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Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Wednesday 9 September 2015

Session 4

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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 9 September 2015

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

Portfolio Question Time

Finance, Constitution and Economy

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio questions. To get as many people in as possible, I would prefer short and succinct questions and answers where possible, please.

Draft Budget (Publication)

1. Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government for what reason it is delaying publishing details of the draft budget. (S4O-04548)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy (John Swinney): The United Kingdom spending review will not be published until 25 November 2015, therefore we will not know what block grant is available to the Scottish ministers and delivery partners until that date.

Under the current devolution settlement, around 80 per cent of the Scottish budget is directly determined by decisions taken in Westminster and the application of the Barnett formula. That means that we have no alternative but to await the outcome of the UK spending review before publishing the draft budget. That has, of course, happened before. The Scottish draft budget was delayed, with the agreement of the Scottish Parliament, at both of the previous two UK spending reviews, in 2007 and 2010.

Scotland is not unique in being placed in this situation. Wales and Northern Ireland face the same problem. That is why on 21 August Jane Hutt, Arlene Foster and I jointly wrote to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to express our dissatisfaction at his failure to consult the devolved Administrations before the chancellor's announcement.

Siobhan McMahon: I am sure that the cabinet secretary agrees that any delay in publishing the details of the draft budget will have a serious knock-on effect on our local authorities and other public service partners. I understand that the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities said:

"in terms of financial planning and decision making"

the timescale

"is not the ideal situation".

It is vital that there is sufficient time for proper scrutiny of the draft budget proposals, particularly now that the Scottish Government will be able to set a Scottish rate of income tax for the first time. What reassurance and certainty can the cabinet secretary provide to people who deliver our crucial public services such as schools, hospitals and social care, who are being kept in the dark and are unable to plan their budgets for next year?

John Swinney: I acknowledge that the situation is not ideal, but it is not a situation of my making. As I said, we depend on the UK Government's decisions for around 80 per cent of the Scottish budget, so it would be premature and foolish to publish our budget before having that information. I am pretty sure that that position is understood by our social partners. Indeed, I welcome COSLA's approach in this respect. I thought that COSLA's response to the likely timescale for the budget was entirely pragmatic and understandable.

Parliamentary scrutiny is a matter for parliamentary committees and is not for me to determine, but, as I have always done throughout my tenure as finance secretary, I will make myself available to interact with parliamentary committees in any way they choose as they scrutinise the Government's budget.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleton) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that the situation fundamentally shows that the Westminster budget system is hopelessly out of date, lacks respect for the Scottish Parliament and other Parliaments and needs to be seriously improved?

John Swinney: It is up to Westminster to decide on its budget process; that is not a matter for me. However, a key point that I make to Mr Mason is that the situation demonstrates that the scrutiny over financial issues that is habitually exercised in this Parliament is significantly greater and more thorough—I make no complaint about that; it is a good thing—than is the case in Westminster. The arrangements are entirely out of kilter because of that, and I hope that we can make available as much opportunity as we can do for this Parliament to scrutinise the Government's budget, when it is published.

Havelock Europa (Potential Job Losses)

2. Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the potential economic impact on the area, what discussions it is having with Havelock Europa regarding potential job losses in Fife. (S4O-04549)

The Minister for Business, Energy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): I share the member's concern regarding developments in Havelock

Europa and their potential impact on employees and their families and communities across Fife.

I can confirm that when the announcement was made, we immediately contacted the company to offer support for affected employees through our partnership action for continuing employment initiative—PACE. Our main economic development agency in the area, Scottish Enterprise, met the company on Thursday 3 September to discuss support for the business, to minimise any negative impact of the job losses.

Claire Baker: I welcome the minister's response and the support that has been offered. Havelock Europa's announcement is another major blow to the Fife economy, following the recent closure of Tesco in Kirkcaldy, the closure of Tullis Russell and the job losses at BiFab. I am aware that the Scottish Government has been working closely with Fife Council in establishing a task force to deal with job losses at Tullis Russell in particular. How many of those who have lost their jobs in Fife have managed to secure further employment or training, and how much of the money that has been earmarked for the task force has been allocated?

Fergus Ewing: I spoke this morning to David Ritchie, the chief executive officer of Havelock Europa, and he confirmed that the redundancies will take place in October. He highlighted the fact that the company currently has seven young people serving out their apprenticeships and said that they will not be affected.

I confirm that the Tullis Russell task force has met on five occasions—each meeting has been chaired by the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy and has been attended by representatives of Fife Council. The task force brings together all partners to support economic growth and respond to the serious challenges that Claire Baker rightly identifies.

An initial £6 million of financial support has been announced, and the task force has agreed indicative allocations for four strands: £1.5 million for supporting the workforce; £2 million for supporting business growth; £250,000 for community regeneration; and £2.25 million for business infrastructure and investment.

It is too early to say how many employees will have found work, but PACE statistics overall in Scotland state that 72 per cent of people who are made redundant find work or other positive opportunities within six months.

Scottish Rate of Income Tax

3. Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when it will take a decision on setting the Scottish rate of income tax. (S4O-04550)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy (John Swinney): The Scottish Government will propose a Scottish rate of income tax as part of its budget-setting process for 2016-17. I am considering the implications for the Scottish budget's timetable presented by the announcement that the United Kingdom spending review will not report until late November.

Anne McTaggart: *The Sunday Times* reported a devolved tax expert, Sharon Blain, as saying that many Scottish firms offering jobs to people in other parts of the UK are concerned that they cannot make assurances about tax rates. Can that evidence influence a decision being made earlier?

John Swinney: I think that people understand that tax decisions are taken at the appropriate time in the budget cycle of Administrations. I refer the member to all the reasons that I rehearsed with Siobhan McMahon a moment ago, such as the fact that 80 per cent of our budget comes in the form of the block grant from the UK Government. Equally, there are decisions that complement that in relation to taxes under our control, which people would expect to be viewed in the round, as part of the budget process.

We cannot compartmentalise these decisions. There is an interrelationship between the tax that we raise and the block grant that we receive from the United Kingdom Government. It is eminently sensible to undertake the process as a joint exercise, as part of the budget-setting process. That is exactly what the Scottish Government intends to do.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The Scottish Government's stated ambition is to make Scotland the most competitive part of the United Kingdom as a place to do business. Does the cabinet secretary agree that setting an income tax rate for Scotland that is higher than that in the rest of the UK would be incompatible with that ambition?

John Swinney: The Government will take a decision on the rate of income tax that is applied in Scotland based on a range of considerations. Part of that discussion will be about the competitiveness of Scotland as a place to do business.

Of course, a range of factors influence and affect competitiveness. I would argue that the way in which we are able to integrate the economic development learning and support that is undertaken by the Scottish Government and other organisations works in a complementary way to ensure that we are an attractive place in which to invest. That is evidenced by the foreign direct investment assessment that is made by Ernst and Young, which regularly shows Scotland to be one

of the key attractive destinations for foreign direct investment in the United Kingdom, behind only London and the south-east of England.

A variety of factors comes into the question. The Government will be mindful of all the issues when we come to our conclusions on the rate of income tax to apply.

European System of Accounts 2010

4. Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how it is addressing the concerns raised by the Office for National Statistics regarding the transition to the European system of accounts 2010 and whether local authorities will be fully compensated for any additional costs for their programmes. (S4O-04551)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy (John Swinney): I provided updates to Parliament on 2 February and 31 July regarding the ONS review of the Aberdeen western peripheral route. The ONS concluded that the AWPR should be classified to the public sector under the new Eurostat rules and guidance, which took effect in September last year. I instructed the Scottish Futures Trust to engage with the ONS to clarify interpretation of the rules that underpinned its decision and to consider the scope for making contractual changes to the project that could secure the ONS's agreement that its reclassification to the private sector would be appropriate.

I am grateful to the ONS for prioritising that work. It has now advised that as a result of the SFT's further engagement on the substance of its July decision, it wishes to refer a number of points to Eurostat for further consideration. That reflects the complexity of the issues with which we are dealing. Therefore, it will not be possible for the SFT to submit proposals for revisions to the AWPR contract until Eurostat has had the opportunity to respond to the points for clarification that are being raised with it, which is likely to take several weeks.

I previously advised Parliament that there would, while the ONS is undertaking its review, be some delays in reaching financial close on a number of projects within the hub programme because of the need to reflect on the ONS's findings. In April, I authorised the SFT to implement initial changes to the hub model that are aimed at reinforcing a private-sector classification while recognising that further changes might be needed after the ONS reports. That work is proceeding well. The SFT has submitted proposals to the ONS, and it is likely that the ONS will be in a position to respond by late October or November.

I have given careful consideration to whether hub projects that are currently in the pipeline should, in the interim, be advised that they can reach financial close in advance of the ONS responding. In doing so, I recognise and share the concerns of project partners and other stakeholders. The Government remains committed to the hub programme. However, I must also take into account the risks that could arise as a result of taking projects to financial close in advance of the ONS reaching a conclusion. As a result, I do not expect it to be possible for those projects to reach financial close over the coming weeks. The SFT will engage closely with project partners to consider the implications for them and I will, of course, keep the position under close review.

Elaine Murray: I hear what the cabinet secretary says, but I do not take any comfort from it. Dumfries and Galloway Council has contractors that are waiting to sign contracts through the Scottish Futures Trust for the schools of the future programme, for example. One of those projects was supposed to start in the autumn of this year.

Can the cabinet secretary provide any comfort to local authorities regarding when the problems will be resolved? What will happen if the delays create additional costs that local authorities did not budget for in their original calculations?

John Swinney: I hope that Dr Murray understands that the decisions that we have to consider are a consequence of changes to the budgeting system that arose while the projects were under way. Many of the projects had been under development for some time. A range of SFT projects have reached financial close—Inverness College, the City of Glasgow College and the M8 improvements, for example—and have run their course, but we now have a new assessment of the rules that have emerged from the ONS and we have to comply with those rules.

As I indicated in my substantive answer, we now seek clarification from the ONS on some of those points; such is their complexity that the ONS seeks guidance from Eurostat, which supervises such issues across all European jurisdictions. Of course, other European jurisdictions are similarly affected by the decisions with which we are wrestling. I assure Dr Murray and all project partners that the Government is doing everything it can to resolve the issues timeously so that we can reap the benefits of the significant impact on the Scottish economy that comes from a strong pipeline of construction projects.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab): My understanding is that the new sick children's hospital in Edinburgh and the Lethian health centre bundle reached financial close between September last year and the ONS ruling. Will both those projects be delayed? What

will be the financial implications for those and other projects if agreement cannot be reached with the ONS and Eurostat?

John Swinney: The new sick children's hospital has reached financial close and it is proceeding as a project. I expect that the ONS will review the classification of the sick children's hospital as part of its forward work programme.

The Lothian health centre bundle has not reached financial close, so clearly it has been affected by the circumstances that I have outlined to Parliament.

The Government is, through the work of the SFT—it is occupying a significant amount of the time and focus of the SFT—trying to resolve the issues to enable us to pursue the pipeline of projects as quickly as possible.

Welfare Powers (Devolution)

5. Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what recent discussions the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding the devolution of welfare powers. (S4O-04552)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy (John Swinney): I, other ministers and Scottish Government officials have regular discussions with the UK Government about the devolution of social security. I met the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on Friday to discuss a range of issues to do with the wider transfer of powers. As Parliament has, we have made it clear that we do not believe that the Scotland Bill implements the Smith Commission recommendations in full, and that improvements should be made to those clauses at the report stage in the House of Commons.

Roderick Campbell: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer. Does he agree with former Prime Minister Gordon Brown's reported remarks that full implementation of the Smith Commission's welfare proposals is

"being held back by the 'dogmatism and resistance of Iain Duncan Smith's Department for Work and Pensions, which seem determined for there to be a blanket imposition of welfare cuts across the entire UK'?"

John Swinney: I certainly acknowledge that co-operation from the Department for Work and Pensions is essential for the successful devolution of welfare powers. The Scottish Government has made a wide range of information requests to the DWP over a sustained period to assist us in implementation of the powers and responsibilities once they are legislated for. We are still waiting for that information to be returned to us. I encourage the DWP to co-operate actively with us in

providing the information to enable us to exercise those responsibilities. That is crucial because it will enable us to make different and distinctive decisions on welfare from those of the United Kingdom, which is what people would expect from a process of devolution.

Lewis Macdonald (North East Scotland) (Lab): The cabinet secretary will know that, in addition to co-operation between Governments, the process of welfare devolution will also require co-operation between Parliaments. Does he agree that the model of a joint committee on welfare devolution is the right way forward and is a model that will be accountable to this Parliament and elsewhere on completion of the process of the current Scotland Bill?

John Swinney: Issues of parliamentary scrutiny are not really the business of ministers. It is up to Parliament to decide what it considers to be the most appropriate arrangements to make. Ministers in this Administration are certainly prepared to be held fully accountable to Parliament for the actions that we take in exercising our responsibilities, and we will do that in all circumstances.

Business Rates (Review)

6. Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to review business rates. (S4O-04553)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy (John Swinney): The Scottish Government is keeping the business rates framework under close and active review ahead of the 2017 revaluation, building on our 20-point action plan to deliver improvements for ratepayers.

Scotland already delivers the most competitive business tax environment in the United Kingdom. We are funding around £598 million of rates relief this year, including the small business bonus scheme, which alone is estimated to reduce or remove rates bills for more than two in every five rateable premises.

Jayne Baxter: I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer. Many people from the retail and hospitality sectors who are based in towns including Kirkcaldy, Cowdenbeath, Dunfermline, Alloa and Perth tell me that business rates are a major challenge to their remaining in the town centre. If the cabinet secretary is serious about town centre renewal, will he agree to look at business rates for town centres?

John Swinney: Jayne Baxter should look at the number of businesses in town centres that are benefiting from the Scottish Government's existing rates relief regime. I will cite one example. Following the closure of the Vion factory, one suggestion that was made to me on promoting the

recovery of the Broxburn area was the removal of business rates for companies in Broxburn High Street. When I investigated the matter, I found that only one business in that street was paying business rates, and all the rest were getting business rates relief.

There is extensive support for town centres as a consequence of the Government's reduction in business rates. To be honest, I have never found the Labour Party to be particularly supportive of the small business bonus scheme; it has never been immediately obvious to me that it is something that the Labour Party values. If there is a change of heart going on in the party, that is of course welcome. I assure Jayne Baxter that there are extensive benefits for small companies the length and breadth of the country from the Government's business rates regime.

Private Finance (Public Projects)

7. Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy will provide an update on what the cost will be of the recent ruling by the Office for National Statistics regarding the use of private finance for public projects. (S4O-04554)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy (John Swinney): In my earlier answer to Elaine Murray I went through a significant amount of the detail on that question, and I do not propose to repeat it.

I reiterate to Parliament that the conclusions of the Office for National Statistics will have no impact on the timetable for or cost of the Aberdeen western peripheral route project itself. More generally, as I noted in my earlier response, the Government and the Scottish Futures Trust will engage closely with project partners to consider the implications for them of the latest developments.

Ken Macintosh: I thank the cabinet secretary for his answer, although there is perhaps an issue for the Presiding Officer to consider. Although I am very grateful to the cabinet secretary for his detailed answer in response to the question from my colleague Elaine Murray, the amount of detail perhaps requires a parliamentary statement rather than just a parliamentary question. Certainly there are wider questions about the scrutiny and accountability of the Scottish Futures Trust—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: And your question is?

Ken Macintosh: The cabinet secretary will be aware that Crookfur primary school in my constituency and Barrhead school in another part of the local authority area will now be delayed

because of his decision. The Eastwood health centre, although it is going ahead, will have to have its contract renegotiated.

Can the cabinet secretary promise the local authority, having encouraged it to go down the route of private finance through the Scottish Futures Trust, that there will be no additional cost to it as a result of the ruling?

John Swinney: First, I will address the procedural points that Ken Macintosh raised. In my answer to a parliamentary question on 31 July, I indicated that I would come back to Parliament with a statement once the session had resumed and when I had sufficient detail to hand. I do not have to hand all the detail that would inform that statement, but in order to give a substantial response to a question that has been properly lodged in Parliament I gave the volume of detail that I thought that was appropriate. It remains central to my plans to come back to Parliament with a statement once the further detail is to hand, and I will do that.

On the particular points that Mr Macintosh raised with regard to specific projects, we will—as I indicated—remain close to individual projects to discuss the implications of the ruling. We want to resolve the issues as quickly and timeously as possible, and we will work with individual bodies to ensure that that is the case.

Tourism (Greater Glasgow and Clyde Valley)

8. Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to increase tourism in the greater Glasgow and Clyde valley area. (S4O-04555)

The Minister for Business, Energy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): We work with VisitScotland and the industry to increase tourism throughout the country, including in the greater Glasgow and Clyde valley area.

Gil Paterson: The minister may be aware that a group in Clydebank in my constituency is endeavouring to make contact with the owners of the QE2 to discuss the famous Clyde-built ship's return to her home. If the ship was to become available, would the Government provide assistance to the group to bring the QE2 back to Scotland and more particularly to the Clyde?

Fergus Ewing: I know that Mr Paterson and other MSPs—in the Labour Party, for example—have pursued the matter. I am pleased to say that representatives from the Scottish Government, Scottish Enterprise, VisitScotland and Scottish Development International already sit on an officer working group that is chaired by Inverclyde Council to examine the possibility of bringing the QE2 back to the Clyde.

I should say that West Dunbartonshire Council is also represented on the group. The group is investigating the availability of the liner. Only once that has been ascertained and its condition taken into account could a feasibility study be undertaken of potential alternative uses.

Higher Education (Tuition Fees)

9. Linda Fabiani (East Kilbride) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what cumulative loss to the block grant has resulted from the United Kingdom Government's policy on tuition fees in higher education. (S4O-04556)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy (John Swinney): The Scottish Government believes that access to education should be based on the ability of a student to learn and not on their ability to pay. Although it is clear that UK Government policy decisions that result in reductions in spending in England impact the Scottish budget as a whole, the processes that are in place for calculating the Scottish block do not allow us to identify the direct impact of changes in one specific policy area. However, with a reduction in teaching grant spend in England of over £3 billion in real terms since 2011-12, the overall impact on the Scottish block grant has obviously been significant. For illustrative purposes, a population share of £3 billion would represent £298 million.

Linda Fabiani: Does the cabinet secretary agree that that shows that, in a range of policy areas, a policy decision in England and Wales—even if it is opposed in Scotland, such as that on tuition fees—can have a material effect and impact on Scotland's finances?

John Swinney: That is absolutely the case. One more recent example is the United Kingdom Government's proposals for an apprenticeship levy. We do not have all the details of that, but I suspect that it will shift the burden of payment for apprenticeships from the public purse to individual companies and, as a consequence, the relevant budget in the UK will be reduced and there will be a consequential effect on the Scottish budget. That is one more reason why it would be folly for me to bring forward a budget before I see the outcome of the UK spending review in November. All those factors are relevant, and Linda Fabiani makes a substantial point in that respect.

Scottish Futures Trust (Meetings)

10. Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government when the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy last met the Scottish Futures Trust and what issues were discussed. (S4O-04557)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy (John Swinney): I met the Scottish Futures Trust yesterday to receive an update on its engagement with the Office for National Statistics.

Neil Bibby: I acknowledge the cabinet secretary's answers on the issue earlier. He will be aware that pupils and staff at St Fergus primary school in Paisley are currently waiting for the Scottish Futures Trust to deliver on its commitment to fund 50 per cent of a new school building. Both the local council and I want a new school to be in place as soon as possible. I therefore ask Mr Swinney to put on the record when the SFT is expected to meet its commitment to a new St Fergus school. Failing that, given that St Fergus primary school is in the most deprived community in the whole of Scotland, could the Scottish Government not provide £2.5 million from other capital sources for that vital project?

John Swinney: The answer to Mr Bibby's first point is that the Scottish Futures Trust will proceed with the issues as soon as we can resolve the wider classification issues with the Office for National Statistics and now with Eurostat.

In relation to Mr Bibby's second point, obviously a substantial allocation of capital expenditure is made available by the Government each year to local authorities. If memory serves me right, it totals in excess of £570 million in the current financial year. Obviously, local authorities are in a position to take forward the capital projects that they choose to take forward.

Draft Budget (Timetable)

11. James Kelly (Rutherglen) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what the implications are of a curtailed timetable for consideration of the Scottish budget. (S4O-04558)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy (John Swinney): Despite the implications of the 25 November United Kingdom spending review date being a full five weeks later than the equivalent 2010 publication, the Scottish Government and the national assemblies in Northern Ireland and Wales were given no advance notice of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's intentions.

In the coming weeks, I will continue to press the UK Government for early engagement on the content of the spending review and I will consult the Finance Committee to agree a mutually acceptable timetable for this year's Scottish budget process that balances the need for the Government to develop robust and credible

budget proposals and the need for Parliament to have adequate opportunity to scrutinise them.

James Kelly: As Siobhan McMahon noted earlier, the curtailed timetable for publication of the budget puts pressure on financial planners at local council level. That will be compounded in areas such as South Lanarkshire by the cumulative effect of three years of cuts of £80 million under Mr Swinney's budgets. Will the cabinet secretary be getting out of Edinburgh to meet councils and see at first hand the impact of previous allocations so that his financial planning can be better informed and it can ensure a fair allocation for South Lanarkshire?

John Swinney: If Mr Kelly cares to peruse the Government's website, he will see that I get out of Edinburgh quite a lot. I was in Lochboisdale on Saturday on Government business; I was in Ullapool the other week; I was in Oban; and I will be in Coatbridge the week after—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We do not need the full itinerary, cabinet secretary.

John Swinney: I was in South Lanarkshire not that long ago. I am very happy to get out and about and understand the issues that affect local authorities. I had a productive meeting with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities just last week on issues in connection with the Government's budget.

Growth Fund (Small and Medium-sized Enterprises)

12. Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government how many small and medium-sized enterprises it expects to help through the proposed growth fund. (S4O-04559)

The Minister for Business, Energy and Tourism (Fergus Ewing): We expect that a very significant number of small businesses will be helped.

Mary Fee: I thank the minister for that very short and precise answer. Will the growth fund include microbusinesses? What allocation of funds will be set aside for microbusinesses?

Fergus Ewing: I assure the member that the fund is intended for small businesses and, of course, microbusinesses are small businesses. The fund will provide microcredit finance up to £25,000, loans of up to £100,000 and equity investment of up to £2 million. It will support public and private sector partners to deliver that finance, generating a minimum of £100 million into the SME finance market over the next three years. That is a good thing, and I look forward to working with all members to make sure that we get the maximum possible benefit therefrom.

Elgin High School Replacement

13. Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy has had with Moray Council and Elgin high school parent council regarding delays to the replacement of Elgin high school. (S4O-04560)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy (John Swinney): The Scottish Futures Trust, on behalf of the Scottish ministers, has engaged closely with Moray Council and other project partners to ensure that all possible steps are taken to progress the delivery of Elgin high school.

Mary Scanlon: I thank the cabinet secretary for his response and the explanation given to the three earlier questions on the issue; I was not to know that they were to be asked.

The new Elgin high school enjoys cross-party support on Moray Council and the need for a replacement was identified 13 years ago. The school is now well past its serviceable life. The uncertainty has consequences for the budget that has been agreed with the contractor and for the maintenance costs of the current building. When does the cabinet secretary think that the project could start? What support will he give should the council face higher costs?

John Swinney: I have already indicated to Mary Scanlon and other members of Parliament that the Government will remain close to individual projects as we try to resolve the issues that affect all of them.

I should point out that many projects are not straightforward. The Elgin high school project was supposed to reach financial close in March 2014, but that was put back to June 2014 because the school roll had to be increased and there was a school estate review in Moray Council, which extended the timescale. Had the school proceeded when it was given the commitment of resources in September 2012, we might not be facing the issues that we are facing today in relation to the school.

I have had a letter from the leader of Moray Council and other political leaders in Moray. I have also had a letter from the chair of the parent council. I welcome those letters and will respond to them, setting out the details that I have shared with Mary Scanlon in Parliament today.

Economy (Performance)

14. Christina McKelvie (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how the Scottish economy is

performing when measured against those of European Union member states. (S4O-04561)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy (John Swinney): Scotland's economic growth last year was more than twice the European Union average growth rate and Scotland is outperforming the EU on a number of labour market indicators.

Christina McKelvie: Today, the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, gave his state of the union address. He talked about the collective responsibility of all European member states, not just in a moral sense but in an economic sense, and he highlighted that Greece, Italy and Hungary should not take the burden of the crisis that all European member states face right now. He also announced a £1.8 billion emergency fund—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please ask a question.

Christina McKelvie: —to help African countries to stabilise and to fight people smugglers. What action will Scotland take in ensuring that our economic growth is Europe's economic growth and that it helps to address some of the crises and challenges that all member states are facing?

John Swinney: The developments that we can take forward in the Scottish economy and the way in which we can include opportunities for everyone who lives and works in Scotland to contribute to our economic wellbeing will be the most significant contribution that we can make to the European growth agenda.

HMNB Clyde

15. Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con):

To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the economic benefits of HMNB Clyde being designated the United Kingdom's submarine centre of specialisation, with a projected increase of 1,500 jobs by 2022. (S4O-04562)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy (John Swinney): It is not possible for the Scottish Government to undertake a meaningful assessment of the decision to bring the new Astute class submarine fleet into service at HMNB Clyde until the UK Government sets out a detailed timetable and a breakdown of the Royal Navy personnel and others, including any dependants, who are expected to transfer to Scotland. Although we support investment in conventional defence capabilities, we are sceptical about the UK Government's projections for future personnel numbers at Faslane given that previous promises of a major uplift in the number of Army

personnel based in Scotland and investment in the defence estate, such as the promised new barracks at Kirknewton, have not materialised.

Annabel Goldie: I know that Mr Swinney in character is not instinctively either churlish or acrid, so I hope that he can bring himself to share the predictably very positive local reaction to the proposal to upgrade Faslane, which is a vital economic driver in the local Dunbartonshire economy.

In order that maximum benefit can be derived from the £500 million investment by the UK Government, will the Scottish Government engage in discussions with the Ministry of Defence and the two local councils—West Dunbartonshire Council and Argyll and Bute Council—to ensure that road infrastructure and public transport are adequate to meet increased demands and that training and job opportunities for young people at Faslane are maximised?

John Swinney: I am glad that Miss Goldie thinks that she knows me so well. Some of my colleagues are disputing her assessment of me—they obviously spend more time with me.

I have made our position clear and Miss Goldie knows it well. We are perfectly happy to support investment in conventional defence capabilities, but we need the detail to be spelled out. To do that, we need the MOD to set out the information, and we will look at it and consider it. To be blunt, I have never found the MOD particularly open with its information in the great spirit of intergovernmental working. It is never terribly open about things. If Miss Goldie, in the inner channels that she has with the Conservative Government, can open up the MOD to dialogue, I will be happy to talk back.

Social Responsibility Levy

16. Kenny MacAskill (Edinburgh Eastern)

(SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what its plans are for the social responsibility levy. (S4O-04563)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy (John Swinney): The Scottish Government's position has always been that we will not introduce the social responsibility levy during the lifetime of the public health supplement and until the economic circumstances are correct. The public health supplement has now concluded and the Government will consider in due course whether there is a case to apply a social responsibility levy, for which legislative provision exists.

Kenny MacAskill: Given the significant shift in drinking patterns from on-sales to the off-sales trade, with 72 per cent now provided by the off-

sales trade compared with 49 per cent in 1994, will the Scottish Government ensure that actions target where the major source of the problem of alcohol abuse lies?

John Swinney: Mr MacAskill marshals the significant pieces of evidence in relation to the argument. He has a long-standing and much respected reputation for confronting the issues and leading policy discussion on alcohol abuse and the consequent, knock-on behaviour that arises from it. I assure him that the evidence that he cited and the points that have been raised as a consequence will be part of the Government's consideration of how to take the issue forward.

Austerity Measures (Economic Impact in Glasgow)

17. Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made to mitigate the economic impact of the United Kingdom Government's austerity measures in Glasgow. (S4O-04564)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy (John Swinney): The Scottish Government is taking a range of actions to support people in Glasgow against the UK Government's austerity agenda. We have supported more than 16,000 households in Glasgow in 2014-15, providing crisis grants and community care grants. Working in partnership with local government, we ensured that 24,000 discretionary housing payments were made in Glasgow last year, and in March 2015 over 97,000 households in Glasgow were benefiting from council tax reduction worth an estimated £1.3 million per week.

Bob Doris: The economic impact on young people aged under 21 who may soon no longer be able to claim housing benefit under UK Government austerity plans will be devastating for many vulnerable young people and may lead to increased homelessness and vulnerability. Has the Scottish Government examined—or will it examine—the economic impact of that policy for my constituents in Glasgow? What scope is there to use the housing element of universal credit, a new power that is coming to the Parliament, to mitigate such effects in the face of significant austerity?

John Swinney: The Government will look to take all the measures that it can to mitigate the impacts of welfare reform on individuals in Scotland. There are some very serious implications of welfare reform, and the Government must exercise its responsibilities. However, it is important that I express to Parliament the cautionary note that, in my estimation, it will be impossible for the Government to mitigate all the effects of the

austerity measures. Nevertheless, the Government will act as it has over the past few years in doing all that we can to support the most vulnerable people in our society.

Housing and Wellbeing

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-14167, in the name of Ken Macintosh, on housing and wellbeing in Scotland. I invite Mr Macintosh, when he is ready, to speak for 14 minutes or thereby.

14:42

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): Over the summer, I was asked for help by a young family with three children who are aged from two to eight. They had chosen to give up their council house as it was becoming increasingly cramped and, in the absence of any other options, they reluctantly moved into a private let to find room for their growing family. No sooner had they moved into the new property, however, than they were served with an eviction notice because circumstances had changed and the landlord needed the house back.

The family were given two months to find a new home. They had no legal grounds on which to challenge the landlord and, despite holding down a steady and secure job, they had no chance of affording to buy a house anywhere nearby. When I asked the local authority about the situation, I was told that it had only 14 suitable properties in the area and that there was very little chance of one of them becoming vacant in the next year, never mind in the immediate future. School was about to start back and the family did not know whether the children would even have a home, let alone one near their community, relatives and friends.

How familiar is that story to members throughout the chamber? More than 150,000 people are waiting to find a social rented house in Scotland. The number of new homes that are being built has fallen by 40 per cent since 2007 and the percentage of families who own their homes is also declining, with affordability being a huge problem for young people in particular.

The net effect has been to drive people into an ever-expanding private sector with, in many areas, ever-increasing rent levels to match. In some cases, private renting is exactly what is required to address local need, but for others it is unaffordable and insecure, with rents rising at double or treble the rate of any increases in income and with no guarantees—as in the case that I described—that the tenants will not be chucked out at short notice.

We need to offer those in private lets some of the protection that is available to those in social rented accommodation. A quarter of those who rent privately are families with children. They need to know that they are safe and secure and that their children can stay at the same school with the same friends and community around them.

The Scottish Government has yet to spell out what will be in its private tenancies bill, but I hope that it will take as its starting point the five asks of Shelter's make renting right campaign, which are stability, flexibility and security of tenure for tenants and landlords, accompanied by predictable rents and a fair system for sorting out problems when they occur.

The bill should not be seen as an anti-landlord measure. Landlords need to know that they can get rid of bad tenants or get their property if they need to sell it. If the main problem that we face is housing supply, a potential solution is to attract large institutional investors into the sector to build substantial numbers of properties for private rent, much as we have seen recently with the expansion of purpose-built student accommodation to rent. In a world where investment capital is highly mobile, I do not underestimate the difficulty of getting the legislative or regulatory balance right.

I will shortly return to the private rented sector—or the PRS, as it is more commonly referred to. Before I do, it is important that we recognise that neither the difficulties that my constituents face nor the sheer scale of the housing challenge will be resolved through regulating private tenancies. We are quite simply facing a housing crisis, which will be resolved only by building tens of thousands of homes. Those are not my observations but the conclusions of the independent Commission on Housing and Wellbeing.

It is easy for our debates on housing to become a battle of numbers. The Government's amendment proudly highlights the commitment to 30,000 new affordable homes, which it clearly expects to deliver by next year. The difficulty is that that figure does not reflect housing need. That point was made yet again in today's press by the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations, Shelter Scotland and Homes for Scotland. Rather than letting the debate degenerate into an overpartisan exchange that compares different Administrations' records, a purpose of our motion is to see whether we can find agreement on the work and the findings of the Commission on Housing and Wellbeing.

I want to say how much I welcome the report and the contribution that I hope that it will make to developing housing policy. Set up in 2013 by Shelter Scotland and chaired by the former Auditor General, Robert Black, the commission's principal goal was to look at how housing impacts on the wider wellbeing of the people of Scotland. This non-partisan and unbiased independent commission has examined the impact of poor housing on people's health, education, employability and life chances. It has highlighted the links between housing and the problems of

poverty and inequality and it has pointed to the wider gains in educational attainment, care for older people and improved mental health that are secured by having a decent home.

Following a lengthy consultation with the public and housing experts, and drawing on the expertise of organisations such as the Poverty Alliance, the commission has published a report that paints an accurate but worrying picture of housing need. It also provides a series of specific but practical recommendations for the Scottish Government to adopt.

Robert Black described the central focus as being about the importance of having a

“suitable home which allows each and every one of us to live fulfilling lives and achieve our potential.”

However, he added:

“We are a long way short of this. There are about 150,500 households on waiting lists for social housing, 940,000 in fuel poverty and over 60,000 are overcrowded. With an averagely priced house now costing about five times the average annual income, owning your own home is becoming an unachievable pipedream for many people in Scotland, especially young adults and families.”

The commission’s key recommendation is that the Scottish Government needs to oversee a radical increase in house building. The report calls on ministers to set an interim target of at least 23,000 new homes a year, of which at least 9,000 should be affordable homes. Given that we are building only around 15,000 homes a year, which is the lowest level of house building since 1947, that will require strong and decisive political leadership.

In a prosperous country such as ours, is it asking so much to expect every Scot to have a safe, warm and affordable place that they call home? That is Labour’s vision, but I hope that we could share that vision with members from every political party.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):

The member seems to suggest that we should have more housing, which I would welcome. Is he suggesting that the Government should spend more money on housing? If so, where should that money come from?

Ken Macintosh: The point of the motion, which highlights the Commission on Housing and Wellbeing’s report, is to see whether we can reach agreement across the chamber on the scale of the crisis that we face. I assure John Mason that the Labour Party is willing to work with and support any Government initiatives that recognise the scale of the problem and the scale of the social rented housing, as well as private housing and housing across all other tenures, that needs to be built. I hope that the member will be willing to work with Labour and others on the issue.

Many housing and anti-poverty organisations would go much further than the commission’s interim target, both on overall housing and on housing for social rent. An area that does not get much attention in the report is how we improve housing for disabled people. It has been estimated that 70,000 households in Scotland need adaptations for wheelchair users. There is simply not enough suitable or accessible housing being built. It is up to the Scottish Government to increase that availability by insisting that at least 10 per cent of housing across all tenures is built to wheelchair-accessible standards.

The commission’s report spells out a series of further actions that need to be taken, and it does not shirk from identifying the major challenges that face us over the next decade: freeing up the supply of land for new housing; recognising and supporting the growing role of the private rented sector; tackling fuel poverty; and stepping up the pace in reducing residential greenhouse gas emissions. Those are all areas in which I am confident that there is at least the possibility that we can find agreement, if not consensus, across the Parliament, but what worries me—this is why we have posed the question in our motion—is that it is not clear that the programme for government matches the ambitions and the call to action that the commission has set out.

For example, one of the housing announcements in last week’s programme for government was on the continuation of the help to buy scheme. I think that we are all pleased that the Government has listened to our criticisms of the scheme and has announced a three-year budget as opposed to annual budgets but, as Homes for Scotland has pointed out, the £195 million that the First Minister outlined is to be provided over the next three years is significantly less than the £305 million that was allocated over the previous three years. That sum was immediately oversubscribed and resulted in a stop-start situation for the industry, which caused frustration and confusion for home buyers and builders alike.

Homes for Scotland has also pointed out that, earlier this year, the United Kingdom Government committed £6 billion to extend help to buy to at least 2020. On the basis of rough calculations, the consequential for the Scottish Government would be expected to amount to some £150 million per year, as opposed to the £65 million per year that was announced. I invite the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners’ Rights to explain to Homes for Scotland how he intends to use the remaining balance.

Another of the housing announcements in the programme for government was on planning. The First Minister surprised many of us—she surprised

me, anyway—when she unveiled plans for a root-and-branch review of the planning system. As the cabinet secretary will know, I whole-heartedly support that, as I do not believe that the planning system is working as well as it should be. It neither addresses our need to deliver new housing nor gives communities the accountability, the control or the protection that they wish to have. It is too slow and too unpredictable in outcome.

I was pleasantly surprised because I lobbied the cabinet secretary as recently as March this year, when I asked what the Scottish Government's position was on holding an independent review of the planning system from a community perspective. The reply that I received from Mr Neil did not encourage me. In it, he said:

“Scotland's planning system has undergone the most significant modernisation in over 60 years. The overall aim was delivery of a planning service that is efficient, inclusive, fit for purpose and sustainable. The Scottish Government has no current plans to undertake a further review.”—*[Written Answers, 3 March 2015; S4W-24530.]*

I am intrigued. Perhaps the cabinet secretary will tell us what has changed in a mere six months to make this most significantly modernised planning system—this efficient, inclusive, fit-for-purpose and sustainable system—now apparently so antiquated.

In the absence of a reply, I will return to the private rented sector. The Commission on Housing and Wellbeing has flagged up the need for reform. That is another reason why my Labour colleagues and I were pleased to finally see the Government outline proposals for a private tenancies bill. Since devolution and the formation of this Parliament, the proportion of Scots who rent in the private sector has almost trebled, from 5 per cent to more than 13 per cent. As things stand, more than 312,000 households are privately renting, including some 80,000 families with children.

By itself, that might not be a cause for worry, but research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that

“The number of households in poverty in the Private Rented Sector has doubled in the last decade to 120,000”.

It reported that the gap between social and private rents in Scotland is higher than it is in every English region except London. Scottish National Party members often say that, instead of criticising the Scottish Government, Labour should come forward with solutions. It would not be untoward of me to remind the chamber that Scottish Labour has been calling for quite some time for action to be taken to improve security of tenure and to limit rent rises in the private sector. In fact, I point out to my SNP colleagues that if, instead of voting with the Scottish Conservatives, they had voted with Scottish Labour to introduce rent controls in the

Housing (Scotland) Bill last year, they could have saved Scots in private lets a considerable amount of money.

Over the past few years, private tenants in Scotland have seen their rents rise on average by £200 per year and at above the rate of inflation—and by a lot more in the hot spots of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Fife and Aberdeen. That is why, although we await the detail, we hope that the private tenancies bill will be a positive step towards creating more stable and secure tenancies.

As I have outlined, we support some Government announcements on housing, but I am not convinced that they merit the label “bold” that the First Minister used to describe them last week. The Commission on Housing and Wellbeing has provided us with a call for action, and one of the strengths of its report is the constant link that it makes between a satisfactory home on the one hand and our individual wellbeing and a fair society on the other. The cabinet secretary has made much of the impact of welfare reform and is working on a new social justice action plan; this area impacts directly on our welfare, our quality of life and the prospects for our children's success, and it is entirely devolved. We all know that families and individuals can prove remarkably resilient in the face of adversity if they have a safe and warm home to return to.

For example, on fuel poverty, the commission's report highlights that

“a cold home is neither conducive to good health nor a satisfactory learning environment for children nor young people.”

Lang Banks, the director of WWF in Scotland, put it this way:

“It makes no sense that hard-pressed households spend scarce money on energy to simply heat the air outside of their cold, draughty and leaky homes.”

Nevertheless, the Scottish Government has yet to set a long-term goal for the national infrastructure project to bring homes up to an acceptable energy performance standard.

I am conscious of the time, Presiding Officer, but I want to say that, although we need to build many more homes, this is more than a numbers game. What is the Scottish Government doing about the report's specific neighbourhood recommendations and to recognise the greater role that wellbeing and community have to play in future housing policy?

Scottish Labour has deliberately decided to focus on housing in its first debate following the programme for government. Ensuring that everyone has access to a decent home should be the starting block in our mission to build a more

equitable and happier society, and Labour's ambitions for our country's future are matched by our absolute determination to ensure that everyone in Scotland has the comfort and assurance of a safe, secure, affordable and warm home. That is not an impossible dream or an unrealistic goal—what is required is the political will.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the report of the independent Commission on Housing and Wellbeing, *A blueprint for Scotland's future*, and the crucial importance that it places on securing a decent home for each and every Scot to ensure individual and social wellbeing; notes the findings of the commission, which concluded that "there is very clearly a homes crisis" in Scotland, with 150,000 households on waiting lists and 940,000 in fuel poverty; further notes the findings that more than 40% of social housing in Scotland falls short of official quality standards but that buying your own home is increasingly unaffordable, especially for young adults; further welcomes Shelter Scotland's campaign, Make Renting Right, and the work of the many groups and individuals behind the Living Rent Campaign in highlighting the need to regulate the private renting sector in Scotland; looks forward to the Scottish Government's Private Tenancies Bill, and asks the Scottish Government whether it believes that its Programme for Government matches the ambitions and "call to action" set out by the Commission on Housing and Wellbeing.

14:57

The Minister for Housing and Welfare (Margaret Burgess): I am sure that we all agree with a lot of what Ken Macintosh has just said, and that everyone in Scotland should have access to a warm, safe, secure and affordable home. That is the aim of this Scottish Government, as we laid out in our "Homes Fit for the 21st Century" strategy document.

I also very much welcome the work that the Commission on Housing and Wellbeing has done on exploring and explaining the links between housing and wellbeing and drawing them to everyone's attention. The commission is a good example of the type of cross-sector working that I believe is important, and it shows a vibrant sector in which everyone is looking to work with each other and with the Government to find positive policies for Scotland.

Housing—in particular, social housing—remains one of this Government's highest priorities, which is why we have committed more than £1.7 billion of investment in affordable housing over the lifetime of this Parliament. According to the official statistics that were published yesterday, we are going to exceed our target of delivering 30,000 affordable homes across the country. More than 28,000 affordable homes—or 93 per cent of the five-year target—have already been delivered. That is a significant achievement at a time of

United Kingdom Government-imposed capital cuts of 26 per cent.

Ken Macintosh mentioned levels of house building since 1947, but what he left out was the recession and the fact that he was talking about private house building. We are building more affordable homes and more homes in the social sector than any previous Administration in Scotland. However, this Scottish Government wants to do more.

Ken Macintosh: I was trying to avoid playing the numbers game, but does the minister accept that whatever number of houses the current Government is building or whatever number are being built in Scotland by the private sector, it does not meet the needs of Scotland's people and communities?

Margaret Burgess: I was about to say that we want to do more: we want to increase and accelerate our ambitions for Scotland's housing and to continue to do so in an integrated and collaborative way. Our current target of 6,000 affordable homes a year is absolutely not the limit of our ambition.

We will continue to support local authorities to deliver their affordable housing priorities with quality homes that fit local needs in mixed communities. We have delivered 4,956 council homes, which is 99 per cent of our 5,000 council homes target. I am going to get into the numbers game here, because that is thousands more—in fact, it is 4,950 more—than were built under the previous Labour-Liberal coalition. We have built more social housing in seven years of this Administration than the previous Labour-Liberal Administration built. I will come to those figures shortly. We have built more social housing, which includes registered social landlord and council housing, and we will continue to work with a wide range of partners across the public and private sectors to invest in and deliver a significant supply of housing that harnesses increased levels of private finance and offers value for money for public resources.

Alex Rowley (Cowdenbeath) (Lab): Given the seriousness of the housing crisis in Scotland, should we not try to move beyond who did what and blaming each other, and get on with building the council houses for rent that people and families in Scotland desperately need?

Margaret Burgess: That is precisely what the Government is doing. We set ourselves a target, we have met it and we are now exceeding it. We are continuing to build houses for those who need them across all tenures, despite the challenges that we face in our budget. We are determined to do that. We have already worked closely with our partners to produce a joint housing delivery plan

that addresses the wide range of housing issues in Scotland and captures a crucial set of delivery actions that we collectively agree are vital at this time.

New housing supply is one aspect of what is important, but—as Ken Macintosh said—we also need to ensure that people can afford to heat their homes, and that their homes provide a safe and positive environment and are flexible to households' changing needs.

The past few years, with high and rising energy prices on top of the UK Government's continued austerity, have made things very difficult for many households across Scotland, which is why the Government has sought to help those households by investing more than half a billion pounds since 2009 in our fuel poverty and energy efficiency programmes. Our efforts are paying off. Since 2008, nearly one in three households has benefited from energy efficiency measures, and now more than a third of all Scottish dwellings have a good energy performance certificate rating of band B or C, which is an increase of 56 per cent since 2010.

However, housing is about much more than roofs over people's heads. The Commission on Housing and Wellbeing referred to that, as did Ken Macintosh, and I certainly agree. Good housing can assist in creating vibrant communities and can allow them to flourish and be empowered. It can create the right environment to allow children to grow, learn and reach their full potential, and it can ensure that the health and wellbeing of its occupants are maintained or improved. Good housing goes right to the heart of the fairer and stronger Scotland that the Government is working to deliver.

The housing market has changed since the global recession, and the Government has responded positively and creatively in order to provide a wider range of funding mechanisms than ever, and to squeeze the maximum value from our austerity-hit reduced budgets. That response has seen us support the construction sector and home buyers through our help-to-buy schemes. Our considerable investment of more than half a billion pounds over the past three years and in the three years ahead will help about 14,000 households to buy new homes. It will also provide the construction industry with a huge economic boost that can ensure employment in the sector. We will work with Homes for Scotland and the sector to develop how the new scheme will proceed.

The Scottish Government continues to lead the way in innovation. The contribution to new housing supply from innovative financing approaches is substantial and growing, with nearly 3,000 new affordable homes being approved and around £400 million of housing investment being

unlocked. Those new approaches have seen us develop products for mid-market rent and shared equity, and have seen us, through our homeowner support fund, support homeowners who are facing difficulties.

The availability of suitable good-quality housing and housing services also makes a vital contribution to the success of the integration of healthcare and social care. We are working closely with the housing sector to deliver appropriate housing support and services.

We also recognise the need to plan for the future and to ensure that we have the land and infrastructure that are required in order that we can deliver the supply of new housing at the pace that we would like. The objective of the planning review that was announced in the programme for government is to ensure that planning does all that it can to enable the delivery of high-quality developments across the country. In particular, the review will seek to identify where further targeted improvements to the planning system can be made, with particular emphasis on increasing high-quality housing developments. We also recognise that the housing system works differently in rural Scotland. We have listened to rural stakeholders, so we will put in place in 2016 for three years a rural housing fund to suit the particular needs of rural areas.

All that requires us to work closely with partners, which we have done effectively, as can be seen in our delivery. We have in the past seven financial years delivered 20 per cent more affordable homes than the previous Administration delivered. We have outperformed England and Wales in new-build social sector completions and in private sector completions per 100,000 of population. We have worked with local authorities to deliver a substantial council house new-build programme, with 99 per cent of our five-year target to March 2015 having been met.

We have provided affordable mid-market rent options for those who seek them. We have put owner occupation within the reach of many people who were struggling to raise large deposits or to access full borrowing in the current climate. We have helped people to insulate their homes and to save money on energy bills. We have created additional funding options and routes to private finance, and we have ensured that housing investment is targeted locally where it is needed most through local authority strategic housing investment plans.

The Scottish Government has achieved much, but let there be no doubt whatsoever that our appetite and drive remain to build and improve on the good progress to date. We will do so within the powers that are vested in us, although we remain constrained by Westminster. We are committed to

building on our substantial progress in tackling housing issues and, in doing that, to working in a constructive collaborative way with partners across the public and private sectors in order to deliver a fairer and stronger Scotland.

I move amendment S4M-14167.2, to leave out from first “the findings” to end and insert:

“that the commission is a good example of the type of cross-sector working that is so important to ensuring that civic Scotland and government work together to find positive policies for Scotland; welcomes the Scottish Government’s £1.7 billion investment and commitment to deliver 30,000 new affordable homes by next year; welcomes and commends the hard work of many stakeholders that seek to ensure, as the Scottish Government does, a modern private rented sector that is fit for the needs of today’s tenants and landlords, and looks forward to the Scottish Government’s Private Tenancies Bill, which will ensure stability, security and predictability in the private rented sector.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I inform members that there is a modest amount of time in hand for the debate.

15:07

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): It is always good to have Ken Mackintosh speaking to a motion in Parliament. He is an experienced politician who manages to mix traditional good common sense with some good old-fashioned left-wing prejudices when it comes to policies such as housing. In fact, what he did in his speech earlier was, in my view, an attempt to redefine the crisis in order to fit existing Labour policy. For that reason, I suggest that much of the motion is an attempt to hammer a square peg into a round hole. Nevertheless, the motion sets out a very clear problem that we are right to be debating at some length today.

The issue of housing and wellbeing was dealt with extensively in the report that is mentioned in the motion, and it will serve to educate us, to inform us and to define many of the arguments that we have about housing and wellbeing as we go forward. Wellbeing, in fact, is a very interesting area of policy and one that I am sure we will return to, but in the short time that is available to me in this debate, housing will be my key priority.

The problem that we face is, of course, that there is not enough money go round—which can often be difficult during the course of a recession. However, money is not the only problem. In fact, when we look at housing and housing issues, it is surprising to see the amount of money that is available—or, at least, that would be available for investment in affordable housing if the correct conditions were created. That is why we should prioritise the building of confidence in the marketplace as much as anything else.

The Government’s amendment sets out its achievements so far. A brief look at the statistics indicates that in spite of the fact that many housing figures are well below their pre-recession levels, positive progress is being made. The problem is that that progress is not big enough or being made fast enough.

When I perused the statistics I found that one of the strangest ones—which I predicted—was that the sale of public authority dwellings, including those in local authorities that have had total stock transfer, rose by 20 per cent in 2014-15, from 1,527 to 1,835. That is the second annual increase, after years of declining sales numbers. In my view, the increases are likely due to the announcement in 2013 that the right to buy was to be ended for all tenants.

When we look at what is happening in our housing market, we see that there is less construction in both the private sector and the public sector across the board—although the Government will insist that it is building more council houses than any of its recent predecessors built. Nonetheless, the private rented sector has taken on provision of a great deal of the necessary capacity that this Government has, for whatever reason, been unable to provide. The growth in the private rented sector has become the central pillar of our social housing policy.

That is why it concerns me that last week and, to some extent, today we have heard talk of rent capping as a primary tool to take us forward. However, Margaret Burgess’s amendment seems to make it clear that the Government still intends to develop a modern private-rented sector that is fit for the needs of today’s tenants and landlords. I ask Margaret Burgess or whoever will reply to the debate whether that is meant to be an olive branch to the private rented sector. It is necessary to deliver something. I assure the Government that there is a deep-seated fear that the wrong action at this stage will result in a move towards disinvestment in the sector. At a time when we are not in a position to replace homes with new-build homes for rent one for one, we may lose a large section of our rented capacity if we do not treat people correctly.

John Mason: Will Alex Johnstone give way?

Alex Johnstone: Excuse me, but I will not. I will come to a conclusion very soon.

We must search for ambitious solutions to Scotland’s housing needs, and we must find ways to increase capacity and construction across the board. We will achieve that by building confidence. Confidence in the market gave us the growth in all sectors that we had prior to the recession, and a return to that confidence will result in investment returning. It is the job of Government and all

politicians—even those in opposition—to ensure that what we do is designed to make it easier, safer and more practical for people at every level to invest in housing.

That return in confidence is the key to success, and it must take place across all tenures and sectors. If we work together to build confidence, the capacity will exist for our housing problems to be solved by funding that is not exclusively dependent on the Government or public sector investment, but which also comes from private sector solutions. If we treat private investors and private renters right they can continue to solve our problems and deal with many issues in this crisis, by which others are confused and to which they cannot find a solution.

I move amendment S4M-14167.1, to leave out from first “notes” to end and insert:

“encourages the search for ambitious solutions to Scotland’s future housing needs; observes the importance of a mix of property types and continuing flexibility of tenures in the housing market; recognises that such a mix will require a vibrant private rental sector that balances the need for affordability with securing supply in light of a growing population; acknowledges that a focus on building and investment is required to ensure that properties are available to meet the demand for homes, and considers that the needs of tenants and homebuyers are best served by ensuring that the Scottish property market remains competitive.”

15:14

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I want to spend a little time looking at the words that Labour used in its motion. It is probably good to start with something on which we can agree: I completely agree that “securing a decent home” is very much linked to “individual and social wellbeing”, and I hope that all members agree that investing in housing has huge benefits, because investment can take people out of fuel poverty, help youngsters to study better and improve the health of families.

Whether there is a “homes crisis” in Scotland is open to debate, as has been touched on. The word “crisis” tends to be used very loosely in the Parliament and we would do better to think a little more carefully before using it so frequently. A definition that I found included:

“a crucial or decisive point or situation, a turning point”.

We accept that housing is a key challenge, but I wonder whether we are really saying that we are at some turning point in history. Housing has been a challenge and a problem all my life, in Scotland and in the UK, and if we are realistic we will acknowledge that it will continue to be so for some time, whichever party is in power. However, it is a mistake to use the word “crisis” too loosely.

Ken Macintosh: I recognise the point that Mr Mason makes, but does he accept that in this context the word “crisis” was used not by the Labour Party but by the commission, by Shelter Scotland and by Sir Robert Black?

John Mason: I accept that. My general point is that we use the word too loosely in this place and more widely. If we were talking about the refugee and immigrant situation, I would accept that “crisis” is the correct word.

Let me be positive. In greater Easterhouse, where I live, the state of housing is generally much better than it was 25 years ago, when I moved in—and 25 years ago it was much better than it was in the period after the war, when tenements had shared toilets and were hugely overcrowded. Let us be realistic. Huge progress has been made—before and since this Government came to power. At the same time, I accept that housing is still the main issue about which constituents come to my office to see me. There is no question but that we face an on-going challenge.

We should give credit to the housing associations for the work that they have done and continue to do, in doing their best to find and create suitable homes for tenants. However, housing associations and this Parliament are limited in what we can do by the available resources—that primarily means the money that is available to us. There are certain inescapable facts, including Westminster’s mismanagement of the economy, which has led to a reduced Scottish budget. The situation has been made worse by the Tories cutting harder than they needed to.

We therefore do not have as much money for housing as we want or need. As I said to Mr Macintosh during his speech, if the Opposition is saying that it wants more money for housing, it must be honest and tell us where it wants to take money from. Would it mean less money for health and hospitals, for schools and colleges or for transport? Surely the money would have to come from one of those areas.

Ken Macintosh: Does Mr Mason accept that one of the reasons why I did not mention money in the motion was that I was trying to get recognition that there is a crisis—a problem that is facing us? If we cannot reach agreement on the scale of the problem, we will not agree on the solutions. Does the member agree that there is a crisis in housing, and that we all need to address it?

John Mason: I think that the member knows that I agree, as does the housing minister, that there is a problem and a challenge. I do not accept that “crisis” is the right word to use at this time, although I accept that individual families are facing a crisis.

If we are not to cut expenditure from somewhere, can we raise money, for example through taxation? Next April we will have power over income tax, and I would be delighted to tax high earners more and use the proceeds for investment in housing. However, we have to remember that 1p more tax from the richest would also mean 1p more from the lowest earners. We need to think long and hard before we go down that route.

As I am speaking about housing, members will not be surprised to hear me mention my constituency and one of the huge housing issues there, which is that of the Commonwealth games village, with its 400 social rented houses and 300 owner-occupied houses, most of which are now occupied, although the care home has not yet opened. My first point would be to emphasise the tremendous enthusiasm with which the development has been greeted. We have disabled people now having a suitable home for the first time, larger families who are no longer overcrowded and even folk moving into the area from areas such as the west end, which some people used to believe was more desirable. Alex Johnstone made a point about building confidence, and that is exactly what the village has done and is doing. We hope to see more private developers coming into the area shortly.

Do I have a little bit of extra time, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Yes, a moment or so.

John Mason: Of course, new housing developments of this size have teething problems. Some residents are already not looking after their gardens, and the council has refused to install litter bins because the roads are not yet adopted. However, those are relatively minor issues in the scheme of things and, overall, it has been great to hear from new residents how pleased they are with their homes.

The motion states that

“buying your own home is increasingly unaffordable”

Sadly, that seems to be the case. I see that as very much linked to the wide gap between the richest and the poorest in our society. If we had a more even distribution of income and wealth, more people would be able to afford an ordinary home. However, if some people are so rich that they can afford a huge mansion or even several properties, the corollary is that others are squeezed right out of owning at all. Therefore, helping people at the bottom end of the scale is linked to redistributing the income and wealth of those at the top.

Other issues that are raised in the motion include quality standards and rent levels. I suggest

that quality standards are more of a challenge in the owner-occupier and private rented sectors, where some of the worst conditions prevail. By all means let us have rent controls if that is what is necessary to give more security to tenants, but improving the standard and safety of private rented properties must be a high priority as well. Linked to that, we need to go further with factoring, perhaps even considering compulsory factoring and, potentially, compulsory maintenance funds as well.

By historical standards, huge progress has been made. I very much welcome the progress that has been made by this Government. In the words of some of my local housing associations, let us complete the good work that has been done so far.

15:22

Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I start by declaring an interest, as I am a private sector landlord in Fife.

In recent years, we have seen a vast increase in the number of people who rent privately in Scotland. Since the formation of the Scottish Parliament, the proportion of people who rent in the private sector in Scotland has almost trebled, from 5 to 13 per cent. However, 100,000 of the households in the private rented sector live in poverty. Private renters in Scotland spend nearly a quarter of their income on housing, which is far more than is acceptable.

A recent report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that:

“The number of households in poverty in the PRS (Private Rented Sector) has doubled in the last decade to 120,000, while the number in social housing has almost halved to 190,000.

At the start of the 2000s, poverty in Scotland was predominantly in the social rented sector but this is no longer the case. Two fifths of households in poverty live in social housing, compared to three fifths a decade ago. Meanwhile a quarter live in the private rented sector, up from 1 in 10”.

Many people have little choice but to rent privately. They cannot afford to save for a deposit to buy a house, and the options for social housing might be limited in their locality.

Scotland is facing a social housing crisis. We need massive investment in the supply side of housing, which would see construction of social housing to boost our economy, access to safe and secure homes for thousands of families and all the improvements in health, wellbeing and increased community cohesion and safety in communities across Scotland that would come with those new houses. An affordable, safe home is a

fundamental component of building a fairer Scotland.

Since coming to power, the SNP has cut the capital housing budget. I am proud to say that Labour is committed to building at least 20,000 homes a year between now and 2020.

Margaret Burgess: Can the member give an indication of how much it would cost to build those 20,000 homes a year and what proportion of the Scottish budget that would be?

Jayne Baxter: I am not in a position to do that today. I echo Ken Macintosh's comments that these are things that we have to work on together.

An example of how these things can be funded can be seen in Fife, where the council has committed to building 2,700 houses by May 2017 and is on track to do that. It raised the necessary funds by consulting tenants and raising the rents, so there are ways of financing increased house building.

In Fife, there has been collaboration between housing providers, housing associations, private developers and a number of Scottish Government initiatives, and the target is on track. Together, they are delivering modern, fit-for-purpose and energy-efficient homes. Where possible, the council's new-build properties are allocated to existing tenants whose current homes are not suitable. Their existing homes are then freed up to be allocated to someone else on the housing list. That chain of lets means that 2.4 households' housing needs are being met for every new council house let. That approach is making serious inroads into Fife's housing problems.

On top of that, innovative and fast solutions are necessary if we are to deal with our housing crisis. Again, I refer to Fife, where an innovative project has been rebuilding on existing foundations. Sharp Construction, with support from Fife Council and Ore Valley Housing Association, has speedily and safely built new homes on the foundations that were originally laid for houses that are no longer fit for purpose. It demolished those unfit-for-purpose houses and built on the foundations. That process was hugely collaborative with local people and has broad local support. It is just one of many new approaches that could be used to tackle Scotland's housing crisis now.

However, for those who cannot or do not want to live in social housing, we need to reform the private rented sector to make it work for everyone. In the worst-case scenarios, the sector is at risk of acting as a cash cow for landlords—not this landlord—but the priority for us all must be to meet the needs of families that are unable to get a foot on the property ladder or access to social housing.

Shelter's make renting right campaign has cross-party support. It makes bold calls for action on rent levels and security of tenure. It calls for stability for people who want to make rented housing their home; flexibility for people to stay in their homes as long as they need to; a modern tenancy that gives security and flexibility for tenants and landlords; a fair system for sorting out renting problems when they occur; and predictable rents for tenants and landlords.

It is clear that tenure options in Scotland are in desperate need of reform. It is a positive step that the Scottish Government has committed to making changes, but we must wait to see the detail of the proposals. The various tenures that are currently available must be rationalised and made to work for everyone in Scotland.

Another area in which there is little doubt that Scotland's private rented sector does not work is in rent levels. Scotland has a larger gap between private and social rents than any region of England bar London. The Scottish Government's expert working group on welfare recommended in June 2014 that mandatory rent caps be written into all leases.

The Scottish Labour Party welcomes in principle the proposed private tenancies bill that the Scottish Government set out in its programme for government. One section of that bill will include reference to some rent controls. Scottish Labour has been arguing for action to control rent rises for months. Indeed, we tried to amend the Scottish Government's last Housing (Scotland) Bill to that end but were voted down several times. Since that bill was passed, rents have again risen. Had the SNP Government acted in 2013, when its last private rented sector review took place, the average Scottish renter in the private sector would already have saved more than £150 per year.

The SNP voted against proper rent controls three times and now proposes only the far narrower provision of

"more predictable rents and protection for tenants against excessive rent increases, including the ability to introduce local rent controls for rent pressure areas",

to quote the First Minister. It rejected Scottish Labour's proposals for real rent controls in the last Housing (Scotland) Bill and has now made watered-down proposals. In its 2011 manifesto, the SNP provided a

"guarantee to retain secured tenancies at affordable rents",

but private rents have increased by more than 3 per cent year on year in Scotland. It remains to be seen to what extent its proposals will achieve that goal, because the housing crisis in Scotland needs radical and innovative solutions.

The Scottish Parliament will be given sweeping and wide-ranging new powers that could be put to use to tackle the housing crisis. Housing benefit reform, the building of tens of thousands of new houses and radical action on rents must be top of the agenda to ensure that people throughout Scotland are able to live in decent homes.

15:29

Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): It is most gracious of the Labour Party to bring to the Scottish Parliament a debate on housing and wellbeing using its own time. That came as a bit of a surprise to many of us, particularly as, while it was in government, it had such a woeful record, building only six council houses in the time that it was in power. That is six council houses in a staggering eight years.

I am sure that the public would be exceedingly impressed if Labour were to say that it intended to double its record—yes, a 100 per cent increase. The public would be bound to be wowed by that promise to build 12 council houses over eight years—actually, I do not think so. Of course I must labour the point—six houses in eight years only added to the shortage in quality council housing, a disaster created by the failed Tory plot to bribe voters to support their cause by bringing in the right to buy, which Labour did absolutely nothing about. No—wait—it gets even worse: Labour actually continued the Tory master plan to rid Scotland of available, quality council housing. If members want to witness the effect of the dual impact of reduced numbers of quality council houses and the almost criminal lack of new-build council houses, I invite them to my constituency—evidence lies there aplenty.

Contrast Labour's record with that of the SNP. We need to remember that up until eight years ago, Labour owned Scotland—or, at least, it thought that it did. There have been eight short years of an SNP Government that had no experience whatsoever in these matters. The Government has gone from a standing start, and since 2009-10 the SNP has built more than 5,350 new council houses. Over and above that, 34,500 social rented houses have been completed—nearly a fifth more than Labour completed over the same number of years.

We do not need to measure this Government's record on social housing only against previous devolved Governments in Scotland. If we look further afield, the positive message on delivery for Scotland continues. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has highlighted that the Scottish Government spends a whopping 85 per cent more per head on social housing than is spent in England and Wales. That investment has seen a significantly higher rate of social sector completions per

100,000 population in Scotland, at 65.3 for the year to the end of September 2014, than in Conservative-run England, where the rate was only 44.7. If that was not bad enough, the rate in Labour-run Wales was 24.6.

However, there is always a catch when we do good work in Scotland. London has yet again put in the usual penalty clause, like some rogue insurance company. We are being penalised by Westminster for investing more in social housing because the benefits of that spending accrue to the UK Government in the form of lower housing benefit payments. That has not deterred this Scottish Government for one second from doing the right thing by doing all that it can to assist our people to get the housing that they deserve and need.

The announcement in the programme for government that £195 million will be provided over the next three years to help more people buy new-build homes will see at least 6,500 families being supported to buy a new-build home that meets their needs and, most crucially, is at a price that they can afford.

The help-to-buy scheme has already helped 7,500 households in Scotland to buy a new home over the past three years. I am sure that I do not need to say that we need to do more. It is quite clear that we need to do more—much, much more. However, it is equally clear from the actions that this Government has already taken, and from its record, that it will not sit on its laurels. I am confident that it will do all that it can, with the powers and the budget available to it, to remedy our quality housing shortage. I thank the Government for its efforts and for what it has delivered through its work.

15:34

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab): Ken Macintosh and Jayne Baxter both reminded us that the number of people who are living in private rented accommodation has almost tripled during the years of the Scottish Parliament. I will speak mainly about that subject, and will illustrate it with an example that has been a major issue in my constituency over the summer.

Before I do so, I will make three points about social rented housing in the City of Edinburgh Council area. First, on average, 200 people apply for every social rented house that becomes available in the council area. I do not think that any other local authority in Scotland can match that shocking statistic.

Secondly, I hope that the minister will take more account of that reality in the funding formula for distributing housing money and that she will not be

misled by the great success of Edinburgh in relation to mid-market housing. Such housing is important and counts as affordable housing, but it is not suitable for the very many people who need social rented accommodation.

Thirdly, there is a long-standing issue with the housing association grant. I attended Port of Leith Housing Association's 40th anniversary event last week, when that issue was highlighted to me once again. The level of the housing association grant—the grant for each new social rented house—plummeted two or three years ago, and although it was partially restored a year or so later, it is still significantly below what it was in 2007. A group that reported recently recommended that the level of the grant should be further restored, and I hope that the Government will act on that recommendation as soon as possible.

I move on to speak about the private rented sector. I strongly agree with and support Shelter's make renting right campaign. The first problem is the short-term nature of private rented tenancies. I welcome the proposals—as far as they go—for the new private rented housing bill, and I will look at them in detail. However, I have concerns that they may not go far enough, and that the six-month short assured tenancy may still be the norm in Scotland. I preferred—and was disappointed not to see in the proposals for the bill—the proposal made by UK Labour before the general election for three-year private rented tenancy agreements as the norm. I hope that the Scottish Government will consider that idea.

In a recent email to me, a constituent said:

"The PRS is not geared up to provide long term stable accommodation that folks and families can make their homes, and the insecurity of the tenure makes stable life impossible and results in much disruption for tenants."

Of course rents compound the problem, and many people need to move constantly because rents increase beyond what they can afford. Again, we have seen some proposals for the bill in that area, based on the pressured area model, but as a minimum there should be no rent increases in any year that go beyond inflation, and I would like that to be included among the proposals.

The repairing standard in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2006 represented some progress for the private rented sector, but we now need to move to a common housing quality standard. I am glad to see that the Scottish Government is committed at least to consulting on a minimum energy efficiency standard for the private sector, and I hope that the minister can tell us when the consultation will be launched.

The Scottish Government is also consulting on a letting agent code of practice. It is very important that we make clear that up-front letting fees that

are charged to tenants are unlawful. Regulations must be strong enough to ensure that agents who do not meet the required standards are struck off the register, and we need a strong register for letting agents.

We have such a register for landlords, but I urge the minister to look at it again and make it stronger. There are still many areas in which private landlords are not meeting their responsibilities—for example, making common repairs or keeping gardens tidy. There are many issues, and it seems that there is no power under the landlord registration legislation for action to be taken in that respect.

Many of those problems are illustrated by the case of a landlord in my constituency, which happens to be a charitable trust. It has decided to evict in due course more than 200 tenants, whose rents have paid for the trust's charitable purposes over many decades. The tenants have asked for a 12-month moratorium on sales so that they can pursue a co-op option or another suitable solution, but only four months have been granted, which is not enough time in such a complex situation.

Crucially, the trust is determined to sell only in a way that realises the highest possible receipts, thereby disregarding its obligations to the tenants, many of whom have invested their own money in their homes over decades.

There is surely a certain irony in a trust making people homeless in order to give more grants to homeless charities and other charities. I cannot believe that that is what was intended in the Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Act 2005. It will break up a highly successful community in the Lorne area that has many families and older people and rich social networks.

There are also major issues about the state of the properties and the failure over a long period to repair and upgrade them adequately. Moreover, there are big questions about the behaviour of the letting agency in question, which assured several tenants about the security of their accommodation, attempted to move some elderly and vulnerable tenants from assured to short assured tenancies and has recently stepped up its inspections in preparation for sales, which has increased stress for tenants.

Supporting those tenants in every way that I can has been one of my top priorities over the summer months, and it will continue to be so. There is an amazing tenants group in Lorne with some wonderful and determined campaigners. More than anything, I hope that they will be able to continue living in their great Lorne community.

The Presiding Officer: I point out to members that we have a little time in hand, so if you wish your remarks to run over a little, I will try to

accommodate you. Of course, if you wish to take interventions, I will add time at the end.

15:40

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): This debate on housing does not take place in a vacuum; it takes place in the context of an austerity onslaught that has devastated public funds for capital investment in the past few years. In the face of a collapsing budget, quite simply, having less cash to build means that it is challenging, to say the least, to build more homes. That is not being defensive on behalf of the Scottish Government; it is surely just plain common sense.

Mr Macintosh said on behalf of Labour that he does not want the debate to descend into a partisan one involving the exchange of statistics, and neither do I. However, it is reasonable to put on record the significant achievements of the Scottish Government, despite capital cuts. Housing waiting lists have fallen every year for the past six years, and they are down 10 per cent since 2007. That is an achievement. More homes have been built in the past seven years than were built in the seven years before that; surely that is an achievement. In the face of the cuts that I mentioned, we have found £1.7 billion to invest in affordable housing, and it looks as though we are shortly going to meet our target of building 30,000 affordable homes. That is an achievement.

Let us recognise success where it has happened, but let us face up to the challenges that we have going forward. I say honestly to Labour that I want to look forward to future success and progress, but we cannot close our eyes to what happened in the past—the good and the bad, the successes and the failures—because we have to learn about what worked and what did not work so that we know what our options are. SNP members sometimes chastise Labour for what we feel are its failures and lack of success, but we have to identify what went wrong and show what we are doing right, and then we can build on that together. That is not partisan. We cannot close our eyes and pretend that history did not happen.

Michael McMahon (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab): I thank Bob Doris for making that point. Does he therefore agree that when his colleagues refer to Labour building only six council houses, they are really stretching the argument beyond any recognition? The fact is that Labour built a substantial amount of social rented housing and the comparison between the number of social houses built under the Government and the number built when Labour was in power is less significant than his colleagues try to pretend it is.

Bob Doris: Somewhere in that intervention, there was a concession that far more social and

affordable housing has been built under the current Scottish Government, in the face of significant capital cuts, than was built under the previous Labour Executive. Surely that is a success. It is just a fact that six council houses were built in four years under Labour, compared with more than 5,000 under the current Administration. Clearly, we are doing something right in driving forward the expansion of council housing in Scotland. I suspect that the axing of the right to buy is a significant driver in that. We have to put that on the record and learn from our successes and from the failures of other people whose ill-considered ideas we have rectified.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab): Does the member accept that one reason why Labour-controlled local authorities and other local authorities could not build houses was because of the right to buy, which was revoked only when Labour reformed the right to buy in an earlier session of the Parliament? We put the money into social housing in other ways, through housing associations. That is the fact of the matter.

Bob Doris: The member says that that is the fact of the matter, but I strongly disagree. However, like Mr Macintosh, I do not wish to get into the partisan argument. The record quite simply shows that more than 5,000 council houses came from this Government and six came from Labour. Frankly, people can do the maths themselves.

Let me consider where there have been successes and challenges and how we can go forward in future. I think that Stewart Maxwell was housing minister when the Scottish Government took a decision to consistently cut the housing association grant budget. Quite simply, in the face of cuts, we could get more houses for a smaller subsidy, and the budget fell quite dramatically. That was successful, but we then amended the housing association grant and gave it a small uplift to get optimal efficiency in the delivery of social rented homes. I hear some laughter from Labour members but this Scottish Government will make the best use of taxpayers' money in the face of Tory cuts and challenge austerity to deliver for tenants in Scotland.

Ken Macintosh: Will the member give way?

Bob Doris: I do not have time.

I want to talk about housing churn and how we can better address housing need through local authority allocations policies. Let me give members two examples.

A constituent of mine in the Balgrayhill high flats in Springburn, who was in a dire housing position, was offered a house that would have met their housing needs. However, they were worried that,

once they were moved to that house, they would be stuck there for ever. Quite often in the social rented sector, allocations policies do not meet housing aspirations. That must be addressed somewhere down the line.

We were able to identify a possible house for another constituent who lived at Saracen Cross in Possil that would have improved their housing situation but would not have met all their housing needs, and the housing association did not want to move them to a house that did not meet all their housing needs.

Those are just two examples that show how housing allocation policies could be used more effectively. There should be churn to improve everyone's housing situations a bit without closing the door to meeting housing aspirations in the social rented sector.

In the time I have left, I want to talk about how this is not just about building houses but about where we build them; it is about building communities. I have to declare an interest: I will be affected by Glasgow City Council's plans for the Blackhill Road area, across Summerston, through to East Dunbartonshire and up to Lambhill. The council has decided to rezone all the green belt and move it over to housing development. It had decided not to do that until the landowners appealed the decision, but the rezoning now forms part of the local authority's plans. I have objected to that decision and I very much hope that it will be overturned at reporter stage. We are not just talking about building houses; we are talking about building communities, and local authorities have to play their part in that. They do not always get it right.

15:48

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): I will not be alone among my parliamentary colleagues in handling more casework about housing problems than about any other issue. A sadly familiar litany of problems crop up over and over again—inadequate housing, overcrowding, high house prices, exorbitant private rents, long waiting lists for social housing, families stuck in temporary accommodation, damp homes, neighbourhood problems and fuel poverty.

However familiar those problems are, I am never in any doubt about how damaging and wearing they can be for each individual constituent whom I see, and my anger and frustration at our collective failure to tackle those problems grow. Housing problems wear people down, the stress affects their health, debt grows and creates more problems, and families are pushed to breaking point.

Councils that are struggling with growing waiting lists force families to make invidious choices. A mother who is in temporary accommodation having fled an abusive relationship comes to me distraught because the council has told her to widen her search for social housing. She explains to me that, if she does so, she will need to move the children away from a school that they are settled in and family support in the village. A homeless family has been offered a council house 30 miles away in a small town with no public transport links to where they work. A single parent in private rented accommodation who spent years fighting to get the educational and social support that her disabled son needed finds herself facing eviction, and the only homeless accommodation that is offered by the local council means that she must uproot her son from that support network.

Week in, week out, my surgeries underline that housing and wellbeing are inextricably linked. We know that, yet it still seems that housing policy is dealt with in a silo. It is therefore welcome that the Labour Party has chosen to use its debating time today to consider the Commission on Housing and Wellbeing's report. The focus on wellbeing and the emphasis on considering in the round a range of interrelated issues such as housing, neighbourhood, economic activity, health and environmental sustainability is a profoundly different and, indeed, welcome approach.

The commission has stressed the central importance of people having a safe, secure and suitable home that allows them to fulfil their potential, and of that home being embedded in and linked to a strong, vibrant local community where people can live good lives. That chimes well with the Liberal Democrats' aim of enabling every citizen to achieve their full potential and contribute fully to their community.

The commission concludes starkly that "there is very clearly a homes crisis",

and it goes on to make a series of worthwhile recommendations, yet both the Government amendment and the Conservative amendment choose to delete all reference to a homes crisis. Deleting words in a parliamentary motion will not solve the problem or take away from the fact that this Government has failed to provide housing for the 10,000 households who are currently in temporary accommodation.

People are in temporary housing not for weeks or months but for years. Just last year, local authorities gave us the grim numbers for people who waited for more than five and more than 10 years after they applied for social housing. As of May last year, more than 13,000 households had been on the waiting list for more than an entire decade. What clearer indication is there of the

Scottish Government's failure to adequately respond to the housing shortage crisis, leaving children to spend Christmas after Christmas in houses that they cannot call home?

The Scottish Government claims that, in the current five-year session of Parliament, it will have built more than 30,000 units, but housing completions remain 40 per cent lower than before the economic downturn.

Margaret Burgess: In talking about completions, the member will recognise that more affordable housing is being built under this Administration than under previous Administrations. She is referring to the private sector and the recession.

Alison McInnes: One of the things that concern me is the constant conflation of affordable housing and social housing. Affordable housing does not mean social housing, and social housing is where we really need to start making a difference.

Margaret Burgess: Will the member take an intervention?

Alison McInnes: I ask the minister to let me make some progress.

Some 16,000 new-build houses were completed in the year ending March 2015, compared with 25,000 in the same period of time before the SNP took power. The Government can continue to blame the economic downturn or it can figure out a way to help those who need a place to live. I think that that is the spirit of Ken Macintosh's motion, and I would prefer us to discuss how we can collectively solve the problem rather than bandying figures back and forth. However, the facts speak for themselves. Of the 30,000 completions over five years, only two thirds are intended for social housing, which falls short of the recommendation from both the commission and Shelter Scotland that at least 10,000 new homes for social rent be built each year to start to meaningfully tackle Scotland's housing crisis. That means that, so far, 30,000 social housing units that have been identified as needed have not been built.

I welcome the announcement of a successor to the help-to-buy scheme, but I urge the Scottish Government to provide details as soon as possible. Although we have seen the positive 9 per cent rise in the number of new-build houses, we must recognise that that is largely due to the predecessor to the scheme and the private build sector driving progress. The fact that the right-to-buy scheme is being brought to an end in April next year and its expiration date is nearing makes the release of information on the help-to-buy scheme even more urgent.

In the north-east, the housing shortage affects not only individuals but whole communities.

Teacher and healthcare worker shortages are exacerbated by the lack of affordable housing, which is putting a strain on public services. We also need to consider innovative solutions to provide for the growing number of households that are headed by persons aged 65 and over, which is projected in the report to increase by 50 per cent between 2010 and 2035.

In addressing the housing shortage in Scotland, we need to heed the findings of the Commission on Housing and Wellbeing. A house, an education and respectable healthcare—these are the issues that we need to tie together. However, guaranteeing that each person has an appropriate, safe, warm house is the foundation stone for giving each individual a chance to experience the best standards of living.

15:55

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I thank the Labour Party for bringing the debate to the chamber. One of the most important things that anyone can have is a decent, warm, dry home. Many years ago, when I was the SNP's deputy convener for housing—it was even before I came to this place—I spoke at a conference in Europe, where countries dealt with rented accommodation entirely differently from how it is dealt with here. That was particularly the case on funding, and for many years I pushed for such funding here.

It is apt that we are debating the issue today, and I thank the Commission on Housing and Wellbeing for its report. The fact that the commission's members come from a wide range of backgrounds—the report states that only one member comes from a housing background, and I know that they are a very good spokesperson for the housing movement—is excellent and has ensured a broad sweep. The minister's amendment refers to the commission's good example of cross-sector working, which I am sure all of us welcome.

I commend the work that the Scottish Government has carried out in reaching 96 per cent of its target for building homes for social rent. As has been mentioned, a total of 54,186 affordable homes have been completed since 2007. However, we all recognise that we need more social rented accommodation and changes in the law, particularly in relation to the private rented sector. We need to work with various agencies including housing associations, councils and private landlords to achieve that.

A number of members have mentioned the planning process and the need for land release to enable houses to be built. That must be looked at, as must the release of brownfield sites. The Scottish Government has mentioned the release

of brownfield sites for building in my constituency, as has Glasgow City Council, but the problem in my constituency—and perhaps throughout Glasgow—is that, although there could be building on brownfield sites to bring people into the city, there are not many brownfield sites to build houses on. I will elaborate on that later. If that plan comes to fruition—I hope that it does—and we get more houses, they will not be in a city centre setting. We must take that on board.

In my constituency, brownfield sites are being used to bring folk into the area but, as people who live in Glasgow—including Patricia Ferguson and other members—will know, the only properties that are being built there are private student accommodation. Bob Doris will be aware of that as well. Absolutely no land is being made available in my constituency for social housing, which is a big issue that the minister is probably fed up of me writing to her about, as is Glasgow City Council.

I note what the commission's report says about the importance of neighbourhood and community—I think that it is on page 19. As Bob Doris mentioned, building communities is an important aspect for sustaining them. The problem that we have in Glasgow Kelvin is that thousands of units of student accommodation have been built where no social housing can be built, which means that, outside semester time, such places become ghost areas. I am not talking about places outwith my constituency; I am talking about Dumbarton Road, Bath Street and the city centre. It is not cheap student accommodation, either. It is not on campus; it is off campus.

I do not understand why Glasgow City Council continues—against the wishes of local residents, who the council is supposed to consult—to give permission for such accommodation to be built. An accommodation pod can be bought for £160,000. That is not the cost of student accommodation; it is simply someone trying to make money.

I have nothing whatsoever against students. I have met them, along with the universities. They are not using the accommodation. I met the developers to ask why they are not building social housing or any other type of housing and was told that the banks will not lend on anything other than student accommodation. The banks' interest rates are so low and the returns so great that people are buying into the student market.

The situation is partly to do with the recession, as has been mentioned; it is also partly about people speculating for money. The approach does nothing to enhance the areas where people live.

I thank Vivienne Nicoll of the *Evening Times*, who wrote an article on the amount of student accommodation, particularly in the west end in my constituency. She suggested that it is about time

that Glasgow City Council consulted the residents. Believe you me—the situation has become so bad that, when it comes to summer, there will be no communities in the areas affected. We desperately need to look at the matter. Perhaps we do not have the powers here in that respect, but we must encourage developers to build social rented housing.

We have some crackin—I am sorry; that is a very Glasgow phrase—

Drew Smith (Glasgow) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Sandra White: I am sorry, but I am in my last seconds.

We have some very good housing associations. Partick Housing Association wanted to buy land that it could move its offices to and build rented accommodation on, but the council sold the land to a private developer, and it was used to build another 1,000 student flats. I do not know how we overcome the situation, but we need to look at it from the perspective of those who live in the area and to make sure that the communities flourish.

16:02

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab): My postbag, like those of most elected members, is dominated by housing issues. In my 16 years as an MSP, that pattern has not changed. However, what has changed over time is the housing problems that I hear about. I will not rehearse all the issues that are brought to me, because we are all aware of them; I am sure that they are the same or similar to those that members across the chamber deal with.

As the commission's report recognised, access to a decent home is essential to an individual's social wellbeing. The lack of decent housing can have far-reaching consequences not just for social wellbeing but for all aspects of an individual's life.

For almost all my life, I have lived in the constituency that I am privileged to represent. I have witnessed at first hand the changes—good and bad—that have occurred in housing over the years: the slum clearance of the 1960s, when high-rise living and new towns replaced insanitary Victorian tenements; the growth in the housing association movement, which helped to give local people a greater say; and the radical move to stock transfer, to relieve Glasgow of historical debt that had stifled investment.

In 2015, my constituency is embarking on another period of great change. The lessons of the past must inform our actions in order to improve the housing situation for all our citizens. Housing provision must match aspiration and need if it is to work. Local people are being consulted about

what they want and need in their communities, through consultation events and planning charrettes. The Scottish Government has been involved in much of that work, too. Housing is no longer planned in isolation, which must be a good thing.

Bob Doris: As the local member for Maryhill and Springburn, does Patricia Ferguson feel that the people of Summerston were consulted adequately on the changes to the city plan that will redesignate the entire green-belt area for housing use but without putting anything in place to support the amenities or the environment there?

Patricia Ferguson: I will come to that later, if Mr Doris will bear with me. I plan to say a little about that issue.

Glasgow City Council's imaginative approach is outlined in its new residential development report. The council plans to build 25,000 new homes over 10 years and, with Glasgow Credit Union, it will introduce a mortgage guarantee scheme to help those who wish to own their own home. Working with the Wheatley Group, the council will deliver 1,700 new homes by 2022.

The Wheatley Group has been involved in building new homes in Royston, Sighthill and Maryhill in my constituency as part of the re-provisioning programme, and it has plans for a further 125 new homes in the Milton area of my constituency, which will be a good first step in regenerating that area. Over the past 16 years, I have consistently made the point that Milton has a number of brownfield sites that should be the focus of attention for developers. Unfortunately, developers are more attracted to greenfield sites, so we need to find a way to incentivise the use of brownfield sites over the use of green-belt land.

Over the past 16 years, I have consistently been against and have opposed every proposal that Glasgow City Council has made to build on the green belt in my constituency. That is not always popular, because people go on to live in the houses that are built on that green-belt land, but that has been my position and I have stuck with it over time.

The Maryhill and Sighthill areas in my constituency have been designated as transformational regeneration areas, and new housing in both areas is now being let to tenants, which is extremely welcome. In addition, it is planned that a memorandum of understanding will be signed with Scottish Canals that will increase regeneration around the Forth and Clyde canal area in north Glasgow, which will include a third phase at the Botany in Maryhill. Work will be done with the Bigg partnership to provide new private sector housing at the site of the former Diageo

factory at Port Dundas. Again, that is very welcome.

From the city deal, the sum of £898,000 will be released for the canal and north gateway, which will allow sites to be prepared and made ready for development. I spoke to two of the minister's predecessors about the possibility of finding a way forward for the site of the old Ruchill hospital, which is owned by a Government agency, that allows Scottish Enterprise to take advantage of the new road that the local authority has built for the new school in the area and to use that as part of the remediation and reuse of that land. I very much hope that the minister will agree with me on that.

Consultation has begun on the future of the Red Road site once the iconic flats there are demolished in October. My community consultation exercise in the area indicates that, although people want new housing to be built, they also want job opportunities and community facilities that will serve the people who will live there in the years to come. At its height, the Red Road estate housed around 4,000 people. For those of us who lived there then, a school and some shops seemed to be an afterthought. We were provided with state-of-the-art housing, but there were no community facilities until some years later. In my view, that is one of the reasons why the estate did not succeed in the way that it might have done.

It is clear to me that Glasgow City Council is leading the way by making dynamic partnerships with the Scottish Government, with the housing associations, with the credit unions in the city and with Scottish Canals. It is using its access to the city deal to make sure that the north of Glasgow is at the heart of its regeneration policy in the next five to 10 years. That is welcome, but it demonstrates that it is not just a question of providing good, decent accommodation. If the process is to succeed, it must provide all the other things that must accompany that—good community facilities, good infrastructure and a mix of housing that means that people have the houses that they need and those that they aspire to live in. Too often, we find that people cannot be housed in the size of accommodation that they need in the location that they need, and that is one of the areas that we must focus on in the years ahead.

16:09

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I have listened with great interest to this afternoon's debate and have come to recognise that this is not a new housing problem that we are discussing. However, I hope to demonstrate that the Government not only has at its heart the need to

make housing available but has done a considerable amount of work to improve housing standards in order to meet its ambitions set out in “Scotland’s Sustainable Housing Strategy” of 2013 with regard to the types of houses that we should be building in Scotland. During the period of house building that happened after the war, Nye Bevan said:

“While we shall be judged for a year ... by the number of houses we build ... we shall be judged in 10 years’ time by the type of houses we build.”

The quality and type of housing that we build are as important as the number of houses we build if we are to get this right for Scotland’s communities.

As a Central Scotland MSP, I have in my region the former Ravenscraig steelworks site, where the Building Research Establishment has developed its centre of excellence. This innovation park showcases sustainable housing for the future, with energy sustainability, affordability and community at its heart. That is very relevant, given that 3,500 houses are potentially going to be built on the Ravenscraig site.

The park, which was opened by Alex Neil in 2012, contains a house by AppleGreen Homes that is designed to reduce the input of energy, water and other resources while minimising the generation of waste and other environmental disturbances. Technologies from around the world are used to assist communities in achieving sustainable builds as well as on-going sustainable living. AppleGreen’s houses are built outwith the sites, usually with the help of local factories and small to medium-sized enterprises, and are then put up on the sites, and the jobs that are generated as a result of these AppleGreen developments put money back into local housing and communities.

Plot 5 in the BRE innovation park hosts the Zero Waste Scotland resource efficient house, which the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Food and Environment, Richard Lochhead, launched in September 2013. It is one of the first projects to be delivered by the Scottish Government’s resource efficient Scotland programme, which is managed by Zero Waste Scotland, and it has been built in partnership with Tigh Grian Ltd. This net zero carbon house will meet at least gold performance levels in fuel efficiency, and every element has been created with the need to lessen the impact of house building on the environment. Built to meet the 2016 Scottish building standards gold performance requirements and working to the waste regulations that came into force in 2014, this modular house shows the principles of resource efficiency, with the aim of bringing sustainable, affordable and repeatable family housing models to the construction market.

The site also hosts a refurbished house, which is a demonstration house involving Edinburgh Napier University and Historic Scotland and employing certain retrofit techniques. As we replace our housing and develop existing sites, it is imperative that we improve the performance of existing housing stock in order to meet our carbon dioxide reduction targets. This demonstration house will feed into the building industry and show best practice on retrofitting and retrofit solutions that work in the long term.

There is also a curriculum house that has been designed and developed by our country’s future designers and builders in conjunction with New College Lanarkshire’s computer-aided design, architectural design and construction courses, and, in partnership with the Forestry Commission, a timber house to showcase innovative use of home-grown timber products and other local products to ensure low-embodied-energy, healthy and thermally efficient dwellings in Scotland.

The reason why I have highlighted the BRE and the importance of the work that it is doing is that I know that the Scottish Government is absolutely committed to reducing fuel poverty. Since 2009, the Scottish Government has spent over £500 million on a range of fuel poverty and energy efficiency programmes to help more than a third of all Scottish homes to meet performance criteria.

Scotland’s energy efficiency programme—SEEP—will aim to provide multi-year funding to improve the energy efficiency of all Scottish buildings, both domestic and non-domestic. The Scottish Government has also committed an unprecedented £119 million to the fuel poverty and energy efficiency budget. That will be split between home advice and a variety of home energy efficiency programmes in Scotland.

The Government is not only delivering on its capital build in delivering new-build housing; it is looking at how we can create sustainable, fuel-efficient and effective homes for Scotland in the future.

I will touch on some issues that have been raised in the debate. Alex Johnstone talked about his concerns about how the socially rented sector might react to rent controls. I hope that he will also pay attention to the effect of the Department for Work and Pensions welfare reforms on that sector.

The Welfare Reform Committee visited Inverness to see the universal credit pilot being rolled out there. There were concerns that the average rent arrears for non-universal credit tenants was around £200 in the area, but that figure rose to £1,000 for universal credit claimants, and the average was £2,100 for those in temporary accommodation, particularly that serviced by the private rented sector. The reason

for that was the inability to pay directly to the landlords any more.

There were also concerns about the time limits. If somebody moves tenancy between their universal credit payments, one landlord could end up receiving the full amount. I hope that Alex Johnstone will pay attention to those concerns about the DWP that are being raised.

Do I have any more time, Presiding Officer?

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): You have about another 30 seconds.

Clare Adamson: Okay.

Bob Doris was right to say that we cannot take the issue out of the context of austerity. The Government not only has to deal with slashes in its capital build budget and the austerity agenda; it has to mitigate problems from council tax benefits and the bedroom tax and the other problems that come its way.

I will not do a comparison with what was done in the past, but if we look at the rate of social sector completions in Scotland per 100,000 of the population, we see that Scotland's figure sits at 65.3 per 100,000 of the population, whereas in Wales, where Labour is in power, the figure is only 24.6 per 100,000 of the population.

The Government is doing everything it can in the current climate to meet the housing needs of Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: I call Paul Martin, to be followed by Jim Eadie. I will be equally generous with time.

16:17

Paul Martin (Glasgow Provan) (Lab): First, I will touch on John Mason's contribution. He said that we should be concerned about using the term "housing crisis". I remind him that if a person is one of the 140,000 applicants who are waiting to be rehoused—I am sure that he has heard representations from many of them at his surgery—they will see it as a crisis. If a person finds themselves homeless and not able to access the housing that they require, that is a crisis. I am less concerned about the word "crisis" being used in the comfort zone of the debating chamber and the words that we have used, and more concerned about the action that is taken to follow on from that.

Bob Doris asked for a period of reflection on what Labour got wrong and what it got right. He advised that that is the case, but I did not hear from him what the SNP got wrong. Perhaps he wants to intervene to tell us what he got wrong.

Bob Doris: Will the member take an intervention?

Paul Martin: I will bring in Bob Doris in a second; I want to clarify my point. What Labour got right was writing off the housing debt in Glasgow and ensuring that people who lived in Glasgow were able to access good-quality housing as a result of the housing debt write-off.

John Mason: Will the member take an intervention?

Paul Martin: Give me a second.

What we also got right was investing in communities via the community-based housing association model—that has a proven record—and ensuring that we moved from a municipal system that was in place in Glasgow City Council to the community-based housing association model. I make no apologies for that and I am very proud of Labour's record in that respect.

I will allow Bob Doris to intervene and confirm what the SNP has got wrong.

Bob Doris: I am happy to describe two things that the SNP got wrong and one thing that Labour got wrong. First, we revised our housing association grant figure a bit too low, so we then adjusted it and made it higher, as I said earlier in my speech. Secondly, we did not take forward everything in "Firm Foundations: the Future of Housing in Scotland" following further consultation.

That is my reflection of what the SNP has got wrong. What Labour got wrong was insisting that housing stock transfer in Glasgow must be done en masse and bypass local community housing associations, and Labour should be ashamed of that fact.

Paul Martin: I think that housing should be in the democratic control of local people, which is the decision that local people took in Glasgow by a large majority. I have to say that, despite the artificial divisions that have been created by Bob Doris, the community-based housing associations across Glasgow want to work with the GHA and Martin Armstrong. That partnership approach is the way forward; it should be encouraged by the Government and not discouraged.

I pay tribute to those housing associations that have stepped up to the plate despite the challenges that they have faced, which include Milnbank Housing Association; NG Homes; the housing associations in Easterhouse that John Mason referred to: Blairtummock, Easthall Park, Provanhall and Wellhouse; the GHA; and the Wheatley Group. Since the 1970s, those organisations have been ensuring that regeneration takes place in their local communities, and they have to be commended for

their role in that. In many cases, the regeneration would not have happened without them.

I defy anybody to visit housing association properties in Glasgow and identify that they are housing association stock—many people have recognised that fact. In addition, many interventions have taken place via housing associations and local regeneration bodies to ensure that social enterprises are in place in communities. The associations have done all that despite the challenges that they have faced.

I welcome the apology from Bob Doris in respect of the reduction in the housing association grant level, because the SNP should apologise for that. Since 2007, there has been a significant decrease in the number of new builds via the community housing association model. I am pleased that Bob Doris has apologised for that today; he should be apologising for it because the community-based housing model actually works.

I invite anybody to visit new-build properties with me and see their quality; for example, Millennium Grove in Easterhouse looks as if it was built yesterday but it is called Millennium Grove because it was built in 2000. Such properties have been sustained and well managed because local people are in control. However, they have been discouraged by the Scottish Government's current approach to managing housing and ensuring that housing organisations are provided with the appropriate resources.

On a positive note, I welcome the help-to-buy scheme, which I think has been a success. I recognise that there are a number of challenges in ensuring that the qualifying criteria are addressed, but we should ensure that those with lower earnings should be able to access the scheme. I inform the minister that correspondence that we have received from Homes for Scotland indicates that it is still waiting, halfway through the new financial year, for information on what the help-to-buy criteria will be. Six months on from what should have been a new launch for the programme, with £185 million confirmed for it, can the minister not tell us what the qualifying criteria will be?

The lack of information is having an impact on local housing sales across Scotland. I do not often make a case in the chamber for housing developers and I do not have great sympathy with many of the challenges that they face, but I recognise that the help-to-buy scheme has been a success and that it should continue to be encouraged. Will the minister confirm in her closing remarks what action will be taken to ensure that the issue of the qualifying criteria is taken forward?

I always welcome a housing debate in the chamber, but we need to ensure that it is one that will address many of the challenges that face us on housing, including the 140,000 people who are waiting to be rehoused. I inform Bob Doris that that is no laughing matter for those individuals but a serious matter. For those on that housing list, who are waiting for the Government to intervene to ensure that they can get a decent home, it is no laughing matter. Members in this chamber should ensure that the Government takes action on the issue.

16:24

Jim Eadie (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP): I, too, welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. Like other members who have taken part, I commend the Commission on Housing and Wellbeing's invaluable work.

The commission's chair, Sir Robert Black, has said that the commission's work is about

"the central importance of having a safe, secure and suitable home that allows people to fulfil their potential, and a home that is embedded in and linked to a strong, vibrant local community"—

such as those described by Paul Martin and other members—

"where people can live good lives."

That aspiration—that vision for the role of housing in our society—is one that I share and which lies at the heart of the Scottish Government's own approach. In fairness, that aspiration lay at the heart of Ken Macintosh's speech, in which he set a consensual tone. He has clearly learned the truth of the old adage that you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar—although I suspect that that lesson is still to be learned by other members across the chamber.

As the commission's report outlines, investment in housing is critical to enable individuals to achieve good health, access educational opportunity and provide care for older people, and to ensure economic wellbeing through employment and income. Investment in housing will also allow society to achieve its ambitions in the areas of environmental sustainability and building strong and cohesive communities.

The Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee, which I have the privilege of convening, will next month host a session in which we will invite representatives of the commission and other stakeholders within the housing sector to engage in a round-table discussion on the commission's findings. All members are welcome to attend that.

The Scottish Government's record is a good one. The evidence for that can be seen in the £1.7 billion that has been committed to be spent over the lifetime of this parliamentary session; in the house-building programme, which over the lifetime of this parliamentary session will build 30,000 affordable homes, 20,000 of which are for social rent; and in the fact that council house building is at record levels—in fact, it is at a 25-year high. As someone who grew up and spent the first 21 years of their life in a council house, I believe that council housing should be at the heart of a mix of housing tenures, rather than be seen only as a safety net for those who cannot afford to rent or buy.

The commission pointed to the fact that almost half a million homes in Scotland have been sold under the right to buy. That massive diminution in council housing stock and the fact that councils were unable to spend capital receipts on modernising existing housing stock or building new council houses to replace those that were sold illustrate why the right-to-buy policy was not sustainable and why the Scottish Government was right to end it.

Among the commission's key findings are the facts that in 2013-14 50 per cent of all households renting in Scotland received financial support to help pay their rent and in 2011-12 housing benefit spending in Scotland was in the region of £1.8 billion, which was a 29 per cent increase on the 1996-97 figure. Housing benefit has become the main mechanism with which to help low-income households meet their housing costs. The commission highlighted that housing policy has shifted over the past 30 years from predominantly subsidising social house building to providing income-related subsidies to poorer tenants in rented accommodation. The ratio has moved from 4:1 in favour of housing supply subsidies in the 1970s to the same ratio in favour of income-related subsidies today.

How we bring about a shift back to subsidising bricks and mortar rather than means-tested personal housing subsidies is a challenge that we must address. Such a shift can only come about if we continue to expand subsidised housing supply and therefore help to make rents more affordable and reduce the need for personal subsidies.

In an excellent contribution, Sandra White highlighted the fact that financial institutions are willing to lend to property speculators who are investing in student accommodation but are unwilling to lend to the social housing sector—an issue that needs further exploration.

The commission highlighted a number of areas that we would do well to reflect on. One of them is temporary accommodation. I was pleased that, during the passage of the Housing (Scotland) Bill,

the Minister for Housing and Welfare, following representations from Shelter Scotland, Alex Rowley and me, laid the Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2014, which states:

“In all circumstances, accommodation is unsuitable if it is—

- (a) not wind and watertight; or
- (b) not suitable for occupation by children.”

That was done to ensure that all temporary accommodation is fit for human habitation. In that context, I welcome the commission's recommendation:

“There should be a significant reduction in the length of time any one household spends in temporary accommodation. Minimum standards for temporary housing ... should also be implemented.”

I look forward to further work on the matter.

The key issue is to maintain existing levels of investment and build on them in the years ahead. If we as a society invest more, we will achieve more. The commission has made a number of recommendations in that regard:

“The Scottish Government should increase the level of new building funded by the Affordable Housing Investment Programme to 9,000 houses each year over the period up to 2020. The social rented new build programme should be increased to 7,000 houses each year (an increase of 3,000 over the current level) and there should be a doubling of the mid-market rental new build programme which, together with the existing level of grants for new owner occupied houses, would provide 2,000 new houses each year.”

It will be for the Scottish Government and all the parties in the Parliament to reflect on those recommendations. It is open to any party, through the budget process, to make proposals to increase investment in the way that has been suggested. There is also a clear responsibility to set out how the investment will be paid for and what other funding commitments will have to be cut if that is to happen. John Mason made that point effectively.

In due course, parties will publish their manifestos for next year's election. The commission's report could be regarded as an opening bid for what should be in them. The commission said:

“The Commission recognises that public finances are likely to be under severe pressure for some time, with difficult choices required.”

We should not shirk those difficult choices. We should heed the call to action that the commission has made, so that we continue to deliver high-quality affordable homes for the people of Scotland.

16:32

Cameron Buchanan (Lothian) (Con): I, too, welcome this opportunity to discuss the importance of quality, affordable housing and to clarify the intentions behind a private tenancies bill and the consequences that such a bill could have.

I support the principle of providing security for tenants and safeguards for landlords, but I would not endorse some of the intrusive measures that are under consideration. A provision to remove the no-fault ground for repossession would severely deter investment in the private rental market, as it would be too sweeping, as would be any provision for rent control. Furthermore, the quality of housing in the private rented sector could be severely damaged, which plainly would not be in tenants' interests. That is what we must focus on: the genuine best interests of tenants and the long-term sustainability of the sector.

John Mason: Does the member accept that the quality of housing can be more substandard in the private sector, albeit not in every case? There needs to be more rather than less intrusive regulation.

Cameron Buchanan: Yes, I accept that that is right. There is an argument for that.

We all wish for tenants to receive a fair deal. We should use robust evidence to determine the context and the most effective way to ensure that the market is affordable and fair to all participants. On that note, it is worth bearing in mind that evidence shows that only in two of Scotland's broad rental market areas did rent increases exceed consumer prices index inflation between September 2010 and September 2014, which in effect means that rents fell in real terms over the period. In three areas, rents fell even in cash terms.

It is important that access to affordable housing is available, but the approach should ensure that the supply of properties matches rental demand. If that is to happen, it is clear that Scotland needs more homes to be built, but that must be done through a clear planning process, which strikes the correct balance between meeting housing needs and respecting local priorities.

All parties want access to quality, affordable housing throughout Scotland. That should be the target, without predetermined intrusions, and I would welcome more clarity from the Scottish Government on its intentions.

Where homes fall short of official quality standards, action should be taken, but it is important that consequences are analysed extensively before any damaging measures are enforced. Therefore, although tenant security is important, it would be wrong and highly

counterproductive to remove the no-fault ground for repossession. Not only would that be highly unfair and worryingly dismissive of landlords' rights, it would damage confidence in the sector and, more important, make landlords increasingly reluctant to let out properties, which is vital. Take the example of a retired couple who depend on income from a property to fund their retirement. They might rent it out in the knowledge that they could sell should they wish to at the end of a contract. Without the no-fault ground, that couple would no longer be in control of their retirement income, which would be extremely unfair. Furthermore, it is likely that many landlords in a similar situation would choose not to rent out their property, which would mean that, with fewer properties available to rent, tenants would be noticeably worse off in their search for a home. A fairer and more workable alternative could be to introduce a more accommodating approach to tenancy agreements that would allow participants to decide for themselves the ideal balance between security and flexibility.

Similarly, any provision to introduce rent controls or caps would be against tenants' best interests. They may notionally sound like a good deal for tenants, but the reality would be very different, and disastrously so. With rents unable to adjust to market conditions, landlords might choose to divest from the rental sector both in terms of making properties available to rent and in terms of maintaining the quality of those available. It would hardly be in tenants' interests for fewer properties to be available—and worse-maintained ones at that. Indeed, Shelter's chief executive has stated:

"although many have called for rent caps as the solution, we have found that this could add fuel to the fire by pushing landlords out of the market and making it even harder for renters to find a home they can afford".

The fact is that there is more demand for homes than there is supply. The long-term solution must therefore involve increasing the supply of housing. Disincentivising investment by landlords will obviously not help with that. What we need is properly thought-through development of all types of housing. However, that is where the often contentious planning processes are crucial. Refusal of all contentious planning applications is neither a viable nor a realistic option. However, our communities and local representatives are not powerless—or, at least, they should not be. However, as we Conservatives revealed recently, the Scottish Government overrules local authorities more often than not when appeals are taken to ministers. That is not how we should strike the balance between communities' needs and securing the quality homes that our growing population requires. There is certainly scope to improve the planning process so that

developments are more likely to be welcomed by local communities, and I await the proposals arising from the Scottish Government's review with considerable interest. What is already clear is that development that is driven by central Government appeals is not the answer.

I underline our drive to secure a rental market that is fair, competitive and in all participants' best interests. It is in that vein that we would strongly oppose any provision within a private tenancies bill that would restrict the ability of landlords to decide for themselves when to rent out their own property and would dangerously distort rent and investment dynamics with rent controls.

The quality of rental homes should be ensured by encouraging rather than discouraging investment, and affordability must be secured by a long-term increase in the housing supply. To achieve that, it is apparent that restrictive measures on landlords should be avoided, and that the planning process must be reformed so that it encourages sustainable development while respecting local needs.

16:38

Margaret Burgess: This has been a wide-ranging debate and it is clear that, across the chamber, we all agree on the importance of housing for Scotland's people and communities. Good housing has a positive impact on people's health and wellbeing and on neighbourhoods—Sandra White, Paul Martin and others mentioned how important the neighbourhood is.

Opposition speakers have been careful throughout the debate not to talk about how much their proposals cost and how much should be set aside for housing. However, we cannot discuss housing and house building without talking about finance. We have already said that our commitment of £1.7 billion is providing 30,000 affordable homes in the lifetime of this Parliament. That is despite cuts to our capital budget. We know that our budget will be squeezed further by Westminster, so we have to consider other ways of using the financial transaction money and of attracting finance into house building in Scotland.

However, even with those squeezed budgets, we are building more houses for social rent and affordable housing than any previous Administration. That includes houses built by RSLs. The total social housing built by this Government with squeezed budgets is 19 per cent higher than that built by the previous Administration with rising budgets. We have also increased the number of affordable homes that are being built. We have built 15,327 as opposed to the 9,000 that the previous Administration built.

We have to look at that and at how hard we are working to build more homes, given the constraints on our budget. It is not fair to talk about that without talking about the budget. I would appreciate it much more if the Opposition came to the chamber and said what it thought should be spent on housing and, as John Mason said, where it thought we should take the money from in the Scottish Government budget.

Michael McMahon: In his speech, Ken Macintosh asked the question that Homes for Scotland has asked about the help-to-buy scheme. Based on the consequential that were calculated as coming through that scheme, there was an expectation that the figure for housing would be around £600 million, but we appear to have an allocation of £195 million over three years. Where is the rest of that money? Has it been allocated to housing?

Margaret Burgess: The spending review has not yet been completed. We have said that we will allocate £195 million to help people to buy new-build houses in addition to what we are doing on social housing and affordable housing. We have already assisted more than 24,000 people to buy a house. Ken Macintosh said that it is a pipe dream for people, but we are assisting people to buy houses as well as providing houses for social and affordable rent.

Using a number of initiatives, we are making best use of that money. Through a range of innovative financing mechanisms, 3,000 affordable homes have been approved. We have the national housing trust. We are the first, and remain the only, Government in the UK and public sector body in Scotland to use charitable bonds to build affordable and social housing. We have enabled pension funds to invest in affordable housing, and we hope that that can be rolled out across the rest of Scotland.

In the private sector, we have supported Homes for Scotland's building the rented sector project, which focuses on attracting institutional investment into Scotland's new-build private rented sector. We continue to do that. I say to Alison McInnes that, in the Aberdeen key worker scheme, we are looking at working with local authorities to provide affordable housing for key workers who rent in pressured areas.

Local authorities determine how many homes they need. We talked about the elderly and accessible housing. We are looking at that with local authorities. We have made it clear that they must consider that when they produce their local housing strategies.

Clare Adamson mentioned the greener homes innovation scheme. Through that, we are also considering how we can provide more homes that

are greener and more energy efficient and cost people less in fuel bills, which we are all keen to see.

Every member mentioned the Commission on Housing and Wellbeing. Joint working across all sectors is the template that underpins the approach to improving Scotland's housing. Groups such as the joint housing delivery and policy group and the homelessness prevention and strategy group clearly illustrate our intent to work together. We very much appreciate the work of our partners in that—local authorities and housing associations. Paul Martin said that we were in some way trying to disassociate from housing associations. We welcome their work. They are a key partner for us and we recognise the work that they do in their local communities. They are community anchor organisations.

Paul Martin: I clarify for the record that I did not say that the Government disassociated itself from housing associations; I said that it did not fund them. The challenge is ensuring that they get appropriate funding for the work that they do.

Margaret Burgess: Paul Martin said that we do not fund housing associations, but we do. We work with them closely. We increased the subsidy to housing associations and have still built more RSL houses than the previous Administration did. We are also considering the report from the subsidy group just now. We work very closely with the housing association sector. We recognise the role of housing associations as community anchors and they also receive funding for many of their subsidiaries and projects from the people and communities fund. We very much recognise the wider role that they play.

Ken Macintosh: Will the minister clarify something? She said that the Government has increased the levels of HAG funding for housing associations, but Bob Doris earlier apologised for cutting funding. Who is right?

Margaret Burgess: I do not think that Bob Doris apologised—he certainly did not apologise on behalf of the Government.

With the pressure on the Scottish Government to build houses on very reduced budgets, the subsidy to housing associations was reduced. The associations still built houses with that reduced budget and we appreciate the work that they did on that. However, when the housing associations said that that budget was not going to be sustainable any longer, I set up a subsidy group. We then increased our grant in line with the recommendation from that subsidy group, which includes the housing associations and the community housing associations.

There has been a lot of talk about the private sector and what we are doing in that sector. We

continue to take action to reform the private rented sector to ensure that it meets Scotland's housing needs. We want to ensure that the private rented sector is properly regulated, with the interests of landlords and tenants being fairly balanced, so there is no olive branch—it was our intent to safeguard landlords as well because, as Ken Macintosh, Alison McInnes and others have said, we need the private sector. It is part of our housing system and we need to ensure that we can attract investment into it.

Alex Johnstone: A number of speakers, particularly on the Labour benches, have suggested—or given the impression—that rents in the private rented sector are rocketing. However, there seems to be evidence that, although surveys of advertised rents for property coming to the market may show rents to be rising, in reality the rents that are being paid in the private sector in many areas of Scotland are stable or, in some areas, falling. Does the Government have figures that can inform that debate and, if so, and if the Government has information that we do not have already, can that be made available to us?

Margaret Burgess: If the Government has figures on that issue, the figures will be publicly available. As Alex Johnstone has just said, there are some areas where private sector rents are stable, but we are very aware that there are hot spots where rents are increasing considerably. That is why we looked at rents in the private tenancies bill and why we have put a provision in the bill for capping rents in those areas.

We will shortly be introducing the private tenancies bill to Parliament. The bill will provide security, stability and predictability for tenants while giving landlords, lenders and investors the confidence to continue investing in the sector. I believe that that will achieve what Shelter is calling for in its making renting right campaign.

The new tenancy that we propose represents a significant transformative change and will enable tenants to better assert their rights and help them to feel part of the local community. I am sure that when Malcolm Chisholm sees our proposals, he will be happy with what we are doing, given what he has said.

As I am almost running out of time, I will finish by saying that, last week, I was speaking about the Government's record on housing at a Chartered Institute of Housing finance conference. Many of the organisations at the conference were worried about the changes that the Conservatives plan for England and their impact on the social rent budgets. There was concern that those changes would have a knock-on effect in Scotland. I was able to assure them that we have absolutely no plans to mirror the UK Government on that. Here in Scotland, we highly value and

promote social housing and social landlords in our communities.

It was clear at the conference that the value that we place on social housing is viewed very positively, especially by those outwith Scotland who are having to fight to maintain social housing. When people from outside Scotland wish that their representatives followed our lead, we can take some satisfaction that the measures that we are putting in place are the right ones.

What matters at the end of the day is that people in Scotland have a warm, safe, and affordable place to live that meets their needs. That is the ambition that this Scottish Government has for housing in Scotland.

16:50

Michael McMahon (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab): I recently discovered statistics that show that the number of vulnerable children in Scotland who are waiting for a home has increased by 400 in the past year, and that the number of children in temporary accommodation now stands at more than 4,500. I reiterate that statistic to do no more than highlight the shocking human cost of Scotland's current housing crisis.

The point that I want to make is that there is undeniably a crisis, regardless of the SNP's strenuous efforts this afternoon to deny the fact. When we see hundreds more children having to live in temporary accommodation because of a social housing shortage, the situation can be called nothing but a crisis.

When we debate the housing situation it is fine for us to use statistics, to make our arguments from differing perspectives and to offer various solutions. However, we should at least come together and agree on the fact that Scotland is facing the biggest housing crisis since the second world war.

It was regrettable—although predictable—to hear the minister and back benchers talk about the “council house versus housing association” straw-man argument. There is no place for that argument when we are talking about the number of people who are on housing waiting lists.

To bandy about figures from 1999, when circumstances were different from those in which the current Government finds itself because of financial pressures, does not help to move the debate forward. We must focus on what is required now, and not use statistics as Gil Paterson did. He is entitled to his opinion, but he cannot have his own facts.

Clare Adamson: Will Michael McMahon take an intervention?

Michael McMahon: I will make some progress first.

I sincerely thank Shelter Scotland for establishing its Commission on Housing and Wellbeing. We should listen to what the commission has to say about the crisis and commit ourselves to responding positively to the findings of its recently published report. As the commission stated:

“Although many households in Scotland live in satisfactory housing, we quickly came to the conclusion that there is ... a homes crisis.”

Obviously John Mason did not hear that message. He sounded more like Jim Callaghan: “Crisis? What crisis?”

We should look at the statistics that the commission produced: 150,000 people on waiting lists, 940,000 in fuel poverty, 73,000 in overcrowded accommodation, 29,000 homeless people and 40 per cent of social housing falling short of the Scottish housing quality standard. Such statistics demand action, not platitudes or spin.

Clare Adamson: I accept what Michael McMahon says about historical statistics, but will he recognise that the Institute for Fiscal Studies has highlighted that the Scottish Government spends 85 per cent more per head on social housing than is spent in England, and more than is spent in Wales, where Labour are in power?

Michael McMahon: Again, I accept the statistic, but comparing apples with oranges hardly makes for a very good argument to bring to the debate about what is happening in Scotland.

The reality is that, more than ever, we need real honesty in discussing the issue. That has been sadly lacking, as has been the case again in this afternoon's debate. The fact is that the Scottish Government has failed to tackle the slow rates of social and private sector house building, and we must recognise that.

However, in asking the Scottish Government to be honest, I will also be forthright and concede that no Government has ever built the number of homes that have been needed. Labour will now focus on how we can build both affordable homes and more social housing.

Historical trends in new builds showed peaks in the early 1950s and late 1960s, which resulted primarily from programmes of post-war reconstruction and slum clearances of which Labour is immensely proud. However, Labour must recognise that we did not sustain that progress when we had the opportunity to do so.

More recently, although the figure for the year to December 2014 was up by 4 per cent, that helped

us to reach a total of only 15,541, which is still 40 per cent below the post-devolution peak that was left by Labour and the Liberals in 2007. That is simply not good enough. We must have answers to the questions that house builders are asking so that we can promote house building to the levels that are required. We have heard some of those answers this afternoon. Sandra White was absolutely right to talk about the difficulty of finding solutions in urban settings, especially city-centre locations, but we should not have a counsel of despair, because there are innovative ways out there that we could use to address the problem. We heard about some from Patricia Ferguson and Paul Martin.

We have to identify how many more homes can be built and explain how that can be funded—the minister was absolutely right to make that point. However, that is where a requirement for even more honesty comes in. The additional money that we require to maximise house building to address the problem that our country faces might increasingly have to come from private finance, for example, via pension funds. As the Commission on Housing and Wellbeing concluded, we will also have to consider tax changes and other measures to improve the supply of land for housing if we are genuinely to tackle the problem. I agree with Homes for Scotland, which has argued that our planning system also needs to be reviewed so that it helps, rather than hinders, house builders.

John Mason: Michael McMahon talks about money perhaps coming from other sources, but that money would, essentially, still be a loan. Whether it is from a pension fund, a bank or anywhere else, it is, in effect, a loan that needs to be repaid with an interest-rate return. How will that help us to build more houses? We would still need grant, would we not?

Michael McMahon: Mr Mason has completely missed the point. I am talking about investment by private institutions in house building. That is not a grant to anyone; it is investment by the private sector. That is what we have to talk about—it is the kind of initiative that we have to discuss.

I see that the cabinet secretary wants to come in. He is probably going to talk to us about Falkirk, but that is the type of thing that we need to investigate.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners' Rights (Alex Neil): We have been at this for five years with the pension funds. The problem with pension funds is that the rate of return from the current level of rents would not be enough for them to fund the entirety of the houses that are being built by housing associations. That is partly why they are not investing to the level that I agree we should try to attract. In order to do it all through pension

funds, we would need to increase rents substantially—to well above their current levels.

Michael McMahon: The cabinet secretary has missed the point. I did not say that all the funding has to come from pension funds. They are just an example.

The commission also reported:

“a cold home is neither conducive to good health nor a satisfactory learning environment for children nor young people. There is a particular problem of potential hypothermia for older people who are unable—or unwilling—to pay to heat their homes to an adequate level.”

That highlights the need to make improving the energy efficiency of homes a key part of the Scottish Government's approach to improving wellbeing through housing policy. I totally agree with Clare Adamson on that and I commend the excellent work that is being done by Building Research Establishment Ltd at Ravenscraig.

As the campaign existing homes alliance Scotland has done, I welcome the Scottish Government's recent commitment to make energy efficiency a national infrastructure priority. The Scottish Labour Party manifesto for the 2015 UK general election had a similar policy, so we are glad that the Scottish Government is following our lead yet again. However, the Scottish Government has not yet set a long-term goal for the national infrastructure project.

The Commission on Housing and Wellbeing recommended:

“Regulations requiring owners to insulate their homes should have a part to play in securing the necessary improvement in insulation standards.”

The existing homes alliance has for some time supported the use of regulation in that regard, and I have to admit that I see a lot of merit in its argument.

However well we construct our homes or improve existing stock, we must first and foremost build the number of homes that are needed. I ask the minister again to explain why the Government has announced only £195 million over three years for the help-to-buy fund when, based on the consequential funding that we expected to receive from the UK Government, the Scottish Government will have received £600 million overall for the fund. Can the minister explain how it intends to use the balance and say whether it is still in the housing budget? Shelter has suggested that £200 million would be required from the Scottish budget to meet its target.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): You should draw to a close, please.

Michael McMahon: Will the Government commit to that type of funding? That is a vital

question, and the minister cannot duck it any longer. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister cannot intervene either; I am afraid that you are in your final 20 seconds.

Michael McMahon: I conclude by returning to the commission. I cannot find a better way of drawing the debate to a close than by endorsing the conclusion of Robert Black and his team on the Commission on Housing and Wellbeing. They state that they have delivered a

“call to action on one of the most serious and challenging issues facing Scotland now and throughout the next decade.”

The commission does not want its report to sit on a shelf. Faced with the current crisis in housing, I assure the Government that we in the Labour party will not allow that to happen.

Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exclusions and Exceptions) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2015 [Draft]

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-14189, in the name of Angela Constance, on the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exclusions and Exceptions) (Scotland) Order 2015. Any members who wish to speak in the debate should press their request-to-speak button now.

17:00

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Angela Constance): Presiding Officer, I begin by thanking you, business managers, committee conveners and members and parliamentary officials for support and co-operation in facilitating an accelerated timetable for scrutiny of the order amending the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exclusions and Exceptions) (Scotland) Order 2013. It is in the public interest to help minimise the disruption to the operation of higher-level disclosure checks and thereby minimise the risk to public safety.

Members might be aware that “higher-level disclosure” describes the overall system that allows for additional scrutiny of a person's criminal convictions. Among other purposes, it is used when someone wants to work with vulnerable groups such as in a nursery, as a medical professional or in a school, or when someone wants to work in a sensitive area such as offering financial advice.

There are two aspects to the higher-level disclosure system. First, it operates through individuals being responsible for disclosing information. Secondly, Disclosure Scotland issues certificates containing conviction information that is held on central police records.

Under the system of additional scrutiny, the information that must be disclosed by the individual and Disclosure Scotland includes convictions that have become spent under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974. Such information would not ordinarily be disclosed to an employer, but as things stand it comes under the higher-level disclosure system.

The operation of those two areas can be seen as mutually reinforcing, with information given by the individual in, say, completing a job application form being able to be checked by an employer against information that is contained in a higher-level disclosure such as a standard or enhanced disclosure certificate or a protecting vulnerable groups disclosure issued by Disclosure Scotland.

In June 2014, the United Kingdom Supreme Court found that the system of higher-level disclosures as it operated in England and Wales breached a person's article 8 rights under the European convention on human rights. Although the court fully accepted the need for additional scrutiny of a person's background if that person wants to work with vulnerable groups or in other sensitive roles, it considered that the automatic indiscriminate requirement for disclosure of all spent convictions was not proportionate because no assessment was undertaken of the relevance of the information to the need for the disclosure.

Although that decision related to the law of England and Wales, we have considered its relevance to the higher-level disclosure system in Scotland. Informed by developing thinking and case law in England and Wales and in Northern Ireland on how the balance of competing rights and interests should be struck, we have concluded that reforms should be made to Scotland's system.

The order deals with one aspect of the reformed system—the responsibilities of individuals to self-disclose spent convictions—and it adjusts the existing law that governs those responsibilities.

The changes will be reflected and complemented by changes to the disclosure of spent conviction information by Disclosure Scotland. Those changes will be addressed by way of a remedial order using the urgent procedure that is provided for in the Convention Rights (Compliance) (Scotland) Act 2001, which allows for a period of public consultation and parliamentary scrutiny after an order is made.

Expediting the procedure in respect of this order will ensure that the responsibilities of individuals and Disclosure Scotland to disclose spent conviction information will be aligned from the outset of the operation of the amended system.

We believe that the proposed changes will put beyond doubt that the disclosure system in Scotland complies with the European convention on human rights while ensuring that vulnerable people and the wider general public are protected. Although not all spent convictions will be routinely disclosed under the system, spent convictions for offences that are sufficiently serious, recent or relevant will continue to be required to be disclosed by the individual in the circumstances that are set out in the 2013 order.

The proposed amendments to the 2013 order set out two lists of offences. One contains the most serious offences—including serious violent and sexual offences—that will continue to be disclosed indefinitely, even when spent, in relation to the types of work that are specified in the 2013 order. The second list contains offences in respect of which a new set of rules, to be set out in the

order, will determine whether they are to be disclosed. Those rules take account of the period of time that has elapsed since conviction, the age of the offender on the date of conviction and the sentence imposed.

The order also adjusts rehabilitation legislation to take account of the amended system to be operated by Disclosure Scotland, in particular by ensuring that an individual need not disclose offences for which they may apply to a sheriff for an order to have them removed from a certificate, until that application to the sheriff is determined.

I reassure Parliament that members will have a further opportunity to scrutinise the underlying policy. Following the 60-day consultation after the remedial order is made, we will consider whether any changes are required. If changes are needed, they may also require to be reflected in the 2013 order. Any such changes would require to be made by a further affirmative order.

Presiding Officer, I hope that my remarks reassure you and members that Parliament will have a full and open role in the scrutiny process—albeit in an unusual format—with their views being listened to throughout. However, I also hope that members will agree that the amendments are necessary to ensure that our higher-level disclosure system continues to operate and helps to protect vulnerable people and the public more generally while balancing the rights of individuals.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exclusions and Exceptions) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2015 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: We have a little time in hand, so I would appreciate members' co-operation in helping me to get to 5.30.

I call Cara Hilton to speak for a minimum of six minutes, please.

17:08

Cara Hilton (Dunfermline) (Lab): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I will try to speak slowly, but that could be difficult.

Today's short debate on the draft Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exclusions and Exceptions) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2015 is important in ensuring that our disclosure system is fit for purpose and that we strike the right balance between protecting the public and enabling people with past convictions to make a personal and economic contribution to our society.

As the cabinet secretary outlined, the debate was made necessary by a number of legal actions in England and Wales and ultimately by the Supreme Court judgment that concluded that our

higher-level disclosure system was in breach of article 8 of the European convention on human rights. Scottish Labour appreciates that we must act speedily to ensure that Scotland is not in breach of human rights legislation.

It is pretty clear, too, that the system up to now has not been perfect, in that it has not always been proportionate. We want a disclosure system that ensures full and thorough scrutiny of people who work with vulnerable groups and protects our children and young people, but does not automatically require everyone to disclose convictions, which might have occurred a long time ago, regardless of the age of the offender at the time. The order aims to ensure that the right balance is struck, and we accept the Scottish Government's case for change.

We are concerned about the speed with which the order is being implemented. Tonight, we are being asked to agree a draft order that was laid only on Monday 7 September—just two days ago—yet that is in response to a UK Supreme Court decision that was made back in June 2014. In theory, there has been 15 months for the matter to be properly considered. I know that that was an issue of contention at yesterday's Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee. This morning, *The Herald* described the Government's approach as a

"scramble to change the law within two days",

with no real time for proper scrutiny or debate. I do not think that that reflects well on our Parliament, and it is not the best way to amend legislation that touches virtually everybody's lives.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): One of the reasons that was given at the committee yesterday for the shortened timescale was that, because there are 1,000 disclosures a day, holding the process up for three days would mean that 3,000 disclosures would not happen or would at least be delayed, so the committee kind of accepted that it was acceptable.

Cara Hilton: That is a fair point, which I will come to in a couple of pages' time. However, the public out there think that, as the court decision was made last June, surely the Parliament has had time to consider it before now. I think that it deserves much better scrutiny than we can give it in two days.

Central to our focus in the disclosure system should be our primary responsibility of ensuring that our system is robust and offers the best possible protection to children, young people and other vulnerable groups as well as the best service to organisations that require disclosures. It should not be about a rush to avoid legal challenge. Indeed, I echo the report of the Delegated Powers

and Law Reform Committee, which states that the Government's approach is

"most unusual"

and

"not one the Committee would wish to see becoming common practice."

The cabinet secretary has acknowledged the widespread concern about the accelerated process both today and in her letters this week to the Justice Committee, the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee and the Education and Culture Committee. That is welcome. She has also agreed that Parliament will undertake

"retrospective scrutiny and an opportunity for a revised order to be laid to take account of any issues arising out of that retrospective scrutiny."

However, as the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee concludes in its report, should Parliament approve the order today,

"this will be the law and further consideration by the Committee will be undertaken in that context."

That aside, we are prepared to accept that the Scottish Government has had little option but to ensure the passage of the order as quickly as possible. Given that, as John Mason has pointed out, Disclosure Scotland has ceased issuing higher-level disclosures to ensure public confidence in the system, if today's decision were to be delayed almost 1,000 certificates a day would not be processed or issued. Therefore, speed is of the essence. Delaying the decision would cause major hold-ups for people such as police officers, childcare workers and teachers who are going through the process at the moment, which is why Scottish Labour will support the order at decision time.

Our duty must be to do all that we can to keep our communities safe and the public protected, and that must be first and foremost when it comes to changes that affect children, young people and the most vulnerable groups. We also need to ensure that the system is proportionate and does not undermine the rights of people who have had less serious convictions in the past and are now looking to play a positive role in our society and our economy.

Until now, many of the disclosures that people have made have been unnecessary. An example that was given in the Supreme Court ruling was of a woman who was refused a job in a care home eight years after receiving a caution for shoplifting. We have all had constituents come to us and tell us about a job opportunity that they have been denied because of a speeding conviction many years ago or because they were involved in trouble as a youngster and, decades on, are still being made to pay the price.

For too long, rules that enforce blanket disclosure or the disclosure of irrelevant or unreliable information have blighted people's lives. We all know that disclosure of even the most minor criminal convictions can have a huge impact on individuals when they seek employment. That impacts especially on men, who are three times more likely than women to have a criminal conviction. Having to disclose previous criminal activity can have an on-going impact on people's ability to gain employment, attend university or college, volunteer or even open a bank account, while all the evidence suggests that the key to ensuring that people do not reoffend is ensuring that they have a stable job, access to education and positive family relationships, allowing them to move on and play a positive role. Those opportunities are being denied to some people because of the way in which the system operates at the moment.

That said, there will be public concern about the list of the types of offences that now might not be disclosed, which is maybe cast a bit too wide. For example, that list, which is contained in schedule B1, includes public indecency and perjury. I hope that, in the 120-day period that Angela Constance mentioned, there will be sufficient opportunity for retrospective scrutiny and for any concerns to be fully taken on board. I am sure that the Scottish Government will fully engage with all the Parliament's committees, the relevant stakeholders and, indeed, the public during that period.

I would welcome assurances from the cabinet secretary that Disclosure Scotland and its staff will be fully resourced and trained to adapt to the changes that we will agree today.

Ultimately, the changes are about striking a balance between public protection and people's right to have their privacy respected. Although I emphasise once more that we are a bit concerned about how the order has been handled and how that reflects on our Scottish Parliament, Scottish Labour will support the Government's motion.

17:15

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I am very pleased to participate in the debate on the amendment order, which was brought to our attention last week. I, too, would like to thank the business managers, the cabinet secretary and her officials and the Minister for Parliamentary Business for keeping members informed of the circumstances surrounding the proposed changes to the higher-level disclosure system.

Two issues need to be addressed. The first is the proposed reforms themselves; the second is

the accelerated process that is required in order to achieve their implementation.

On the reforms, let me be clear that robust scrutiny of their backgrounds should be a prerequisite for individuals who are seeking employment in sensitive roles, with vulnerable groups, or in positions of trust and responsibility. If a conviction is spent but is sufficiently serious and relevant to the role's remit, that should always be disclosed. The gold standard must be that we ensure the safety and security of people who are at risk. Therefore, rigorous tests need to be in place—we simply cannot condone a soft-touch approach on such an important issue.

Equally, the current system, which requires self-disclosures of all convictions, regardless of how old and potentially minor they may be, is undoubtedly anachronistic and, we accept, could in some cases be unfairly prejudicial. As the cabinet secretary said, in June 2014, the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom ruled to that effect, but the particular circumstances of the two cases that give rise to the ruling could not have occurred in Scotland. Nevertheless, it is right that the disclosure system is also under review north of the border.

Based on the evidence so far, the proposed changes seem to be proportionate and acceptable. However, when looking at schedule B1 on "Offences which are to be disclosed subject to rules"—Cara Hilton touched on the issue—we have concerns that individuals with previous convictions for offences such as fire-raising, fraud, housebreaking, theft and public indecency could end up working in sensitive roles and with vulnerable groups. Although I appreciate that non-disclosure of the offences will be dependent on a number of variables—for example, the disposal given and the passage of time since conviction—I very much hope that in practice it is exercised judiciously and sensibly.

It is also important that the public fully understand the forthcoming changes to the higher-level disclosure system and the implications that the changes will have on future employment, where applicable. The reforms are fairly technical, and the effect of such changes will need to be communicated clearly, transparently and accessibly.

I will turn briefly to the accelerated procedure necessitated by the affirmative order. I understand that Disclosure Scotland has ceased issuing higher-level disclosures to ensure public confidence in the system. That is obviously a cause for concern, given the sheer volume of disclosure certificates—around 1,000 a day—that will not be processed as the instrument is being scrutinised.

We support the action that has been taken today by the Government and we support the measures that have been outlined by the cabinet secretary in the debate. We ask the Government to monitor the situation closely to ensure that it has no adverse effects. We also ask that Parliament be kept fully informed about implementation and potential changes.

The Presiding Officer: I call Nigel Don to speak on behalf of the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee. I would be obliged if you would continue until 5.25, Mr Don.

17:20

Nigel Don (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I will be happy to try to do so.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee about an extremely important statutory instrument that was published only on Monday afternoon. That meant that, when it came to my committee yesterday morning, we had had relatively little opportunity to scrutinise it. As other members have said, the instrument will change the rules on the responsibilities that individuals have to self-disclose. It will also adjust the rules on what information about an individual's previous criminal activity can be used against that individual in various proceedings.

I thank not only the Government for keeping us informed of the possibility that the order might arrive, but my committee's clerks and our legal advisers, who must have burned some candle wax in providing advice to us on it. I also thank members of the committee for their robust scrutiny of the order over an hour and 40 minutes yesterday morning, and I note that the office of the official report turned round its work very quickly so that not only our report but the *Official Report* of the meeting were published yesterday afternoon, thereby giving all members an opportunity to find out what had happened.

The exceptional circumstances and timing of the order have already been noted. As a committee, we would not expect such circumstances to arise very frequently, and I am sure that they will not.

In the limited time that has been available to my committee, we have not been able to draw quite as many conclusions as we do on all the other instruments that come before us, but we have drawn the conclusion that there is no reason why we should report the order. I will quote from the committee's report:

"In the time available to it to consider the draft Order, the Committee has not formed the view that the instrument raises a devolution issue. Nor however can the Committee be confident that no such issue arises. The Committee

considers that some of the policy choices which have been made in the draft Order require further investigation with regard to the tests laid down by the UKSC in the *T and another* case. Further, in the evidence gathered to date, Members recognised that within the range of potentially Convention-compatible solutions, distinct policy choices have been made which the relevant lead Committees will wish to explore".

John Mason: I appreciate what Nigel Don says, and I very much agree with the conclusion that the committee—of which I am the deputy convener—came to.

The UK Supreme Court raised the point that

"no assessment was undertaken of the relevance of the information disclosed to the purpose for which the disclosure was required."

Does the member accept that there is a bit of uncertainty about that, because although there is a right of appeal, in a sense, Disclosure Scotland does not consider the purpose?

Nigel Don: John Mason rightly and helpfully brings out the one point that was a slight concern to us. To put that in context, I make it clear that what the cabinet secretary laid before us was a set of rules. We accept that it needs to be a set of rules: we cannot have the circumstance in which anyone in Disclosure Scotland is required to exercise their discretion in coming to a view on applicability of the rules, because that would involve Disclosure Scotland acting as some kind of tribunal, which it is not.

The rules as laid down clearly pick out the different categories of offence, the time that has elapsed since the offence took place and the age of the offender at the time of conviction. However, as John Mason has pointed out, it is clear that they do not specifically cover the relevance, or otherwise, of a conviction to the job for which the individual is applying. I think that all parties will have to consider that, but I make it clear that that is not a reason for reporting the order.

The committee is entirely comfortable that the order satisfies the primary test and does not see why it should be reported. We believe that, fundamentally, it is capable of satisfying article 8 of the European convention on human rights, and we have reported accordingly.

17:25

Angela Constance: I start by welcoming the very constructive contributions from Cara Hilton, Mary Scanlon and Nigel Don and the two interventions that John Mason made. Once again, I thank Parliament for agreeing to this accelerated process and pay tribute to members for understanding the position that we have had to start from, which is that the UK Supreme Court's decision and the subsequent case law have

caused us to consider the operation of higher-level disclosures. I appreciate members' acceptance of and support for the Government's conclusion that change is necessary.

We are of the view that changes should be made to ensure that disclosure of spent convictions is more proportionate, so the reforms seek to strike the right balance between public protection being first and foremost and, of course, the rights of individuals. The reforms will continue to ensure that vulnerable groups are protected and that a person's background is assessed for relevant convictions.

It is also important to stress that the most serious convictions will always be disclosed and that under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 some convictions, in particular for offences that have warranted a custodial sentence of 30 months or more, will never be spent. The reforms will allow people who have had minor criminal convictions to put their past offending behaviour behind them, thereby enabling them to become more productive members of society instead of being penalised for very old and minor convictions.

I have already acknowledged to Parliament that we have taken the time to understand the direct relevance of each element of the UK Supreme Court judgment, the emerging case law and how all that applies in a Scottish context. Mary Scanlon is right that the original case that went to the Supreme Court could never have happened in Scotland, but we have had to take a very careful and close look at standard and enhanced disclosures and at the protecting vulnerable groups scheme, and then to develop the complex policy and operational solutions that are needed to implement an amended disclosure regime for higher-level disclosures.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Will the cabinet secretary write to me about the exclusion relating to proceedings before the Mental Health Tribunal for Scotland or the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland, because I found it very difficult to understand why there was still a disapplication in that respect.

Angela Constance: I give that undertaking to Dr Simpson. At yesterday's committee meeting, we began to focus on other aspects, including firearms and gambling legislation. We also need to address concerns that Dr Simpson might have with regard to mental health or the Mental Health Tribunal for Scotland; I give him my personal undertaking that we will do so in the fullest possible terms.

It is important to acknowledge that irrespective of the length of time that passed before we came to Parliament, we would always have sought an expedited process. We have used this unusual

parliamentary process to ensure as little disruption as possible to the issuing of higher-level disclosures; indeed, as members have pointed out, each day that Disclosure Scotland does not operate means that another 1,000 higher-level disclosure applications cannot be processed. We have sought to minimise that disruption to three days because we all understand that disruption is undesirable and that it has an impact on an applicant's ability to secure a job and an impact on an employer's ability to fill vacant posts. Nonetheless, I reassure members that Disclosure Scotland is fully resourced and ready to deal with that three-day backlog as quickly as possible and that it is confident that it will still meet its targets in relation to completing 90 per cent of applications within 14 days.

My final point is about continued scrutiny. The Scottish Government will welcome continued scrutiny of all those matters. There are 120 days: 60 days for written views to be submitted and another 60 days for committee reports. There will have to be a further parliamentary statement. More fundamentally, we want to ensure that we have the right offences on the right lists, so we will work very closely with Parliament to ensure that the detail of the affirmative order is absolutely right.

The remedial order will be laid tomorrow, and it will come into force on the same day as the affirmative order. That allows for correction of potential incompatibilities and actual incompatibilities with the ECHR. We believe that the changes that we propose to Parliament will underpin a disclosure regime in Scotland that is compatible and complies with the ECHR and will continue to protect the public.

I am grateful to Parliament and seek its support for the draft order.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes a very short debate on the draft Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exclusions and Exceptions) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2015.

Business Motions

17:31

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S4M-14191, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a revision to the business programme for Thursday 10 September.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Thursday 10 September 2015—

delete

2.30 pm Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee and Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee Debate: Internationalising Scottish Business and Freight Transport in Scotland

and insert

2.30 pm Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee Debate: Internationalising Scottish Business

followed by Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee Debate: Freight Transport in Scotland—[*Joe FitzPatrick.*]

Motion agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next item of business is consideration of business motion S4M-14175, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following programme of business—

Tuesday 15 September 2015

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Responding to the Global Refugee Crisis

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 16 September 2015

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions
Justice and the Law Officers;
Rural Affairs, Food and Environment

followed by Scottish Government Debate: Scotland's Future, Democracy and Devolution

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 17 September 2015

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

12.30 pm Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Scottish Government Debate: The Future of Renewables in Scotland's Energy Policy

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 22 September 2015

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions (if selected)

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 23 September 2015

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions
Health, Wellbeing and Sport

followed by Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 24 September 2015

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

12.30 pm Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Scottish Government Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time—[*Joe FitzPatrick.*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:32

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-14173, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Public Records (Scotland) Act 2011 (Authorities) Amendment Order 2015 [draft] be approved.—[*Joe FitzPatrick.*]

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

Her Majesty the Queen

17:33

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Before we come to decision time, I would like to say a few words to mark a special occasion.

As we commemorate the milestone of our longest-serving monarch, I had the pleasure and privilege to be with Her Majesty the Queen today. I was therefore in the very fortunate position to be able to pass on in person best wishes and warmest congratulations on behalf of the Scottish Parliament.

During the event today—the wonderful opening of the Borders railway—I saw yet again the commitment of a woman who has worked through decades of public service. That incredible commitment has not diminished with the passing of time.

I am sure that all MSPs will wish to join me today in marking a landmark moment not just in our history, but in the remarkable and dedicated journey of one woman's life of public service. [*Applause.*]

Decision Time

17:34

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): There are five questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S4M-14167.2, in the name of Margaret Burgess, which seeks to amend motion S4M-14167, in the name of Ken Macintosh, on housing and wellbeing in Scotland, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Allard, Christian (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)

Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

Against

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Baxter, Jayne (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)
 Buchanan, Cameron (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)
 Hilton, Cara (Dunfermline) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McMahan, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMahan, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Rowley, Alex (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 63, Against 54, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S4M-14167.1, in the name of Alex Johnstone, which seeks to amend motion S4M-14167, in the name of Ken Macintosh, on housing and wellbeing in Scotland, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)
 Buchanan, Cameron (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Allard, Christian (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Baxter, Jayne (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)

Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hilton, Cara (Dunfermline) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMahan, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMahan, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (Ind)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 14, Against 103, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-14167, in the name of Ken Macintosh, on housing and wellbeing in Scotland, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Allard, Christian (North East Scotland) (SNP)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Baker, Richard (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Baxter, Jayne (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Crawford, Bruce (Stirling) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hilton, Cara (Dunfermline) (Lab)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)

MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Marra, Jenny (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMahan, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMahan, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

Against

Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)
 Buchanan, Cameron (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (West Scotland) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Lamont, John (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McGrigor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Abstentions

Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (Ind)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 95, Against 18, Abstentions 4.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament welcomes the report of the independent Commission on Housing and Wellbeing, *A blueprint for Scotland's future*, and the crucial importance that it places on securing a decent home for each and every Scot to ensure individual and social wellbeing; notes that the commission is a good example of the type of cross-sector working that is so important to ensuring that civic Scotland and government work together to find positive policies for Scotland; welcomes the Scottish Government's £1.7 billion investment and commitment to deliver 30,000 new affordable homes by next year; welcomes and commends the hard work of many stakeholders that seek to ensure, as the Scottish Government does, a modern private rented sector that is fit for the needs of today's tenants and landlords, and looks forward to the Scottish Government's Private Tenancies Bill, which will ensure stability, security and predictability in the private rented sector."

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-14189, in the name of Angela Constance, on the draft Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exclusions and Exceptions) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2015, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exclusions and Exceptions) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2015 [draft] be approved.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-14173, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on the approval of a Scottish statutory instrument, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Public Records (Scotland) Act 2011 (Authorities) Amendment Order 2015 [draft] be approved.

Seal Deaths and Population Decline

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-13880, in the name of Roderick Campbell, on the Scottish oceans institute's work on seal deaths and population decline. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes what it considers to be the impressive work of the Scottish Oceans Institute (SOI), which is based at the University of St Andrews; understands that its mission is to "bring together the people, interdisciplinary skills and supporting scientific services necessary to deliver world class research in marine sciences"; praises what it believes to be the assiduous work into marine mammal research, particularly in relation to unexplained seal deaths and harbour seal decline; notes that recent publications have posited a new theory suggesting that grey seal predation is the cause of "corkscrew deaths" but that no definitive answer has yet been found to explain why seal numbers on Scotland's coasts are declining so rapidly; commends the efforts of the staff and students at the SOI for their ongoing work; notes proposals for a brand-new building to accommodate the institute, and looks forward to further publications that may help to halt, and reverse, seal population decline.

17:39

Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank everyone who has stayed to take part in the debate and I welcome Dr Bernie McConnell of the sea mammal research unit, which is part of the Scottish oceans institute at the University of St Andrews, who is in the public gallery.

I should declare that I am the Scottish Environment LINK species champion for harbour seals. I must concede that prior to that illustrious appointment I had little knowledge of the problems faced by harbour seals. Although I was notionally aware of decreasing seal numbers on Scotland's eastern and northern coastlines, I have been quite surprised to learn just how significant the fall in numbers has been in recent years.

What does the SMRU do? It provides the United Kingdom's main science capability in the field of marine mammal biology and it is funded in part by the Natural Environment Research Council. Although the SMRU carries out most of its research on dolphins, whales and killer whales, it carries out most of its NERC-funded research on seals. Other significant funding for the SMRU is provided by the Scottish Government and bodies including the European Union, non-governmental organisations and even the Ministry of Defence.

A notable achievement for the SMRU came in 2012, when the University of St Andrews was awarded a Queen's anniversary prize in

recognition of the unit's outstanding contribution to understanding and protecting the oceans. The university was described as

"a world leader over many years in work aimed at understanding and improving the global marine environment".

It is fitting that I should mention some of the SMRU's work in recent years on seal population decline. The Conservation of Seals Act 1970, which was replaced by the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010, placed a duty on the NERC to provide relevant and timely advice about the management of UK seal populations. That work is carried out by the SMRU on behalf of NERC. In addition, in 1992 an ecological quality objective for harbour seals was set out in the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic, which states:

"there should be no decline in harbour seal population size ... of $\geq 10\%$ as represented in a 5-year running mean".

The SMRU's recent findings have indicated, however, that there have been declines in population numbers well in excess of the 10 per cent limit.

The decline in areas such as Shetland, Orkney and south-east Scotland, including the Tay estuary, has been markedly steep. In the Firth of Tay area, harbour seal numbers have fallen from approximately 800 in 1995 to almost 50 during the time of the most recent survey a few years ago. The question on everybody's lips has been why.

My motion refers to "corkscrew deaths" and there have been developments since it was circulated to members for support. So-called corkscrew deaths are characterised by a seal displaying a smooth, continuous wound with clean-cut skin, with the injury starting at the head and spiralling down around the body. Such injuries were first spotted at the end of the previous decade. In 2011, the SMRU started its research into unexplained seal deaths, including those that had occurred due to corkscrew injuries. The SMRU's initial hypotheses suggested that the wounds could not be inflicted by any known predator. Instead, it believed that ducted propellers on ships were a possible cause of the damage. Despite all the work and investigations that were carried out, the initial conclusions, whereby predators were not to blame for the deaths, were proven to be at least partially incorrect.

Several adult grey seals were observed on the Isle of May catching and killing grey seal pups and harbour seals. One particular adult grey seal was tagged on the Isle of May and followed to Germany, where it displayed the same behaviour. The wounds displayed on the carcasses that the SMRU observed and recovered were consistent

with previous corkscrew injuries. Why is that important? As recently as February 2014, the Scottish Government and the UK Government were put under pressure to ban the use of covered propellers on the basis of the SMRU evidence. Despite new evidence, the SMRU suggested that it would be "premature" to completely discount the possibility that some corkscrew injuries are caused by interactions with propellers.

That is further evidence of the fact that additional research is required to confirm what is causing population decline. Is it increased interaction with grey seals and competition for resources? Is it predation by grey seals? Is it biotoxins present in Scotland's waters? Is it shooting of seals? Unhelpfully, the simple answer is that it could be any or all of the above. It could equally be something else altogether. Far more research is required not only to identify exactly what is causing such a decline in seal populations in Scotland, but to explain the discrepancies in declines.

I mentioned that populations in south-east Scotland have declined and that predation by grey seals has been confirmed. By contrast, on the west coast of Scotland harbour seal numbers are increasing, as are grey seal numbers, with no confirmed predation problems. The biotoxins to which I referred—specifically domoic acid, which can cause amnesic shellfish poisoning—are subject to on-going research; I hope that the SMRU agrees that a lot more research in the area is required.

I am aware that some of what I have said might be controversial and that the SMRU's findings earlier this year on the causes of corkscrew deaths attracted widespread attention. Some bodies, not least Whale and Dolphin Conservation, considered the new advice inappropriate, urging that precautionary mitigation advice be given until the causes of death are clearly understood.

In recent weeks there has been reference to seal shooting. Data were published, under freedom of information provisions, on the number of seals that have been shot at salmon farms in Scotland. The statistics revealed that 176 seals had been shot over the past two years to protect fish stocks, with almost half the shootings taking place in Shetland. For the purposes of this debate, however, there is scant evidence that legal shooting is a contributory factor.

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I wonder whether the seals that the salmon farmers were shooting were mostly grey seals or common seals. Also, I believe that a few years ago a disease was killing common seals but not grey seals. Does the member know about that?

Roderick Campbell: I know about the latter issue; I would have to pass on the first question. However, I want to focus on the subject of the debate and not get too drawn into the controversial issue of seal deaths at salmon farms.

The Scottish oceans institute has a lot to offer in the field of oceans research and I am sure that its new building, the construction of which will commence in the not-too-distant future, will help to ensure that more innovative research is done. The SOI's existing premises are impressive but small and outdated. Presiding Officer, I hope that you will forgive my unavoidable aquatic joke when I say that SMRU staff are packed into their current premises like sardines in a tin.

I hope that the unit can continue its invaluable and impressive work and that the Scottish Government and NERC, the main financial contributors, will continue to fund it to allow it to do so.

17:47

Cara Hilton (Dunfermline) (Lab): I thank Roderick Campbell for securing this debate on the Scottish oceans institute's important work. As the deputy convener of the cross-party group on animal welfare, I am increasingly aware of and concerned about seal deaths and harbour seal decline.

Scotland has a proud naval and fishing tradition and many communities up and down our east coast rely on marine resources to sustain the local economy. Many of my constituents are employed at Rosyth dockyard, working on the new Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers. However, our harnessing of the sea's resources cannot be tolerated when it becomes exploitation.

A report by the sea mammal research institute, which Roderick Campbell mentioned, concluded that the most likely cause of seal corkscrew deaths was the ducted propellers on ships operating in shallow coastal waters, which were sucking seals into the slipstream and causing horrific and distinctive corkscrew-shaped lacerations along the length of the seal's body.

Although we recognise the importance of our seas to our economy, we must also remember our responsibilities as users of the sea. More than 80 seals, including 32 harbour seals, have died in the Firth of Forth near my Dunfermline constituency, and there is every likelihood that the injuries that I described are much more widespread than the figures suggest. We certainly do not fully understand the causes of corkscrew deaths, which is why it is important that the Scottish Government continues to support the Scottish oceans institute's innovative work in an important and underresearched area. I also commend the work

of veterinary services at Scotland's Rural College in Inverness on post mortems after unexplained seal deaths.

It is essential that we take a rigorous approach that is based on the best possible scientific evidence. Therefore, I hope that the Scottish Government will continue to provide all the support that it can do to the bodies that have been mentioned and their work.

I now turn to the new report by the Scottish oceans institute, which we are debating today. There are some concerns to be raised concerning the release of the research. The report suggests a new theory, which is that the corkscrew deaths that have been suffered by seals might be caused by predatory attacks by other grey seals. That new theory might be the key to saving dozens of seals' lives over the next few years, but it is important to note that the report emphasises that we still do not have a categorical answer to the question why seal populations are dropping so rapidly. It is therefore concerning that the Scottish Government chose to fast-track publication of evidence of the new theory and release the information to the shipping industry before official publication.

In April, documents that were released under freedom of information legislation and were originally reported in the SNP's favourite daily, *The National*, revealed that Government officials planned to brief the UK shipping industry two days before publication, while leaving environmental groups to read the report at a later date. Given those circumstances, it is difficult not to agree with the view of Sarah Dolman, of Whale and Dolphin Conservation, who said:

"The tone of the advice to ministers, and speed with which it was delivered, suggests that helping industry is the government's prime concern, rather than protecting Scotland's precious wildlife".

She went on to say:

"Officials seem more anxious to keep the shipping and renewables industry sweet, than to enact precaution and ensure that all possible causes of seal deaths are minimised."

For the sake of Scotland's seals, I hope that Ms Dolman is just being cynical.

I welcome the work of the Scottish oceans institute and its aim of using interdisciplinary skills to develop world-class research in marine sciences. I also welcome the report and the opportunity that it gives us to curb the rapid decline in seal populations that affects the Forth and other Scottish marine areas. I really hope that the report is not used by some as an opportunity to dodge responsibility for seal deaths.

Whale and Dolphin Conservation says that, if the Scottish Government does not act, our harbour seals could disappear from the Forth and the east

of Scotland within 20 years. We must act to ensure that our marine protected areas are conserved, enhanced and protected for the future and are managed to meet the needs of people and nature.

17:51

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): I congratulate my friend and colleague Rod Campbell on securing the debate. He is a hardworking constituency MSP, and I would expect nothing less from him than for him to highlight the impressive work that is being carried out in the part of the country that he represents.

However, in a broader sense—I say this as a member of the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee—I welcome the chance to consider the Scottish oceans institute's research into seal deaths and population decline. In passing, I acknowledge some other fine work that is being done at St Andrews on the development of seal scaring devices that are deployed around salmon farms in the west of Scotland in order to protect the crop from predation and reduce the need for shooting. Thanks to St Andrews, not only are we developing a better understanding of why seal numbers are declining in some parts of the country but we have the emergence of measures to actively mitigate a possible contributory factor in the decline overall.

The sea mammal research unit of the SOI, which next year celebrates its 20th birthday, provides statutory advice to the Scottish Government on seal management issues through the NERC. As the motion notes, the unit was commissioned to carry out research into harbour seal declines and the specific issue of corkscrew deaths. That work has progressed to the point at which, as we have heard, it is now thought that competition from larger grey seals is the likeliest cause of the former problem and that grey seal predation is the likeliest explanation of the latter, with greys now being found in areas that were previously occupied only by harbour seals.

Further, I believe that there is currently a strand of Scottish Government-commissioned research into interactions between seals and salmon net fisheries—a subject that has attracted quite a lot of attention in the media of late. That, too, is welcome, as we really need to move away from the polarised and often emotive opinions on the issue and get the hard facts that are required to appropriately shape future policy.

The Marine Scotland Act 2010 has provided far greater protection for seals than was previously the case. We are also now far more open in providing details of how many seals are shot under licence, with figures indicating a pronounced

fall since the act was introduced. The better we understand the causes of declining populations and how shooting contributes—or does not contribute—to that, the more informed the decisions that can be taken.

On the subject of seals and science, we have recently seen another thread developing: that of the extent to which seals might be responsible for the falling numbers of salmon that are to be found in some of Scotland's rivers. We desperately need solid science as we seek to understand the falling numbers of salmon that make it back into our rivers. We are told that changing sea temperatures might be at fault, or that the electromagnetic currents emanating from subsea cables might confuse them as they make their journey home. Common sense tells us that netting at the mouths of rivers, especially where mixed stocks are involved, must be a significant factor. Most recently, it has been suggested that seals are consuming more salmon than was originally thought.

We need a fuller understanding of the impact of seals on salmon, to which end I note and welcome the answer that the Government provided to Rob Gibson MSP within the past few days on the subject of calculating the feed sources of seals. I look forward to publication later this year of a new study into the subject, commissioned by the Government and carried out by the SOI. Just as we need to better understand the issues that impact on seals, we must understand better the impact of seals on the marine environment. As ever, science of the type delivered by the Scottish oceans institute will provide that understanding.

17:55

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I, too, congratulate Roderick Campbell on securing the debate. I join him and other members in commending the good work of the Scottish oceans institute and the sea mammal research unit, which are important elements of the first-class academic offering and research base at the University of St Andrews—Scotland's oldest university and one of the world's best. I wish any project to develop new building facilities for the institute every success.

It is vital that we have accurate data in relation to seal populations, not least as we seek to balance healthy seal populations with a vibrant and sustainable fisheries sector. Both are important to society, as Graeme Dey said. Like other marine mammals, seals are difficult to count. They spend most of their lives—other than during breeding periods—in or under water, so it is challenging to obtain a precise estimate of the total population size. Therefore, population modelling needs to be robust.

Seals are amazing creatures. I have fond memories of swimming among them with my dog in the sea off Coll and Tiree when I was a youngster. The numbers of harbour, or common, seals appear to be declining. In some areas, the decline is drastic: up to 85 per cent between 2000 and 2010. However, the grey seal population seems more stable, which is a puzzle, although grey seals seem to be better equipped to deal with disease—they do not seem to get diseases, although there are so many of them, which is extraordinary.

I am informed that harbour seal populations in Orkney, Shetland and the Firth of Tay continue to decrease but the Moray Firth population appears to have stabilised and the population on the west coast of Scotland and in the outer Hebrides does not appear to be showing the same dramatic decline as that in the northern isles. Clearly, there is a need for more research, as we do not have many answers on the causes of decline.

Roderick Campbell said that seal numbers on the west coast are increasing. Fishermen tell me that the population of the grey seal colony on the Monach islands near North Uist is in the region of 30,000, which seems an incredible number. They must eat a very large quantity of fish, including salmon and lots of other sea fish.

The assumption had always been that deaths with distinctive corkscrew marks were a result of injuries caused by ships' propellers, but the new research suggests that cannibalistic predation by other grey seals—primarily by adult males on seal pups and younger seals—may be the cause of a significant number of them. That research, which increases our understanding of grey seal behaviour, may also support the view of other scientists that predation by grey seals on harbour seals is a real factor and worthy of additional research.

There has been some coverage lately in the media of seal death by shooting in the fish farming sector. No one wants those beautiful mammals to be culled unnecessarily, but we are also aware that, each year, thousands of seal attacks take place on Scottish salmon farms. The salmon farming industry is clear that it wants to bring down the number of seals being culled and is making a significant investment in that regard, for example in more sophisticated acoustic deterrents and better nets. However, the industry maintains that, as a last resort, it needs to shoot persistent rogue seals that attack the nets, in the way that a terrestrial farmer might shoot rogue foxes or even pet dogs that sometimes attack and kill their livestock. We support that happening only after all non-lethal methods of excluding or deterring seals have been explored and under strict license conditions.

I welcome the debate and look forward to further research discoveries from the SOI.

18:00

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I, too, thank Roderick Campbell for securing this important debate, which gives us an opportunity to raise awareness of the first-class, essential research that is taking place here in Scotland, enabling us to better understand the state of the marine environment and the challenges facing marine animals here in Scotland and beyond.

Much concern has been voiced about the decline of our harbour seal population in certain areas and it is vitally important that we understand why that is happening. Our marine environment is an important barometer of our environmental health. The research that is cited in Roderick Campbell's motion demonstrates the value of such research. It was previously thought that propeller blades were the most likely cause of the gruesome corkscrew injuries inflicted on the young seals. Although that hypothesis should not be dismissed, we now know that there is an alternative and well-researched likely cause.

It is very important that we understand completely what is happening in our ocean. Many people are interested, from those who research our seas to those who want to visit our seas to get to know them better. Nature-based tourism provides 39,000 full-time equivalent jobs in Scotland and it brings £1.4 billion to the economy. It is one of the main reasons for visits to Scotland—40 per cent of all tourism spend is to do with nature tourism. Tourists come and build the rest of their holiday around their desire to see seals in their natural environment or to witness whales at play from the deck of a small boat. I know, as I have been fortunate enough to be one of those tourists.

Dr Van Sebille of Imperial College London recently said:

"A pristine ocean doesn't exist anymore ... Every ocean is now filled with plastic."

Last week, the press told us that many birds have up to 8 per cent of their body mass made up of plastic. That might be difficult to envisage, but it is like a grown man carrying around two fat house cats. Marine research is essential because we are severely impacting the health of our oceans, which impacts many species.

Globally, there is growing demand for higher welfare for our seas and the life in our seas. There is less tolerance of poor treatment of marine animals, there is a growing voice advocating the boycotting of dolphinariums, and there is a backlash against the tiny tanks that we see too many marine mammals imprisoned in.

There are serious and valid concerns about the impact of aquaculture. Here in Scotland we are only now just able to learn, thanks to the FOI ruling, about which individual salmon farms have shot seals. It is acknowledged that the numbers shot have declined but, at 176 in the past two years, they are still far too high. I would also like to understand how rigorous the reporting and recording of those deaths are, because constituents have called me when they have come across seals that have clearly been shot and have been found by the water's edge. I warmly welcome the release of that information, as it empowers people when they decide what they want to put in their shopping baskets and where they wish to spend their cash.

We are told that salmon farming is a £400 million to £500 million industry and that it must be protected, but that intensive industry has a duty to the environment that it is set in and to those that it shares that environment with. When 87 per cent of farms do not have anti-predator nets, it cannot possibly be claimed that seals are being shot as a last resort. I would be grateful if the minister could explain in her closing speech what the Government is doing with regard to issuing licences and, in particular, whether licences are issued to companies that do not have any non-lethal deterrents in place, because I cannot understand why a farm that does not have anti-predator nets would be issued with a licence to shoot seals.

18:04

Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank Roderick Campbell for securing today's important debate. The Scottish oceans institute, which works out of the University of St Andrews, is doing important work on seal deaths and population decline. That excellent work must be recognised.

All Scottish wildlife must be monitored and studied at all times so that we can see what is good for it and what is harming it. I have always believed that all life is connected in one way or another and that there is a complete chain, in which all animals, including us as human beings, depend on each other.

It is the efforts made by the staff and students that make the Scottish oceans institute. The Government should help out as much as possible with the acquisition of appropriate buildings to allow the centre's valuable work to continue as required in order to discover why our grey seals are dying.

All marine research should be supported. As an island nation, we depend on our marine life, more so than many other nations around the world. Sooner or later we will discover how marine

science plays such an important role in supporting our marine life and in ensuring that we live free of disease and danger.

My colleague Roderick Campbell is correct when he says that there are dangers in not supporting our marine life. The research that has been carried out is important and valuable. Not only should we bring such significant issues to the Scottish Parliament, the Government should do something about them and ensure that appropriate actions are taken.

However, I do not want to lay all the blame on the Scottish Government. Marine life affects all of us around the world, and the UK Government and the Governments of European Union countries therefore have an important role to play in supporting our efforts.

On many occasions we talk about marine exports, our fisheries and many other aspects of marine life, and we must always keep in mind the fact that marine life is finely balanced. We are responsible as human beings for the marine population, because we are all beneficiaries of it in one form or another. Whether we take photographs, promote exports of food or carry out research, we are ultimately responsible. We play a large role in assisting marine life in its hour of need to work in a positive way to enrich the seas around our shores.

I thank Roderick Campbell once again for bringing the debate to the chamber. I say to the Government that we should not feel that we have to carry all the burden on our own shoulders all the time. The UK Government and the European Governments have a role to play, and I strongly recommend that we pursue those angles to support the industry.

18:08

The Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Aileen McLeod): I thank my colleague Roderick Campbell for bringing to the chamber this important debate, thereby giving me the opportunity to put on record my appreciation for the excellent work and first-class research that is being done by the Scottish oceans institute at the University of St Andrews.

The institute's work helps us by protecting our marine environment for the future. The institute's sea mammal research unit in particular has played a key role for more than a decade in informing the development of a wide range of Scottish Government policies on marine mammals. In fact, no other facility in Europe has a comparable breadth of expertise in marine mammal issues.

As other members have highlighted, the unit provided the scientific basis for the new legislation

on seals that was introduced in the Marine (Scotland) Act 2010, which has brought about greater protection than ever before for seals in Scotland. The 2010 act introduced a new seal licensing system to balance seal conservation with the protection of fisheries and fish farms from seal predation. In the act's first years of operation since 2011, the system has resulted in a 56 per cent reduction in the numbers of seals that are shot under licence across Scotland.

A report on the operation of the seal licensing system was published last week as required by the 2010 act, and it is available on the Scottish Government's website. To try to answer the question that Alison Johnstone asked, I point out that I understand that all companies have at least one non-lethal deterrent measure and that many have more than that.

Under the 2010 act, the Scottish ministers also designated 194 seal haul-outs, where seals are protected from harassment. The expert knowledge of the sea mammal research unit proved essential in identifying those important sites, where seals emerge to rest or breed. On Monday 7 September, a consultation was published to seek views on whether an additional haul-out site on the River Ythan should be designated. That is available on the Scottish Government's website and has a closing date of 4 December.

The sea mammal research unit provides a key source of scientific advice on marine mammals, especially seals, to the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government has also commissioned a wide range of specific research projects from the unit to inform policy development on marine mammals, including seals.

As colleagues have highlighted, in the period since 2000, there have been declines in harbour or common seal numbers in a number of regions around Scotland. The current position is that the declines are continuing in the Firth of Tay, Orkney and Shetland. The position in the Western Isles and the Moray Firth is currently stable, and there have been no similar declines on the west coast of Scotland.

The sea mammal research unit has been undertaking research into the declines and, as we have heard, has so far eliminated a wide range of possible causes. It is now clear that we can eliminate fisheries bycatch, licensed shooting, exposure to persistent organic pollutants and phocine distemper virus and other diseases as significant factors in the declines.

As many members have highlighted, the most likely cause of the declines is now considered to be competition from the increasing populations of the much larger grey seals. That might involve direct competition such as predation and

competition for haul-out space, or indirect competition over similar food resources. Indicative of that possibility is the presence of increased numbers of grey seals at sites that were previously mostly colonised by harbour or common seals, which has been noted in a number of areas of decline.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind): As my colleague Alison Johnstone said, there are issues about water quality and the level of plastic in the water. That will affect the availability of food. Will there be additional research on that factor?

Aileen McLeod: I am happy to come back to the member with further details on that.

From 2012 onwards, juvenile grey seal and adult harbour or common seal deaths showing the unusual corkscrew or spiral injuries were reported to the Scottish Government-sponsored Scottish marine animal stranding scheme. The sea mammal research unit was commissioned to urgently investigate the potential causes of those unusual mortalities. Obviously, the unit worked closely with the stranding scheme vets to record and examine as many dead seals showing such injuries as possible.

That eliminated a number of potential causes before, as we have heard, focusing on a theory that ship propellers might be responsible. Initial testing of the theory using models appeared to indicate that it was a possibility, although the reason for seals actually approaching ship propellers was never established.

The research subsequently sought confirmation of the theory in the wild, but the researchers were rather surprised to record on video a grey seal killing between 11 and 14 juvenile grey seals. The injuries that were caused by the grey seal were subsequently examined and confirmed as classic spiral seal cases. At the same time, similar reports from Germany confirmed that grey seals also attack harbour or common seals in the same way. It is now considered that grey seal predation is probably one of the most likely causes of the mortalities. Ship propellers have not been entirely eliminated as a possible factor, but they are considered very unlikely to be significant.

The sea mammal research unit is also working hard to identify possible interactions between marine mammals and marine renewables. The purpose of that research is purely to assess the risks of potential interactions and, if necessary, to identify possible mitigation measures.

I commend the researchers at the sea mammal research unit for their efforts in undertaking such a wide range of research for the Scottish Government. In some cases, they have been able to adjust the focus of the research at short notice to prioritise particular aspects. I look forward to

seeing the results of their continuing work on harbour or common seal decline, the possible interactions between seals and marine renewable developments and the interactions between seals and salmon net fisheries. I am confident that the results of those projects will inform the future direction of the Scottish Government's seal policy.

I thank all members for their contributions to the debate, and I again thank Roderick Campbell for bringing the motion for debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I thank members for taking part in this important debate.

Meeting closed at 18:15.

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