in June and is the most progressive of its kind in the UK. The first of the three principles behind the strategy is that we should value all children and young people, and the tone of this debate shows that members throughout the chamber do that.

The second principle is that we should enable all children and young people to realise their right to play. The minister mentioned signs saying "No ball games". I remember seeing those when I was younger, but we did not think that it was a rule; we kept playing until someone came out and chased us. Now, people in society are not quite as tolerant as they were in the past. Politicians, be they local councillors or elected members here in the Parliament, get people complaining about young people playing in some of the open spaces that we have. We seriously need to address the issue, because we have to ensure that children and young people have opportunities to express themselves, and part of that is having the time and space to play.

I have grown quite tall as the years have gone on, but the world seemed an awful lot bigger when I used to play in the Gleniffer braes on the long summer days. We know we are getting old when we start talking about such things in our childhoods, but that is the kind of thing that I want for young people now. I want them, when they are older, to remember their childhood in that way as well, because that is what makes the difference.

The action plan is structured around four domains. The first is the home, and the plan states that homes should be

"places where children ... enjoy plentiful play opportunities".

Some of the points that were made earlier are quite correct. When I was younger it was the case that, at family get-togethers, we all played together as a family, whether it was the board games at Christmas, when we would all fall out and the fighting would start again, or other games. When we look at the success of the Nintendo Wii, we see that all that it did was to modernise the whole thing. It meant that maw, paw and the weans could play together around the computer and engage together in a game that they were all interested in.

In our family, it was a question of who was the bigger kid, because my father was incorrigible. We used to play with a balloon in the room—with the whole family playing. It was like before association football rules, when everybody just kept running about. My mum always worried about the crystal in

the living room. These are the things that we remember as we get older. They develop us and make us closer to our families.

We have to ensure that there are high-quality play opportunities at nursery schools, and that there is outdoor free play as well. We may not have the weather for that, but there have to be opportunities for everyone to access nature and see what is out there in the world. As has already been said, young people now tend to spend more time in their homes using computers and the internet. Let us not Google nature; let us go out there and see what is happening in the real world.

There also has to be sufficient space for play in the community. Much has been said about that so far. It is up to local authorities to ensure that that space is available. When I was a councillor, we decided that we would find a way to find money for play areas. I was the chair of the local area committee in Paisley south, and we set aside moneys to make sure that we could get over the cross-generational boundaries and reclaim our parks. We invested in multi-use play areas. Not all the money came from the council, as we managed to find money from various other sources as well.

We ensured that we spent money, and eventually we renovated some of the tennis courts. If we had not done that, they would have gone. As Liz Smith said, it is important to ensure that people of all ages can play sports, but the political will has to exist locally. There were times when I thought that it was an impossible task, but we just have to say that we can find the money for that investment and push towards getting it. Other members who were councillors will probably speak in the debate, and they will probably tell their stories as well. It is a case of actually going out there to make sure that we give young people space.

Another thing that we spoke about then was teaching kids to play some of the older, traditional games that we all played when we were younger. We now have that in one of our parks, and the kids love it. Play is something that crosses the generations.

We have to be bold and ambitious, but we also have to remember our inner child when we make decisions. We have to make sure that, as well as talking about play in the chamber, we try our best to engage across the parties to deliver as well.

15:09

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I thank the minister for bringing this debate to the chamber, and particularly for her excellent timing. I do not imagine that I am the only one here who will rush home to get the kids ready to go out guising this evening. Hallowe'en, along with Christmas and

birthdays, is one of the few days in the year when we truly free up our children to celebrate their playfulness and imaginations. We let them off the leash, allow them to wander the streets after dark and, heaven forbid, maybe even knock on strange doors.

Of course, the day has changed over the years. For many it is now “trick or treat” rather than guising, although I should say that I am very grateful for the American habit of gouging out a pumpkin rather than the laborious and painful task of doing it to a turnip, as most of us had to do. Depending on one’s age, another welcome—or unwelcome—change is getting pound coins at some houses and not just sweets. The apples and nuts are just to keep the adults happy, as far as I can see.

I had a big debate with one of my children—I lost that debate too, which is a familiar experience—about him buying a ninja outfit off the internet rather than dressing up as Dr Who using old clothes as his sister is doing. The point is, however, that they are both having fun. Tonight, I will probably take the wee ones—aged five and under—out, but the bigger ones, who are eight and over, want to go off by themselves with their friends. No adult supervision is required, thank you very much.

It is slightly worrying that the very freedom to play like a child, as I have just described it, seems to be all too rare, rather than commonplace. Adults do not have the time, and children do not have the places. As a society, we relax our guard only on one or two days a year. That makes today’s debate on the play strategy that the Government published in the summer and, more important, the action plan that was published this week, so important.

As every member has said so far, play is essential to our wellbeing. As the strategy makes clear, it can tackle obesity, improve health, and reduce antisocial behaviour. Most important of all, it can help to develop our inquisitiveness, resilience and personality. As we all know, all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.

The benefits of play are well known and used by some already. In the early years of primary school, for example, teachers have adapted the curriculum specifically so that there is greater emphasis on children learning through play. However, even in the field of education, the further our children and young people progress through school, the more sober and serious the curriculum becomes and the less time and attention are given to play.

Two reports that were produced on successive days in the past fortnight caught my attention. The first, from the University of Strathclyde with the

University of Dundee, suggested a link between taking more exercise and improved performance in exams including in English, maths and science. The second study, also from the University of Strathclyde, this time in conjunction with the University of Aberdeen, took the form of a report card on Scottish youth and it gave us an F on obesity levels and levels of physical activity.

There are many reasons why our nation is becoming fatter and more sedentary. Our increased prosperity is perhaps the most obvious reason, but our changed and changing attitudes to play are also part of the picture and, to my mind, part of the answer.

Liz Smith: Ken Macintosh has made an exceptionally valid point. Does he agree that we should be concerned when what I would call common sense about some children’s play activities is thrown out the window? I heard about an egg-and-spoon race being cancelled because it was seen to be too dangerous. Does he agree that some of the issues are very difficult?

Ken Macintosh: I entirely agree with that point, and I might get the chance later to talk about the risk-averse culture. Yes, there are stories of people banning conkers and so on, which is clearly risk aversion gone mad.

I want to digress slightly to make a point that Liz Smith might agree with. Physical education and play are clearly not the same. Most of us enjoy playing, but not all of us enjoy PE. However, organised sport and unsupervised play activities suffer from not having a high enough profile in our school curriculum. They are not ranked highly in the academic hierarchy. Even when it comes to extracurricular activity, we do not give play, sport or music, for that matter, enough time and support, and it can be done. I am not a fan of private education but it annoys and frustrates me that many state schools do not offer the focus on sport, games and physical activity that is so often a feature of the independent sector. Even though the picture was not quite as bad in Scotland as it was across the rest of the UK, stories about the high proportion of Olympic medallists last summer who were privately educated rather than state educated still rankle with me. Sport is not the same as play, but the point that I am trying to emphasise is that both would benefit greatly from a higher profile and higher status within our schools and education system. To echo what the minister said earlier, we do not take play seriously—if that is not too much of an oxymoron.

The action plan is very welcome. One aspect that jumped out at me was that the organisations on the list of consultees or of those responsible for implementation are already champions of play. In some ways, the most important actions in the plan are those outwith the play sector, which involve

planners, architects and organisations such as local authorities. The strategy and action plan are very important, but I hope that we can move towards even firmer duties and statements of intent, such as a duty on local authorities to take account of play when granting planning consent or building roads. Some of our local authorities already have excellent play strategies that are making a difference, but even in that area duties are interpreted differently.

I agree entirely with the point that Jayne Baxter made earlier. I would like to see more open and interesting places for play. Every time a new estate gets built there is a wee play park with a swing and a seesaw, but is that what children really want? A few years ago, my wife and I bought a wooden Wendy house for the kids to play in, but when their friends come round the kids just want to play in the tree house, which is just four planks of wood with nails sticking out of it—it would never pass any risk assessment. However, the tree house has been a palace, a castle, a bedroom and a play room—it has been filled with the children's imagination.

Seven and a half years ago, we had a members' business debate calling for a play strategy. At the time, many of us bemoaned the risk-averse culture—the “cotton-wool kids”. I remember what Christine Grahame said at the time. She is not here just now, so I apologise if this paraphrasing is not quite accurate, but she said that if you hadn't broken your arm as a kid, you hadn't lived. Play is about learning one's limitations and managing risk. I do not want my children to be scared of crossing the road; I want them to be sensibly aware of the risks and dangers.

I hope that attitudes are changing. I could pick a few holes in the strategy around the UN convention, but I will not, because I think it is a great move in the right direction. I do not get to agree with the Scottish Government that often, but on wellbeing and play, I think that we can work together.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members that speeches should be of six minutes. I call Mark McDonald, to be followed by James Dornan.

15:17

Mark McDonald (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): On 7 August, part of the city centre of Aberdeen was essentially turned into a playground, with 250 to 300 children participating in the Aberdeen national play day, which included face painting, an obstacle course and a bouncy castle. It was organised by the Aberdeen play forum, whose role is to increase play opportunities in Aberdeen, working with public and private organisations in

the city and with charities and voluntary and community organisations to raise awareness of the importance of play. That kind of approach ties in neatly with the strategy that the minister has launched, which I welcome greatly.

I think back to my time as a councillor when work was undertaken in my ward to reinvigorate some of the play areas in the community—one at Sluie park in Dyce and two in the Princess Drive area of Dyce—which had fallen into disrepair and were not well used. In one case it was about bringing partners and funding together to put new equipment in place and to change the layout of the park and make it much more vibrant and well used. In the other case, it was about bringing in some street art on the ground, which reinvigorated the area and has made it very well used by the young children round about.

There are other areas in my constituency where there is a lack of modern play facilities. In some cases, such as in Forrit Brae and Bucksburn, play facilities have been removed with no prospect of their being replaced.

I take on board the point that members have made about the funding issues, which I recognise, because I encountered them when I was working as a councillor to reinvigorate some of the play areas. We need to think outside the box, if you will, about how we approach this. We cannot simply say, “There's not enough funding in local authority budgets, so we can't make progress.” We need to find creative ways to encourage new play facilities and play areas to be developed. One of those might be to look to the private sector and to consider whether, in the same way that some local authorities set sponsorship for roundabouts, sponsorship of play parks could fund play facilities.

We also need to consider the prohibitive cost of play equipment. We need to look at whether the companies that are supplying play equipment are offering true value for money and whether they are asking the price that ought to be paid for such equipment.

Ken Macintosh's anecdote about the Wendy house reminded me that children sometimes do not need expensive play equipment—imagination is all that is required. In my intervention on “No ball games” signs, I was trying to make the point that we sometimes do our level best to prevent play from happening in certain areas. However, when I was growing up “No ball games” signs were very good for goalposts. We need to think about how we are encouraging children to use open spaces.

I will focus the remainder of my speech on the issue of children with disabilities and additional support needs. The Conservative amendment is a welcome addition that will enhance and strengthen the motion.

Here are some testimonials from families who have difficulty in accessing leisure and play facilities:

“There isn’t anything suitable for our young daughter with autism”;

“No afterschool clubs or groups to cater for his needs”;

“There is nowhere for him due to age and height restrictions”;

“Physical access. 1:1 support needed—can’t do that with another child to support, physically too difficult”;

and

“It is very stressful for our son and us as he doesn’t do well in crowded places”.

I recognise those as issues that I have encountered when looking at the play opportunities for my own son.

The facilities that people would like to see are:

“Sensory rooms and more soft play for ASN”;

“Relaxation, play and learn, movement, ball, storytelling”;

and

“To have somewhere to access as a family or with your child with ASN; to have somewhere we could go as a family”.

In the north-east—not necessarily in my constituency—there are opportunities for families with additional support needs. Kool Kidz, in Inch, is a soft play centre that tries to hold special requirement sessions on a monthly basis—the next one is on 20 November. I have been to one of those sessions and they are extremely welcome. Hoodles, in Oldmeldrum, is one of the top soft play areas according to a Netmums survey. It holds a special requirement session on the last Thursday of every month, which runs from 5.30 to 8 pm. Today, for Hallowe’en, there are prizes for the best boy and girl in fancy dress.

There are good examples of organisations and private enterprises that are reaching out to make their areas more accessible to children with additional support needs. It can be difficult for families with children with additional support needs to access such facilities when they are open to the main stream, as they can be very busy and crowded. If a child has particular sensory issues or a lack of ability to understand the concept of waiting and taking turns, or if a child wants to use only the middle one of three slides, it can be difficult to explain that to other children and parents.

There is a facility in the north-east—in Westhill, in Dennis Robertson’s constituency—called SensationALL, which is designed specifically to cater for children with additional support needs. It has sensory provision, toys and other opportunities for sensory play, and at present it is

fundraising to increase the availability of its play facilities.

I will end by quoting Dr Seuss because, frankly, any opportunity to do so should be taken:

Oh, the places you’ll go! There is fun to be done!
There are points to be scored. There are games to be won.
And the magical things you can do with that ball
will make you the winning-est winner of all.

By having a national play strategy, we can make Scotland’s children the winning-est winners of all.

15:23

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP):

There is no doubt that there are clear long-term economic and social benefits attached to play, and that investing in children’s play is one of the most important things that we can do to improve children’s health and wellbeing across Scotland. Play is good for the child, as it gives them confidence and the ability to communicate and share with other children.

When Jayne Baxter spoke about her grandchildren, it reminded me that my two grandkids spent their early years in a tenement. It was a lovely tenement house in a lovely place, but there was no play area for them. They moved away—10 years ago, now—and within a year I could see a huge difference in their confidence and their physical abilities. Therefore, Jayne Baxter made a very good point. As for George’s inner child, I think that he is still playing.

The action plan addresses four domains: “In the Home”, “At Nursery and School”, “In the Community” and “Positive Support for Play”. I will concentrate on the last of those and will explain why in a minute. First, here comes an episode of “All Our Yesterdays”.

When I was a kid, during the holidays we left the house in the morning, come rain or shine, came home at lunchtime—sometimes—and then came home for dinner, hopefully to go back out to play before bedtime. We played hide and seek or allevio and hid up trees. We played best man’s fall, with branches for guns, and then rolled in the mud once we had been shot with those guns. We played football, and occasionally cricket, in the summer, with jumpers for goals or stumps. We came home dirty, hungry, scraped and bruised, but happy and fulfilled.

For lots of reasons, many of which have been articulated, we seem to have lost the opportunity for children to go out and play without structure or supervision, which is why the strategy recognises the benefits of active play. In many ways, things were easier back then and, although money may have been extremely tight—it certainly was in my case—we did not have the stresses that exist for

many families now. Throughout my constituency there are families who find the pressures of life so great, and the existence of grinding poverty so wearing, that they do not have the time, or in many cases the expertise, to play with their children. By the time their children go to school—or sometimes, tragically, even by the time they go to nursery—the children can be difficult to control and to get involved in play or any other activity.

That is where the fourth strand, or domain, comes in. In my case, I am talking about the Jeely Piece Club, which is a magnificent organisation that I am extremely proud to have in my constituency and has already been named by the minister as a fine example of outdoor play provision. Founded in 1975 by a group of parents in Castlemilk who wanted to provide play opportunities for their kids, the club initially ran play schemes during the school summer holidays. In time, funding was raised to run activities all year round, before the club became the hugely successful nursery and play centre that it is today.

The Jeely Piece Club now has two bases in Castlemilk, is open for 342 play sessions a year and delivers a 10-week holiday programme. Its play zone receives more than 22,000 visitors a year. As the only soft play centre in the area, the Jeely Piece Club is the only centre that is focused on meeting the free-play needs of children up to 12 years of age—the most important time. The club has also opened an outdoor children's play park and has opened up access to Castlemilk wood for outdoor play, as part of its go play project. More than 1,000 kids a year take part in the club's outdoor activities, which include climbing trees, building dens and learning about nature.

As well as being a well-run organisation that delivers not only the successful play schemes, but a nursery either free or for a nominal fee, the Jeely Piece Club seeks to deliver personal development for children and families, some of whom are growing up in highly adverse social and economic circumstances. We know that living in chaotic households can have serious emotional and physical consequences for children and their parents, which can, unless they are addressed in early childhood, have a lifelong adverse impact, with consequential issues for the family and society as a whole. As an organisation that is trusted by parents, the community and agencies, the Jeely works mostly with the mothers in aiming to help them to help their children, through play and other interventions, to overcome those issues and to develop, so that they can start primary school with the skills that are needed to engage with the wider education system.

There is no doubt that the difference that the Jeely makes to the local community cannot be

overstated. A huge vote of thanks is due to Tracey Black, Grace Lamont and all the staff, volunteers and parents who work so hard to make the Jeely a success. Members should just listen to this direct quote, which emphasises what the club means to some of the parents:

"If the Jeely hadn't been here, there is a 99% chance my children wouldn't be with me now."

Now, that is making a difference.

A recent study by Stanford University, based on American statistics and an American pilot study, showed that early intervention and working with parents who need support and assistance, both during pregnancy and until the children reach school age, is among the most important tools that can be used to reduce crime. There was a 59 per cent reduction in child arrests by age 15 for children who had gone through the programme, compared to children who could have used the help but did not get it because of the limits of the pilot. That mixture of early intervention and play, which has had such an impact where it has been tested in America, is having a similar impact when used by the Jeely and other like-minded organisations.

The Scottish Government has made a commitment to make Scotland the best place in the world to grow up and we know that it is better for all of us if we invest in such programmes now rather than pay a far higher price later.

It is also crucial that we move away from the belief that play has to be expensive, as has already been mentioned by a number of members. One of the parents who are quoted in the strategy noted:

"I've learned kids are happy playing with almost anything, you don't have to buy expensive toys."

We are all guilty, I suspect, of thinking that giving kids a happy Christmas involves spending a lot of money on them. As has already been mentioned, the truth is that often they will play more with the box than with the expensive gift that has been bought for them.

We have a choice to make about what sort of country we want our children and their children to live in. There is a wealth of research out there that tells us that the best way to address economic inequality, poverty and crime is to invest in early education programmes, including our play strategy, and in coaching parents who require help. The play strategy is not a magic bullet, but it is a tool that we must use to fight the poverty that blights too many children and their families in Scotland today.

The strategy will play a huge role in the years ahead as we work together to make Scotland the best place in the world to grow up in. I hope that

the strategy gets the cross-party support that it deserves.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before Christian Allard begins, I remind members to address one other by their full names, not only because that is required by protocol, but because it makes it easier for the public who are watching our proceedings to follow the debate and for the official report to record the speeches.

15:30

Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP): I welcome the Scottish Government's action plan. We judge a society by how it looks after its children. As many members have mentioned, we have a lot to learn from the time when we grew up—a time when, as children, we had more space and time to play.

There is little time in modern life in which to consider our children's wellbeing. I am proud to hear that there is consensus in the chamber about the importance of developing a play strategy. I was delighted that the minister reminded us what investing in the early years repays in economic terms. Let me repeat that point: every £1 invested in early intervention will generate an eventual saving of up to £9 for the Scottish taxpayer.

As James Dornan did, I had a fantastic childhood. As members know, I was not born in this country but in a small farming village in France. I was close to nature and I had great support from my family and the community. If one wants a picture of how best to go about that they should purchase the last Asterix comic—it happens to take place in Scotland—"Asterix and the Picts". The final frame of every book always shows the reader what happens when Asterix and Obelix return from their adventure. There is a great celebration with a lot of drinking and eating but, in the foreground, there are children playing. That is very important, because play is how we define our society and we should ensure that children are always able to play.

I chose Scotland not only as the place to work and live in, but as the place where my children should grow up. There is the same type of community, but it is a different and busy life living on the outskirts of Aberdeen.

We are pleased to welcome SensationALL, the charity that Mark McDonald mentioned. What do I remember about my children growing up? Perhaps I should defer to what a member who spoke before me said: we should not leave children to play on their own. I am not saying that they should be supervised; rather, that we should interact with children. Children should not only have space to play, but have space that we share. I remember my seven and eight-year-old neighbours knocking

at the door and asking me to go out and play. To the surprise of my children, they wanted me to go out and kick a ball with them. We need to understand that play is great, but children should not only play on their own, but interact with adults. As George Adam said, adults can play, too.

I particularly like the Scottish Government's attitude and its progressive approach to legislation. Similar to the curriculum for excellence, which has come into our communities and schools, the strategy is based around engagement. I particularly like the idea of the three phases. Phase 1 is engagement to help to inform the development of a national overarching strategy and to seek—this is important—the views of children and young people. We cannot do anything in legislation about children without involving them right from the start, at phase 1.

Under phase 2, depending on the views that are gathered in phase 1—I like this because there is no top-to-bottom approach; rather, people are consulted on their views before the strategies are developed—we develop detailed outcomes and strategies for parenting of children of different ages. That is very interesting. Under phase 3, the focus will be on producing something of practical value to parents; although legislation is important, it must have practical value, especially for parents.

I, too, add my thanks to the many contributors who are here today and those across the play sector and beyond who offered their views during development of the strategy. I will name some of the organisations that formed the working group: Inspiring Scotland, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the Smart Play Network, Play Scotland, the Scottish Pre-School Play Association, NHS Health Scotland—health is part of what the strategy is about—Capability Scotland, Education Scotland, Creative STAR Learning Company, the Learning through Landscapes Trust, the International Play Association Scotland: Promoting the Child's Right to Play and, of course, Tam Baillie, who is Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People.

I will say how important Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People is in our communities. He came to the region that I represent on 16 November 2011. I remember the date and I will tell members why. When he came to Aberdeenshire, he met the local authority to discuss proposed legislation from the Scottish Government. He went to Portlethen academy to meet 12 members of the school council. In Westhill academy, he met school-based youth workers and addressed no fewer than 25 members of the school council on his role. The important point is that his visit meant that the community council and the local authority took

decisions to make things better for the children in our communities.

The Scottish Government's vision and commitment to extending the powers of Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People is crucial to enabling Tam Baillie to undertake more investigations in relation to individual children and young people.

I am delighted to welcome Scotland's first national play strategy. Children's play is crucial to Scotland's social and economic wellbeing. I share the minister's ambition and believe that an independent Scotland will become the best place in the world to grow up.

15:36

Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab): I am pleased to contribute to this important debate on the Scottish Government's play strategy and the wider efforts that are being made to ensure that Scotland is the best place in the world to grow up. I whole-heartedly agree with the Scottish Government that play is vital from the early ages and stages of a child's life and that engaging in fun educational activity is hugely beneficial to the health and wellbeing of our youngest citizens.

It is undeniable that encouraging our children to become active and interact with their peers is a core part of the educational journey that begins long before their introduction to primary school. Children learn to play before they learn to walk or talk, and it is our collective responsibility to ensure that their experiences are of good quality and are meaningful.

Encouragement of play among children depends not on any single factor but on genuine investment in every area of a child's life. Play should be a focus in formal and informal environments. It should be a priority in schools and in the home. Parents, teachers, health professionals and others should all play a role in the development of our children. It is down to us to ensure that our youngest generation has the resources to get the most out of its formative years.

Programmes such as getting it right for every child and the named person scheme for looked-after young people are well intentioned and—if they are appropriately resourced—can be exceptional tools to increase the quality of life for Scotland's young people. However, without adequate investment, they can only ever be commendable aspirations that make little difference to the lives of our most vulnerable children.

To implement many of the policy initiatives fully, front-line workers—whether in the voluntary

sector, education, social work or health—will need more time with each child and greater readily available resources to support the invaluable work that they carry out daily. I want those initiatives to be as successful as possible. The uncomfortable truth is that that requires serious investment in our schools, social work services and national health service alongside—which is most important—increased support for parents.

I am confident that the whole Parliament joins me in aspiring to a reality in which all children have the same opportunity for play in their formative years and in which no young person suffers as a result of a lack of resources in their home life or their time at school. To achieve that, we must prioritise young people in Scotland and further invest in the services that make the most significant difference to our children and their biggest supporters.

15:40

Fiona McLeod (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): It is extremely important that the minister talked about the fact that article 31 of the UNCRC mentions that every child has the right to play. That is the right way to start any contribution to the debate.

The minister talked about the fact that play is also about learning, in that it can lead to young people being able to learn about independent choice, collaboration and co-operation, and risk-benefit assessment—that is a horrible term, to which I will return. Play also teaches young people about the consequences of actions. Those are surely all skills for life but, above all, as the minister said, play is fun.

Many members have reminisced; I want to do a bit of reminiscing, too. I also want to point out the intergenerational fun that we have when we play with children. James Dornan reminisced about his childhood, which sounded very like mine—it involved getting up in the morning, going out and not coming back until someone came and got you when it got dark. Looking back at the play experience that my son—who is now 23—had when he was young, I think that the dirtier he was when he came home, the happier he was. I am now in the same position with the dog.

Ken Macintosh mentioned his family's Wendy house. Being politically correct, in my house—as we had a little boy—we had a play house. I remember how he used that play house with his granny. He used to play Mugdock cafe, which would involve him serving his granny the cup of tea that she had when they went up to Mugdock to play. It was wonderful to watch them interact in that way. Of course, he was also learning. He was

learning about how to co-operate with someone and how to listen to what they wanted.

A few months after I watched that one afternoon, the children of one of my friends, who was the same age as my son—about three—was diagnosed as a late speech developer. Lo and behold! The speech therapist told his mum to go out and buy a tea set, on the ground that that would get him speaking and co-operating. That is exactly what Kenneth had been doing with his granny without anyone telling him to do it.

I have one last story that I must share with members, which relates to intergenerational play. My son had a much younger cousin, so he was able to keep playing for many years into his teenage years, not because he wanted to play, but because he was doing it for Cameron. He loved that. We had foam swords, which are not terribly politically correct—although at least they were not guns. I gave in on that one. We used to go out at night time in the summer and they would go wild with the foam swords and have great battles. One day, we took a friend's mum. My goodness, did that unleash the inner scary mum! She just went wild with the foam swords. It was great to watch that truly intergenerational play.

I can tell anecdotes and talk about my childhood and my son's childhood but, as a librarian, what I am delighted about—members would expect me to say this—is the fact that we now have an evidence base that tells us how important play is in the development of young people. That is extremely important, because it allows us to play officially. That comes into the action plan at section 9.3. Being able to play because the evidence says that we can also allows people to invest in play, and we see that in section 9.12 of the action plan.

Many members have talked about how important it is that we involve young people in development of their play areas. In my constituency, there is the Kirkintilloch skate park, which I think is now about 10 years old. It was young folk who said that they wanted it. They got together and got support from the adults. Ten years on, the skate park is still incredibly well used.

My local nursery school takes the kids into my mum's care home, which means that the old ladies get to watch the wee ones play; I am sure that it will not be long before they get down on the floor and start playing with the children. It is important that such initiatives are allowed officially and can be invested in.

The Scottish planning policy says that planning authorities should protect valued open space, which is incredibly important. Many members have met my constituents and fellow villagers from

Westerton, who are fighting hard to maintain the 100-year-old green space there.

I wanted to pick up on two more subjects, but I do not think that I will have time to do so, so I will concentrate on health and safety. My husband has a background as a health and safety professional. Health and safety is not about being risk averse but about managing risk. It is not like the modern urban myths—Liz Smith raised one with Ken Macintosh—such as the idea that people cannot play conkers if they do not have safety specs on. That is not what health and safety is about; it is about the wearing of head protection and not having scrums when young children are playing rugby. That is managing risk, not being risk averse.

I have a brilliant quote from the Health and Safety Executive. In 2008, it said:

“We need to focus on finding ways for things to happen, not reasons to stop them—a sensible approach to managing risk focuses on practical action to tackle risks that cause real harm and suffering.”

That approach is embedded at points 9.10 and 9.11 of the play strategy action plan.

I talked about intergenerational play. Members should look at what Finland is doing with not outdoor gyms but outdoor play parks, where all go to play together.

From the minute they are born, we play with our children and they learn from that play. I hope that today is another of the days when the hashtag #Scotlandbestplacetogrowup is trending across the world.

15:46

Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP): It is too easy to dismiss play as a trivial activity for children. The reality is that play is about much more than just having fun. Like many other members, as a parent, I recognise how important play is to the health and wellbeing of not only my daughter but Scotland's children and young people.

The minister spoke of the Scottish Government's ambition to make Scotland the best place in the world for a child to grow up, and I share her view that the development of Scotland's first national play strategy and action plan will bring us another step closer to achieving that ambition. A strong evidence base and international research demonstrate that play is essential to enabling a child's healthy development through to adolescence and into adulthood.

I recommend that members spend some time reviewing Play Scotland's report “The Power of Play”, which provides an excellent overview of research and expert opinion and which shows that

supporting play from an early age can give children the best possible start in life. For example, page 10 of the report says:

“Because playing includes such a wide variety of experiences it contributes in many different ways to children’s enjoyment and well-being. Imaginative and constructive play is thought to be particularly important for cognitive development whilst play involving art, craft and design helps children develop the fine motor skills needed for handwriting. A range of play experiences contribute to, for example, language development, problem-solving, memory and creativity and the exercise involved in physically active play helps increase fitness.”

That illustrates the range of benefits to children’s development when they are given the opportunity to participate in play. Play throughout childhood is a key part of learning physical, intellectual, emotional and social skills. It plays a crucial role in helping children to grow up to be healthy and productive members of society.

I have been fascinated by members’ anecdotes about children’s games and games from long ago—by which I mean 1960. I recommend that members look at the Bruegel painting entitled “Children’s Games”, which was painted not in 1960 but in 1560. I saw it two weeks ago in the Kunsthistorisches museum in Vienna. It shows dozens of children playing dozens and dozens of games, nearly all of which are instantly recognisable, probably to every person in the chamber.

However, things have changed in the past 20 years. That is why it is essential that we have a national play strategy. We know that children are spending more of their time indoors and have an increasingly inactive and sedentary lifestyle. Recent research led by the University of Strathclyde into the physical activity of Scotland’s young people found that only 19 per cent of adolescent boys and 11 per cent of girls aged 11 to 15 do the recommended 60 minutes of moderate exercise per day. It was also found that 76 per cent of 11 to 15-year-olds watch more than two hours of television each day. That demonstrates the challenge that Scotland faces, with almost a third of Scottish children being categorised as overweight or obese.

However, the study also recognised the positive steps that the Scottish Government has taken to bring forward national policies, strategies and investment to improve opportunities for young people to participate in healthy activities. The Scottish Government’s on-going commitment to developing play opportunities for children can be seen in a variety of funding streams, including the £3 million go2play programme, which is managed by Inspiring Scotland. That builds on the progress of the go play fund, which has helped to benefit a number of play initiatives in communities throughout the country.

One of the projects that has benefited from that support is based in my region in West Dunbartonshire, where the Environment Trust has been working to develop new spaces for play in local schools, parks and streets. Pupils at St Mary’s primary school in Alexandria worked in conjunction with the trust to design and create a new Scandinavian-style free play space in the school playground to better facilitate outdoor play and learning.

The national play strategy focuses on strengthening the play infrastructure in Scotland to ensure that children and young people have better opportunities to participate in play. The latest Scottish household survey found that around nine out of 10 households with children aged six to 12 typically have access to at least one form of play area in their neighbourhood, such as a park, playground, field or open space. That is encouraging, but there is certainly much more that we can do to ensure that children and young people have access to suitable play areas in their community settings and public spaces. Members have made clear some of the pressures that are brought to bear on those open spaces through the desire of some to build on them and remove the opportunities for children to use them as open recreational areas.

A number of alternative funding routes are available to help to develop better play provision for young people, such as the cashback for communities initiative and Big Lottery Fund funding. The action plan highlights the need to showcase the positive impact of play to potential funding bodies. I know that the Big Lottery Fund in particular has facilitated a number of fantastic community projects for children and young people across Scotland.

In East Renfrewshire, Cosgrove Care, which is a local charity that specialises in providing support for people with learning disabilities, was recently awarded a grant from the Big Lottery Fund’s young start fund for a project to enable children from eight to 12 with differing learning disabilities to take part in horse-riding activities.

Teachers at the Isobel Mair school, which is a school for children with special needs and is also based in East Renfrewshire, successfully applied to the awards for all fund to establish a sports and drama programme for pupils at the school who have additional support needs.

Those are two worthwhile local projects to highlight in particular, as they cater for young people with disabilities who have been shown to face barriers to play opportunities due to inadequate provision in mainstream play facilities. I particularly welcome the Conservative amendment, which highlights that particular point.

I know that Capability Scotland has been a key stakeholder in the development of the national play strategy, and I am certain that it has emphasised the need to take into account the challenges that young disabled people face in accessing the same play opportunities that non-disabled children access.

I pay tribute to the range of stakeholders across the children's sector, including Play Scotland, Inspiring Scotland and Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, whom Christian Allard mentioned earlier, that have all worked together to bring forward Scotland's first national play strategy. I know that a wide range of views and opinions have gone into making that possible. Everyone—teachers, parents, health workers, volunteers, carers, youth workers and, indeed, young people—has a role to play in taking forward the action plan, promoting the positive benefits of play, and enabling quality play opportunities for all Scotland's children and young people, irrespective of their ability or, indeed, disability.

15:53

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): Like all my colleagues in the chamber, I fully support the development of a national play strategy. Play and recreation are essential to the health and wellbeing of children. They promote the development of creativity, imagination and self-confidence as well as physical, social, cognitive and emotional strengths and skills. Through their involvement in play and recreation, children learn by doing; they explore and experience the world around them and experiment with new ideas, roles and experiences. In doing so, they learn to understand and construct their social position in the world.

Scottish Labour pledged to develop a national play strategy in our 2011 manifesto. I hope that the Scottish Government delivers on the broad range of commitments and outcomes that are included in the action plan.

Play and recreation are very different now compared with what they were when I was growing up. Children in all regions of the world are spending increasing periods of time engaged in play and recreation on various digital platforms and media, and information and communication technologies are emerging as a central part of a child's daily life. Today, children move seamlessly between offline and online environments. The use of modern technologies such as tablets and personal computers to learn and play provides children with benefits around learning cognitive skills, albeit spending hours on games consoles and in front of the TV is often children's primary use of technology. We need a balance.

A recent survey of 13,000 children for NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde found that one in four children spends as much as 12 hours a day in front of the television or on a computer. Moreover, a 2011 report by International Play Association Scotland suggested that only 35 per cent of children felt happy and safe when playing in their streets. It is easy to see from that why children are spending more time using digital media.

I welcome the commitment in the action plan for children and young people to be able to find clean, safe and welcoming spaces in which to play and gather near their home. There is a duty on parents and adults in our society to provide safe platforms on which our children can grow, develop and enjoy themselves. The action plan can, I hope, help us provide those safe platforms for our children, but a number of issues need to be addressed.

The right to play is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that children have the right to relax and play, and to join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities. In the consultation on the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill, the Scottish Government committed to give the UNCRC a statutory basis in Scots law by placing a legal duty on ministers to give due regard to the UNCRC in all its decisions. However, the wording of the bill requires ministers only to

"keep under consideration"

matters relating to the UNCRC and to act

"if they consider it appropriate to do so".

The wording is ambiguous and I am disappointed that the Scottish Government will not make a stronger commitment to the legislative incorporation of the UNCRC in the bill.

Every child should be able to enjoy those rights, regardless of where he or she lives, his or her cultural background or his or her parental status. According to Children 1st, one in five Scottish children is officially recognised as living in poverty. Save the Children's research demonstrates that children who grow up in poverty are more than twice as likely as their better-off peers to experience developmental difficulties by the time that they reach school age. There is a substantial evidence base to suggest that access to high-quality play experiences from a very young age can support the healthy development of some of our most vulnerable children and nurture literacy and key skills that can unlock their potential and help to address the gap in educational attainment.

I agree with Save the Children's view that the Scottish Government should prioritise in the play strategy action plan support for families experiencing poverty and endeavour to join up

commitments in the national parenting strategy, to prioritise support for parents to provide a good home-learning environment.

Many of the actions in the action plan apply to local authorities that have already had to absorb significant cuts to their budgets and local authorities may struggle to increase leisure services beyond current levels. Last year, the Scottish Government committed to providing £3 million for play through the early years and early intervention change fund, which supported projects to help children play safely in their local area. In light of budget pressures on local authorities, I would like assurances that the measures contained in the action plan will be backed by the financial resources to turn those ambitions into reality.

The play strategy action plan can be used as a tool to help vulnerable children in certain sections of society. Families Outside estimates that 28,000 children in Scotland have a parent in prison. The incarceration of a parent can have an adverse effect on a child's development and increase the likelihood of them growing up to offend later in life. The play strategy action plan, coupled with the early years and early intervention change fund, could be used as a tool to support that vulnerable group of children by providing quality play and recreation time with their incarcerated parent.

Aileen Campbell: I have a constructive point to make. I hope that Mary Fee would welcome the early years task force, which is the group that administers the change fund. Families Outside is a very active member of that group. I have a personal connection with Families Outside, given my involvement in some of its work during the previous parliamentary session. I take on board the point that Mary Fee makes.

Mary Fee: I thank the minister for that clarity. Those families are an important section of society, and I am pleased that they will not be overlooked.

I fully support the development of the national play strategy, which I feel can have an integral role in a child's development and become an invaluable tool in helping society's most vulnerable children. With on-going support and commitment, we can turn those ambitions into reality.

16:00

Richard Lyle (Central Scotland) (SNP): I support the play strategy, as a father and grandfather. My grandson Ruaridh is now a year and a half old, and he teaches his grandfather how to play—of course I, like all grandparents, love it.

I believe that the play strategy for Scotland is committed to the development of children, noting as it does that play is a fundamental component of

how children grow. It is our responsibility as policy makers to ensure that children have the opportunity to play and realise their full potential.

In my former role as a local government councillor for 36 years, I was astounded when I first joined the council at the cost of play equipment. However, I was committed to ensuring that play areas in my ward and throughout the authority were upgraded and that more money was allocated to play. I was also committed to reducing the number of "No ball games" signs.

During my term in office, I involved several schools in designing new play areas, which gave local children an input into what was being installed. Several small play areas were closed after consultation in order to erect a more central, safer and more innovative play area. Prior to leaving the council, I was able to access external funding from a housing association that wished to build in my ward. That funding ensured that a play area that a local group was requesting was built, and more than £100,000 was obtained to promote play. Local groups, local councils and councillors must be innovative and explore all avenues in order to ensure that play is an essential part of council policy.

I will relate a story in the words that were used to me; I look forward to seeing this in the *Official Report*. While walking through the Jewel scheme—an area in my ward of Orbiston in Bellshill—I was stopped by a wee boy aged 10. He said, "Haw Dick, what you doing for us kids? You're doing for all these old yins, but what you doing for us?" He was right. I went on to access funds and build a youth centre for kids in my ward; I received £150,000 from the then Scottish Office urban aid fund. That is what can be done; as Mark McDonald and George Adam pointed out, local funding can be accessed.

One of the most resounding points in the strategy is that play and future wellbeing are closely linked. The strategy explains that play helps to promote brain function, which increases flexibility and improves potential for learning later in life. It also notes that play serves important social and emotional functions. Additionally, it has been shown that children who have the opportunity to play actively grow to be better problem solvers. Therefore, creating an environment that allows them such opportunities is highly beneficial not only for children but for society as a whole.

The play strategy for Scotland highlights that investing in children's play is one of the most important actions that we can take to improve children's health and wellbeing. As a member of the Health and Sport Committee, I find that especially important. We have devoted much attention to determining why and how inequalities

in health arise. Evidence sessions have shown that inequalities in health are largely socially determined and that the communities where people live have a large role in health status.

It has been suggested that tackling those challenges requires an integrated approach of combined efforts with a focus on creating strong communities. Creating more connected, safer communities through the promotion of play can indirectly aid in reducing health disparities.

The assertion that play is a child's right is enshrined in the play strategy for Scotland and supported by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. As members of the Scottish Parliament, it is our responsibility to ensure that that right is assured. We must ensure that, in a world in which parents are increasingly busy and incomes are often tight, all children—regardless of background—have access to play.

We must support free play initiatives and encourage a wide variety of play experiences. Playing in the home, outdoors and at school are critical in helping children practise and gain skills they will need in their adult lives. Unfortunately, many children now live in one-parent homes, hence they require greater support. It is our role to help support communities that provide assistance to families in need. Play is especially important for children in disadvantaged situations. It can also be used as a type of therapy to aid physical and mental wellbeing.

Scotland is already a great country to grow up in—I believe that—but supporting the play strategy for Scotland will help make it an even better environment for children in the future. The benefits of childhood play must not be overlooked or underestimated. Play directly affects how our children develop and what type of adults they become. We must do all that we can to create a positive environment for children so that they can flourish and express their creativity. By providing play opportunities and safe areas to play in, we can enhance communities and ensure that people are healthy. Enabling children to play can provide a better Scotland. I urge all members to consider this message mindfully and to support play action for Scotland.

16:06

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): In 2007, I was elected as a councillor in Wishaw and was elected on to the Scottish Accident Prevention Council home safety committee. It was on that committee that I learned some of the shocking statistics about accidents among children and young people. I learned that this is really an issue of social justice, because children in socially deprived areas are five times more likely to die in

an accident. Not all those accidents will be during play, of course, but we know from the research that has been done by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents that many of the accidents that happen to young people are in a play environment and that we see many more of them in the long summer holidays than we do at other times of the year.

James Dornan talked about the issues that can affect a family in relation to play and interacting with their children. ROSPA's evidence in that area backs up that when the stresses of life are such that families are disengaged or there are drug or alcohol problems, children's play activity suffers. The ROSPA evidence shows us that that means that those children are far more likely to have accidents in a play environment.

Therefore getting this right, working with our partners and making a play strategy that works for Scotland is about social justice. I am very glad that there are some good examples out there of work that is being done to tackle some of these problems. For example, Network Rail, which is in the process of electrifying its lines across Lanarkshire and Falkirk, in my region, is working with the Scottish Youth Theatre on a project called rail respect. The project has been rolled out in North Lanarkshire and Stirling and is about to be delivered in Lambert high school and Carrongrange school in Falkirk.

Through a series of workshops, the rail respect project engages young people in their decision-making process about how they play, where they play, their risk taking, their respect for other people and their respect for one another. In so doing, the project gives some of the life experiences that Fiona McLeod alluded to—life skills that give young people the chance to make better decisions about their own safety in their play areas.

I am also very glad that the Scottish Government is working in conjunction with ROSPA to provide home safety kits for referred households in poor areas. It is not just about the provision of the kits—they are engaging with the fire service and with other home services in the area to fit the kits into the houses of people who have been recognised to be at risk by the agencies involved with them. That is a great step forward in improving the play environment and the home environment for young people.

ROSPA has also engaged the acclaimed children's author Linda Strachan, who has written a book called "The Birthday Party", which is for five and six-year-old children. The book makes them aware of the dangers around their own houses and their own areas in the context of a birthday party at a friend's house. ROSPA has an ambition to make sure that every five-year-old in Scotland has access to a copy of the book.

For all the reasons that have been mentioned to do with the emotional wellbeing and development of our children, getting this right absolutely is about social justice. If we want to achieve our ambitions of reducing inequality and improving the welfare of our young children, the play strategy is a great step forward towards meeting those aims in our country.

I will give an example from my region. Thornlie primary school sits in a council estate in Wishaw, in North Lanarkshire, that has had its challenges over the years with deprivation. It is a strong community but nonetheless suffers from a lot of the social problems that members would imagine in such an area. Given that the school sits in the centre of the community, prior to 2010 it was often a target for misadventure and vandalism in the evenings.

However, in 2010 Thornlie primary school embarked on a project to completely transform the outdoor play area at the school. The project was about active learning in the classroom and beyond and it was all about innovative outdoor learning. The whole project was designed around risk—getting better risk assessment for children—and adventure, so it involved shelter building and the use of natural play materials. The project completely transformed the nature of what had been an urban play area. The approach was not without its challenges, not least having to tackle some complaints from parents about having not only to wash their children more but to wash their clothes when they come home from school.

Nonetheless, the school developed a policy and worked with parents in the area to get them to engage in what was an innovative project. There is a fallen tree in the grounds, and there is a fire pit, which the children are allowed to use at the after-school fire club. Jayne Baxter talked about children playing creatively with boxes. Children at Thornlie have a whole load of material for making dens. They have posts, flags, blankets, crates and so on, and hay is delivered to the school once a year, which the children are encouraged to use.

Jayne Baxter talked about the need to involve children. The children at Thornlie worked with a local artist. They designed willow tunnels and shapes that they wanted to use in the playground.

I was lucky enough to attend the launch of the initiative in 2011 with the minister, Aileen Campbell. It has taken the school from strength to strength. The school went on to have an outdoor conference, to which it invited members of the local community. The conference was a big success. Many children gave up their Saturday to come along and explain what the initiative meant to them. In January this year, the school was awarded a keep Scotland beautiful campaign award for its playground.

Not only has the initiative transformed opportunities for children at Thornlie primary school, but the pride that the community takes in the school is evident to all. Play has been truly transformational for the community.

16:13

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

This has been a consensual and constructive debate. Members talked about their grandchildren, and I too like to play with my granddaughter, except when she wants me to tie worms into knots. I think that members will agree that there are limits.

I want to draw attention to the excellent play facilities in our children's hospitals, which have not been mentioned. I spent a bit of time in the Royal Aberdeen children's hospital earlier this year, and I know how important and how valued the indoor and outdoor play facilities are.

Kenneth Macintosh made a good point about how play and physical exercise are given greater priority in private schools. I hope that the Government will reflect on that, so that pupils in the state school sector get the same opportunities for play and PE as pupils in private schools do.

We welcome the publication of the Scottish Government's play action plan. The links between play and cognitive development are real and proven, and it is important that politicians, parents, local authorities and third sector organisations work together to ensure that every child has the opportunity to take part in constructive play.

I welcome the establishment of the play strategy implementation group, and I hope that it will facilitate the joined-up thinking that will make a real difference to children and young people across Scotland. We support the minister's desire to inject an element of play awareness into continuous professional development courses. We believe that, if our common goals are to be realised, we must also look seriously at opening up school playgrounds and, in particular, indoor games facilities to much wider community use.

As my colleague Liz Smith has already indicated, children with disabilities struggle at times to engage in full play. I welcome the support for addressing that from Stewart Maxwell and some other members. Equality of opportunity is vital, and we must do our best to ensure that every child, regardless of need, has the same play opportunities.

I read through the play strategy document, noting all the agencies involved in implementation, and I was a bit surprised that the Care Inspectorate was not mentioned. We would expect to see some of the new action plan highlighted in

the care standards for early education and childcare up to the age of 16 and for children in care homes, so that all agencies would have to rise to the challenges that the strategy sets out and which we all agree must be met.

For example, section 7 of the action plan sets out the outcome for “Nursery and School”:

“All children and young people enjoy high quality play opportunities, particularly outdoor free play in stimulating spaces with access to nature, on a daily basis in school, nursery and early learning and childcare.”

It is therefore surprising that there is no recommendation to review—perhaps it is coming; I would hope so—the care standards for early education and childcare up to the age of 16 or the care standards for children in care homes to ensure that they include the recommendation in section 7.

I looked up both sets of care standards in preparation for this debate. I found a brief, passing mention of play in the care standards for children in care homes and, equally, a brief, passing mention in subparagraphs of standards 3 and 5 of the national care standards for early education and childcare up to the age of 16. If the Scottish Government was serious about successfully implementing the strategy—I presume that it is—I would have thought that one of the main drivers to ensure full implementation would be a requirement in the care standards. Without such a requirement, nurseries, schools and care homes for children can very easily ignore any recommendation in the action plan for play indoors or outdoors.

As Jayne Baxter, Mary Fee and Richard Lyle highlighted, whether children are advantaged or deprived, urban or rural, they should all have access to modern, inclusive play facilities. However, the most recent Scottish household survey, which was published in August, revealed that although almost nine in 10 households have access to some form of play area, only around half have a park, playground or other open space within the local community.

The survey showed that deprived communities fare particularly badly, as others have mentioned, because not only do children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds have poorer access to play areas, but those that they could attend are widely perceived to be dangerous, with fewer than half of parents considering a park, games pitch or street as a safe area to travel to. In fact, more than two thirds of parents in the survey regard playgrounds as potential sites of bullying.

I was contacted recently by a parent in Argyll who was shocked to find out that, in schools with fewer than 50 pupils, there is no obligation to provide any playground supervision. Given the amount of play time that children spend in the

playground, I ask the Government to reflect on that situation and whether it is doing all that it can to ensure that every playground is safe, inclusive and monitored appropriately.

As Liz Smith stated, many local authorities are already committed to delivering play strategies. I think that it was James Dornan who mentioned that, in 2011, Glasgow City Council launched “Playing for Real”, which is a three-year plan with 15 aims that uses much the same language as the Scottish Government deploys in its action plan. Edinburgh also has a play strategy, as do Dundee and Aberdeen. It remains to be seen how such strategies will mesh with the new framework that we are discussing today.

It has been an interesting debate and many interesting issues have been raised. I put it on the record that it is nice to discuss the issue at hand rather than hear every speaker talking about independence. It is very refreshing. The Scottish Government’s strategy is admirable and many of the proposals, if properly implemented, have potential to do much good. We support the Government’s motion.

16:20

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): On independence, I am genuinely pleased that the minister has pressed the play button on the play strategy today, given that Scotland is on pause. I hope that other ministers will take note of that.

This afternoon’s debate on play has been a good one. It has given us the opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to play and play-based learning and education. We know that play can make a significant contribution to a child’s development. It can make a huge contribution to nursery education and a significant contribution to families. It can also aid and develop children by changing the nature of how they learn, not just in nursery education but in primaries 1 and 2.

When Labour was in power, we initiated a debate on play and the role that it can play in education, so our approach to children’s learning is now more about play-based development than about talking at children. During the debate last year on the national parenting strategy, Labour called on the Scottish Government to come forward with details of the role of play in that. We are pleased that we now have a play strategy and action plan—something that was also in Labour’s manifesto at the 2011 election.

The play strategy is effective in explaining what play is and why it matters. As the minister and other members mentioned, it rehearses the cognitive, social and physiological impact of play and the contents of article 31 of the UNCRC, which states that every child has the right to rest

and leisure and the right to engage in play and recreational activities. As Jayne Baxter said at the start of the debate, Labour agrees that play is vital to children's learning, development and wellbeing, and that Scotland needs an action plan that sets out specific actions, timescales and responsibilities for delivering support for play. Labour agrees that a collaborative, multi-agency approach to improving the life chances of all children is the right way forward and, like the minister, we appreciate the work of the play sector and congratulate it on helping to improve support for play.

I do not think that Labour would disagree with anything in the strategy, but suggestions have been made by members from all parties on what could be done to improve it. Mark McDonald mentioned "No ball games" signs. He is a decent footballer in the Scottish Parliament football team, and—who knows?—if it was not for those signs, he could have had a glittering football career or, failing that, played for Aberdeen. However, he made the serious point that, within reason and as long as children are safe, we should have a presumption against such signs.

The Conservatives and others talked about the need for targeted support for children with additional support needs, and Stewart Maxwell mentioned children with disabilities.

A point that came up time and again this afternoon is that the strategy could and should go further. One of the biggest challenges with regard to play is deprivation. As Mary Fee and Dick Lyle said, it is clear that poverty damages children within the home and can prevent them from benefiting from important early experiences. There is a substantial volume of evidence to suggest that access to high-quality play experiences from a very young age can support the healthy development of some of our most vulnerable children and go a significant way towards closing the gap in educational attainment. There are some good examples of that. James Dornan mentioned the Jeely Piece Club in his constituency, and I have heard a lot of good things about it over the years.

I therefore join Save the Children and Poverty Alliance, which provided the briefings for this debate, in urging the minister and the Scottish Government, in delivering the plan, to prioritise support for families that experience poverty and to join up commitments that were made in the parenting strategy to help families to provide a good home learning environment. Poverty places huge pressures on families and their ability to provide the kind of play experiences that benefit children. It is only right that we should provide them with the kind of support that allows play to be an equaliser among children rather than

something else that widens the gap between rich and poor.

This afternoon, it is important that we recognise, as many members have done, the contribution that has been made by groups of parents who fundraise and organise to build or improve play parks in their local communities. A number of suggestions have been made about how that could be improved, and there are certainly a number of good examples in my own area in Renfrewshire. Again, however, not every community necessarily has all the support that is required to help with fundraising expertise, and nor is the money available. That is especially true of those communities that are in areas of multiple deprivation. We need to address that point.

Although I welcome the focus on joined-up planning and training, it is important to note that many agencies are already working together informally and we need to review how much of a difference that will make on the ground. Mary Scanlon mentioned existing strategies, but we still need to take note of the concern.

We also need to recognise the wide importance of training. The only mention of initial training in play is in the domain of nursery and school. Knowledge of the importance of play must go much wider than school staff and early years practitioners. We need to do something on that as well. For example, courses for social workers, residential social workers, and play workers who might never work in a school or a nursery are also in need of review, and I hope that the minister and the Scottish Government will consider that when considering delivery of the plan. Ken Macintosh made the general point very well when he said that play development should not be left simply to the play sector.

Probably the most challenging and serious issue, which has come up in a number of contributions this afternoon, including that of Anne McTaggart, is that of resources. I simply ask the minister: where is the strategy for renewing play areas backed up by resources? I would certainly push for properly resourced environments for children and young people, as I am sure we all would. Will the Scottish Government add that to the existing budget? Will it give cash to local authorities to improve tired and worn play areas?

Mark McDonald: I appreciate the point that the member is making, but he will recognise that finite resources are available. The point that I made in my speech is that we need to look at ways of co-operating beyond the public sector. For example, we could consider sponsorship of play parks and equipment. We also need to look very carefully at the amount of money that is being charged by some of the companies that provide play equipment, particularly specialised play

equipment. Such equipment for children with disabilities, for example, can often be prohibitively expensive.

Neil Bibby: We need to look at all the issues that Mark McDonald has just raised, but there is still a role for public sector investment and we need to find the appropriate money. The word “ambitious” has been used this afternoon, and that is quite right. We should be ambitious about play and the play strategy, but the reality is that a strategy for play will only be as ambitious as the investment that is set aside for it.

We know how important play is in making a significant contribution to a child's development. We also know that there are challenges to ensuring that every child benefits from play in the early years. Labour welcomes the introduction of the play strategy and action plan as a step forward. It is important that actions, timescales and responsibilities for delivering support for play are set out. However, as I have just said, it is equally important that adequate resources and training are made available to ensure that the ambition of the strategy is made a reality. We also need to ensure that support is targeted at the most deprived areas, where families often need help to provide the sort of environment and experiences that help children to develop and progress. That is the least our children deserve.

16:30

Aileen Campbell: I am genuinely pleased that we have had this opportunity to debate play and its contribution to childhood and the wellbeing of Scotland.

Ken Macintosh made a nice point when he recognised that we launched the play strategy during the longest play day back in the summer and that we managed to capture the playful activities that are going on around Scotland today when we talked about what children are doing to celebrate Hallowe'en.

I am also pleased that members support the action that we are taking to invest in Scotland's greatest resource, which is our children. We all want Scotland to be the best place to grow up and we all want our children to have the best start in life. We have debated today the fundamental role that play has in contributing to that vision.

Jayne Baxter outlined the multiple hats that she wears as a spokesperson for Labour, an MSP and, more important, as granny to her grandchildren, who enjoy the muddy puddles. She outlined the importance that play has in ensuring that we give all our children the very best start in life.

We also got an image of a young George Adam playing on the Gleniffer braes getting a skint knee but growing into the strong and resilient MSP we know today. I thank him for that image. Mary Scanlon revealed a hidden talent for tying knots.

Many members raised the issue of funding and the challenges that exist across the country. I will outline some of the Scottish Government's investment in play. We have invested over £7 million in play over the past five years through our go play and go2play programmes. That investment has built capacity in the play sector and given it tools to evaluate and articulate the benefits of play. That is about leaving a sustainable legacy.

At the halfway point of the current go2play programme, 12,500 children have experienced quality play supported by play rangers and 150 volunteers—mostly parents—who have been involved in building community links and taking individual steps on the pathway to employment. That programme has also attracted an additional quarter of a million pounds to support play.

This is an important statistic on which to reflect, given some of the comments that have been made. Of the children supported through go2play, 60 per cent live in the 15 per cent most deprived areas; 17 per cent have additional support needs; and 12 per cent are from black and minority ethnic groups. Go2play opportunities delivered by many other practitioners show that the approach is inclusive. By building on that we can ensure that many more children can participate in and benefit from play.

On that note, as I said in my opening remarks, I appreciate the Conservative amendment and the comments from Mark McDonald, who talked about the innovative approaches of Kool Kidz, SensationALL and other facilities that host special requirements sessions. Those interesting ideas and innovative approaches can be shared. He also described eloquently the very real challenges facing families who have a child with additional support needs. We need to work hard to deliver on that strategy for those families.

Stewart Maxwell was correct to point out the excellent work that goes on in the Isobel Mair school, which I have visited. I visited it just before it opened and I know that it is a truly fantastic and phenomenal facility. The debate allows us to talk about such good practice much more openly.

A big theme today has been that play often does not need significant resources, but rather what is needed is a change in culture. Ken Macintosh used the example of the Wendy house and the tree house to show that children do not necessarily need expensive toys and that we should never just assume that we know what

children want. We need to engage with children and understand what their needs are.

During my time as planning minister, I was impressed by the charrette process that took place throughout different communities in Scotland. That process, which included children, involved engaging deeply and meaningfully with communities to get them to imagine what their communities could and should look like. Others such as Planning Aid for Scotland are also important partners in changing culture to ensure that our places have spaces for children to use and enjoy.

I really liked what Fiona McLeod said about her son coming home. If he was dirty, she knew that he had had a good time—the dirtier the better, she said. Other members have spoken about jumping in puddles, and Christian Allard spoke about his time in rural France. Free outdoor play has been mentioned.

James Dornan spoke about the social inequalities that exist in some of our most deprived communities. The message that play does not need to be expensive is important and highlights the significance of our play talk read campaign. James Dornan mentioned the Jeely Piece Club and we have other partners across Scotland—including the Scottish Out of School Care Network, the Scottish Pre-school Play Association and PEEK—who are doing fantastic things to support families and build up parents' self-esteem. What matters is not how much money a parent has but what they do with their children.

Fiona McLeod talked about intergenerational mixing, and other members have spoken about their own childhood experiences. During the time that I spent at the youth club that my mum ran, we had to perform pantomimes for the local residential group. That was a valuable and enriching experience not only for us, as young people, but for the older residents who watched our performances—even though they might have been a bit ropey at times.

George Adam and Richard Lyle spoke about the power of play to bring families together. Whether it involves the games in the picture from 1560—I think that that is what Stewart Maxwell said—or a Nintendo Wii, as suggested by George Adam, play is never static. Mary Fee and Richard Lyle also talked about the positive impacts of play on our communities.

Clare Adamson made some interesting points about the work that she carries out in connection with ROSPA and the fantastic work that is going on in Wishaw and throughout her constituency.

Mary Scanlon mentioned the good work that is carried out in hospital in relation to play. In response to some of the points that she made

about the Care Inspectorate, I advise her that we intend to include the Care Inspectorate in the implementation of our strategy.

A helpful development in changing the culture across Scotland is the new professional development award in strategic planning for play, which aims to start that process. The Scottish Qualifications Authority is aiming it at wider communities and policy makers who have an impact on children's play, including architects, planners, health workers and local authorities. That professional development opportunity can help to make play a reality for more children, families and communities and is a helpful response to people who want the play strategy to be about more than just the play sector.

As part of the go2play investment, a play strategy implementation fund of £90,000 will be available to charities and play projects between January 2014 and April 2015 to support implementation of the action plan through practical and innovative approaches to play. In addition, the Big Lottery Fund is a key investor in and supporter of play through a number of its programmes.

Liz Smith said that we should not forget Scotland's fantastic older young people in the strategy. I absolutely agree with that. Youth work and community learning and development organisations and services are making a huge contribution to young people's access to play and leisure activities.

Liz Smith: I am grateful to the minister for acknowledging that. As I mentioned in my speech, a lot of good work has already been done. Can she confirm that the Scottish Government is in a position to make that coherent and bring it all together? A lot of cross-party groups have done significant work on this.

Aileen Campbell: Absolutely. The strategy is about pulling together all the different themes that are already in existence. As I said in my opening remarks, we are not starting from scratch on the issue; an enormous amount of good work is going on. On Saturday, I will attend Youth Scotland's 80th anniversary celebrations. I know from the volunteers whom it helps to empower about the advice that it offers on insurance and other risks such as those that Liz Smith described in her opening remarks. Such organisations are doing great work on which we will build the outcomes of our play strategy.

My colleague Shona Robison is developing our forthcoming youth sport strategy, which will set out what children and young people have told us will get them involved and keep them engaged in sport and physical activity, thereby helping to provide a lasting legacy from the Commonwealth games.

When earlier today I met children from St Athanasius primary school in my constituency, I asked them what they would like from the play strategy and what they like to do in their spare time and I was pleased that some of the girls said that they like playing football. As a former centre-half, I am disappointed that Neil Bibby and Mark McDonald have never asked me to dust down my football boots and to join them in a game of football—

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Minister, you should be winding up.

Aileen Campbell: Many members also raised the issue of child poverty. I absolutely agree that child poverty is an abomination in a country as resource rich as Scotland. Next year, the Scottish Government will publish a revised child poverty strategy with the aim of improving children's wellbeing and life chances. As a Government, we remain as committed as ever to that aim. We do not want to see any child being born into, or condemned to, a life of poverty. We understand that poverty undermines our best efforts to support parents. Our work in the play strategy should be seen as an important way in which we can tackle social inequalities.

I also absolutely agree that the strategy needs to complement the national parenting strategy in terms of its benefits for parents, carers and practitioners.

In conclusion, it has been a pleasure to lead the debate on the national play strategy, which I am glad has cross-party support. We want to make Scotland the best place in the world to grow up, and the play strategy will firmly help us to go down that route towards achieving that ambitious aim for children and young people in Scotland.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

16:41

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of a Parliamentary Bureau motion. I ask Joe FitzPatrick to move motion S4M-08118, on committee membership.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that Cara Hilton be appointed to replace Jayne Baxter as a member of the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee.—[*Joe FitzPatrick.*]

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

Motion without Notice

16:41

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): As we have completed this afternoon's business ahead of schedule, I am minded to accept a motion without notice from Joe FitzPatrick, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, that decision time be brought forward to now.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees, under Rule 11.2.4 of Standing Orders that Decision Time be brought forward to 4.41 pm.—[*Joe FitzPatrick.*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:41

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S4M-08099.1, in the name of Liz Smith, which seeks to amend motion S4M-08099, in the name of Aileen Campbell, on the play strategy action plan, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-8099, in the name of Aileen Campbell, on the play strategy action plan, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament welcomes the action plan, Play Strategy for Scotland: Our Vision, which sets out specific actions, timescales and responsibilities for delivering support for play; agrees that play helps to ensure that children have the best possible start in life and are ready to succeed and that it can make them successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens; further agrees that play is absolutely vital to a child's wellbeing, that it contributes to the development of physical, cognitive, emotional and social skills and is an important tool in tackling poverty and health inequalities; believes that it is therefore vital that all children and young people should have the opportunity to play every day; supports the collaborative multiagency approach to improving the life chances of all children as the right way forward, and congratulates the work of the play sector in helping to improve support for play but recognises the concerns being expressed by KIDS and Capability Scotland that there should be additional focus on the needs of disabled children so that they 'have the same play opportunities as their non-disabled friends'.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-08118, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on committee membership, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that Cara Hilton be appointed to replace Jayne Baxter as a member of the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 16:42.

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