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Official Report

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 29 October 2015

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Scottish Parliament

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

General Question Time

Water Direct Scheme (Midlothian and East Lothian)

1. Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what information it has regarding how many local authorities use the water direct scheme to deduct water and sewerage charges, and whether this includes Midlothian and East Lothian councils. (S4O-04718)

The Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities (Keith Brown): As the use of water direct is a matter for individual local authorities in collaboration with the Department for Work and Pensions, the Scottish Government does not retain a list of the local authorities that use the scheme. However, the Scottish Government recognises that water direct is being used in Scotland, and it is working to facilitate discussions between relevant parties to support the development of a common understanding on the appropriate use of the scheme.

Colin Beattie: Given the Scottish Government's commitment to poverty reduction and to alleviating the impact of changes to benefits payments brought in by the Westminster Government, has the cabinet secretary offered any guidance to local authorities about the need for them to take into account the customer's ability to pay and to consider whether a benefits deduction for water and sewerage charges, or debt resulting from unpaid water and sewerage charges, will cause financial hardship to the customer before they apply to the DWP to make deductions from the benefits payment?

Keith Brown: The member raises a good point, but he will be aware that it is for local authorities to decide which tools to use to collect water charges and in what circumstances they should apply any particular approach. However, it is important that any debt recovery tool, including water direct, is used responsibly. A forum is therefore being established, which the Scottish Government will chair, to ensure that stakeholders, including customer representatives, can discuss the implications for different groups of individuals of the use of water direct and other charge recovery methods, with a view to establishing a common

understanding of good practice that best protects the most financially hard pressed.

It is also worth noting that in Scotland water charges are, on average, £39 lower than they are in England and Wales, and that they have been falling in real terms in recent years. The linkage to council tax means that charges are the most progressive in the whole of the United Kingdom.

Seafish (Review)

2. Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government when the next review of the industry authority, Seafish, is scheduled to take place. (S4O-04719)

The Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Aileen McLeod): Following the Smith commission's report, options for making administrative changes to Seafish have been under discussion across the four United Kingdom fisheries administrations. We do not believe that those discussions address the fundamental flaws that are inherent in Seafish as a reserved body that is attempting to operate in an area in which policy is devolved. We have therefore asked the UK Government to support the devolution of powers to raise and administer food levies, including the seafood levy that Seafish administers, via legislative change through the Scotland Bill. Once such powers have been devolved, we will be in a position to undertake a proper and fundamental review of food levies in Scotland, including Scotland's place in Seafish and the implications for that body's role in the UK.

Christian Allard: I thank the minister for her answer, but I am quite surprised, because such UK-wide bodies must be reviewed every three years. As I understand it, the most recent review of Seafish was supposed to have taken place last year, in 2014. The Smith commission asked the Scottish and UK Governments to work together on the matter. If the discussions that have been taking place have not yet resulted in the devolution that we want to see, is it not time for Seafish to be reviewed out of Scotland?

Aileen McLeod: Christian Allard is absolutely right to point out that a review of Seafish is overdue. Indeed, we believe that a fundamental overhaul of the arrangements for raising and administering seafood levies has been pressing for some time.

Following the Smith commission's report, options for making administrative changes to Seafish have been under discussion across the four UK fisheries administrations, but we do not believe that those discussions address the fundamental flaws that are inherent in Seafish as a reserved body that is attempting to operate in an area in which policy is devolved. That was

demonstrated recently when Seafish chose to use this year's UK fish and chip shop awards, at which a Shetland business deservedly won the best fish and chip shop award, as a vehicle for the Norwegian Seafood Council to promote frozen Norwegian white fish in the UK market. Although that plays to the interests of powerful importers of frozen fish elsewhere in the UK, it fails to put Scottish interests first.

We have asked the UK Government to support the devolution of powers to raise and administer food levies, including the seafood levy that Seafish administers, via legislative change through the Scotland Bill. Once such powers have been devolved, we will be in a position to undertake a proper and fundamental review of food levies in Scotland, including Scotland's place in Seafish and the implications for that body's role in the UK.

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I share the industry's concerns about any suggestion that Seafish should in any way be promoting Norwegian seafood, given the quality and sustainability of our Scottish fish. The UK Government has said that it is prepared to work closely with the Scottish Government on giving Scotland a greater say over how the levies are spent. Will the minister update us on those talks and on her priorities for spending on seafood promotion in Scotland?

Aileen McLeod: I am happy to write to the member with further details, to make sure that I give him information that is as comprehensive as possible.

Bus Re-regulation

3. Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its views are on bus re-regulation. (S4O-04720)

The Minister for Transport and Islands (Derek Mackay): Our position has not changed in that I have no plans for wholesale re-regulation but I want to see closer partnership working between operators and transport authorities. We will shortly bring forward legislation to make changes to the registration of bus services, and that will provide an opportunity for those in the sector to demonstrate how they can work together to better manage changes to the bus network.

Patricia Ferguson: I thank the minister for that answer, but I find it very disappointing. I am sure that I am not the only constituency or list MSP whose communities have been blighted over the years by the relatively fast withdrawal of bus services from local communities, including most recently the M3 and 10 buses in my constituency. It seems to me that transport authorities are also hidebound in this regard, because their current

guidance means that they have no opportunity to intervene when there is another or a similar service operating in the area, which is the case with the two services that I mentioned.

I ask the minister to think again. If he is not content to have, as he described it, "wholesale re-regulation", perhaps he could look at another model that might give communities the opportunity to have a say in the decisions that are being made that so badly affect them.

Derek Mackay: I have outlined proposals that will assist in relation to bus services throughout Scotland. There is already provision in legislation for quality contracts, which involve local franchising, and quality bus partnerships. In addition, local transport strategies can be addressed through strengthened community planning.

I disagree with the member's point that there is no opportunity to intervene. If there is assessed social need, local transport authorities can intervene and implement subsidised services. The legislative change that I am proposing involves better engagement with local authorities in the assessment of transport changes through bus regulation, and I am sure that that will be welcomed by the whole Parliament.

On wholesale re-regulation, if Patricia Ferguson is disappointed in my answer, I am sure that she will be equally disappointed in her colleague Iain Gray, who abandoned his bill. It was apparently about re-regulation but, as with many things in the Labour Party, it was not quite what it said on the tin. David Stewart brokered a meeting between me and Iain Gray, and I was happy to be supportive to strengthen the legislation, but Mr Gray withdrew his bill.

I will do what I can through grant conditions, transport strategies, strengthened community planning and the national transport strategy to support local communities working in partnership with the bus industry, rather than bringing the kind of volatility that I think the Labour Party would wreak on Scotland's public transport system.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Is it not the case that re-regulation would cost more than three quarters of a billion pounds and that it is the height of cynicism for the Labour Party to suggest such a thing when it knows that the comprehensive spending review is likely to lead to further cuts to an already diminished Scottish budget?

Derek Mackay: Mr Gibson is right in the respect that wholesale re-regulation or indeed renationalisation would be incredibly expensive. However, as with its proposition on the railways, Labour says that it is talking about renationalisation but it turns out that what it says is

not necessarily what it does. It did not deliver re-regulation in administration and it is not even proposing it now in opposition, having abandoned its bill.

That is why we will take the right pragmatic and practical steps to support local communities in engaging changes to bus services while maintaining the national concessionary travel scheme, the bus service operators grant and other measures to try to support accessibility and connectivity right across the country, and we will do so in partnership with the Confederation of Passenger Transport UK. Those are the conditions that will lead to enhanced public transport in Scotland.

Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD): As the minister hinted, there is a suite of options with which local authorities can improve bus services, including quality partnerships, quality contracting and punctuality improvement plans. When did the Government last review the take-up of those mechanisms? How many take-ups have there been? Does the minister plan to review or refresh the bus strategy generally?

Derek Mackay: The good news is that, yes, a refresh of the national transport strategy is under way as we speak. I have set a very challenging timescale for it to be concluded by Christmas. Within that refresh there will be the imminent legislative and regulatory changes that I have proposed, which will be shared with the chamber. The national transport strategy review must prioritise bus transport if we want to get a modal shift from the car to public transport.

I am disappointed that local authorities and transport partnerships have not taken up quality bus partnerships and quality contracts. If I can make it easier for them to do that, I will, but sometimes the issue is about resource, not regulation. There are the tools to do the job at local level, and local authorities need to seize those opportunities and make things happen to help to address need. Those kinds of practical measures—not blanket wholesale re-regulation—will make the difference, because they can be done, and they can be done now.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): It is regrettable that the issue is seen as just another example of Labour-Scottish National Party rivalry. If we look around Europe and the countries that enjoy the excellent public transport provision that Scotland deserves but does not have, one thing is clear: those countries regulate firmly, subsidise—not just at the margins—and recognise that a free-market approach involving the private sector alone does not deliver the goods.

Derek Mackay: Around 45 per cent of total bus income is public sector subsidy. We can do more

on integrated transport, smart cards, partnership and local connections, and all that work is under way. I disagree that wholesale re-regulation is the answer when there is a suite of actions that will improve bus patronage in Scotland.

We should celebrate the positives and empower people at the most local level to address social need where necessary. It is my job to ensure that the conditions are there to do that, which is exactly why we are refreshing the national transport strategy. We are making it clear to local authorities that they have the power to take action now to address need in a pragmatic and positive way.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I have been contacted by many constituents in Renfrewshire, which is an area that I and the minister represent, who are concerned about the high price of bus fares and the lack of services, particularly in the evening. I have also been contacted by bus passengers in Clydebank who are dismayed that they cannot get a direct bus to the new Queen Elizabeth university hospital. Some pensioners have to get three buses to travel just 7 miles for a hospital appointment.

If the minister will not regulate the bus industry—clearly he will not—what will he do to address those problems, which bus users face daily?

Derek Mackay: I do not think that Neil Bibby has been listening to me. I have outlined the actions in the national transport strategy, including quality contracts and quality bus partnerships, and I have outlined the investments and subsidies that we are making. In my previous answer I outlined how, if there is social need, local authorities and transport partnerships can address that, and how they can address wider issues around the personalised journey, including the contacts that can be made through Traveline Scotland to support that. In addition, we make fantastic investment into public transport, including the bus industry, of more than £1 billion every year.

Neil Bibby sounded disappointed that I am not re-regulating. He will be disappointed that even the Labour Party is no longer proposing re-regulation, as Iain Gray has abandoned the bill that was going to do that very thing. We will get on with the job of ensuring that there is satisfactory public transport and we will sustain the very impressive record of infrastructure investment that far surpasses anything that the previous Administration was able to deliver.

Cultural Events (North East Scotland)

4. Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to promote cultural events in the north-east. (S4O-04721)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): The national companies are supported in 2015-16 to perform 30 times in the north-east, with an associated programme of more than 170 workshops and events, and they have been asked specifically to support the north-east during the music hall revamp. Partners have engaged with include schools, family centres, the Lemon Tree and the Royal Aberdeen children's hospital. In 2014-15, Creative Scotland invested £3.6 million in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire local authority areas through 35 awards.

Creative Scotland has provided £90,000 funding towards "Granite", a major new site-specific piece of participatory theatre that is being made by and for the people of Aberdeen. It has provided £130,000 funding towards Sound Festival for its work in 2015 and 2016 on promoting new music through performances, installations and learning and participation activities across Aberdeen city, Aberdeenshire and beyond. Today I can announce that Creative Scotland is providing Sound Festival with an additional £140,000 to support next year's festival and enable the company to deliver a high-quality and dynamic programme of education and performance in 2016 and 2017 in Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire and the north-east of Scotland.

Richard Baker: A recent survey by Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce showed that seven out of 10 of their member businesses believe that cultural investment has a strong role to play in making the city a more attractive place to live and work. Given that and the fact that, notwithstanding what the cabinet secretary said, funding for the arts in Aberdeen is significantly lower per capita than in our other cities, what future plans does the Scottish Government have to promote the arts in the city?

While I welcome the cabinet secretary's announcement about Sound Festival, does she also believe that Creative Scotland should consider awarding funding to Sound Festival from its core funding stream to secure its long-term future beyond next year?

Fiona Hyslop: I very much welcome the survey that the member has highlighted that shows that businesses in Aberdeen recognise that the cultural offer has been very important to economic growth. I am delighted to hear that.

In terms of what we can do for investment, I point out that the statistics that Richard Baker cited on funding per head of population relate to where the applicant for funding resides as opposed to where the arts activity takes place. Having more organisations that can apply for regularly funded activity, from Aberdeen in particular, would be helpful, bearing in mind that

100 per cent of those from Aberdeen that applied for regular funding received that.

In relation to Sound Festival, I am delighted that the member welcomes our announcement today, but over the period since 2012 Sound Festival has had almost half a million pounds of investment, recognising the quality of what it produces. Clearly, we want to ensure that not just the central belt but every part of Scotland can enjoy the great cultural performances that this country has to offer.

Borders Rail Link (Progress Report)

5. Jim Hume (South Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide a progress report on how the Borders rail link is operating. (S4O-04722)

The Minister for Transport and Islands (Derek Mackay): Patronage on the Borders railway has been exceptional since its opening; nearly 200,000 journeys have been made in the first six weeks. Some performance issues have resulted from those busy services, which ScotRail is mitigating, through additional carriages on some affected services. The performance of the Borders railway is being closely monitored, alongside the rest of the Scottish rail network.

Jim Hume: The minister will be aware that some services have been cancelled because of overcrowding. Does he think it acceptable for ScotRail to advise passengers which trains are busier than others, so that customers can make alternative arrangements? Will he tell passengers what he is doing in conjunction with ScotRail to increase capacity in the longer term?

Will the minister also today give a clear commitment to initiating talks with stakeholders about getting a feasibility study into extending the line to Carlisle under way, so that even more communities can reap the benefits?

Derek Mackay: We have made it clear that we will judge the Borders railway's performance and talk to the regional transport partnership about a future feasibility study. We will engage with stakeholders.

It is helpful to advise passengers about when the busiest trains run, because some leisure passengers might want to avoid the busier times. That is helpful advice. Most important is what the Government and ScotRail have done to address the huge success of the Borders railway, which has meant adding extra carriages, doubling capacity at certain times.

That success story has had an immense positive economic impact, and there will be further increases in capacity and improvement in rolling stock, which is being used to the maximum in

Scotland to address the now-fantastic demand for Borders rail. In due course, 70 new Hitachi electric trains will come to Scotland, which will allow us to cascade existing rolling stock across the country.

I think that I hear Jim Hume saying that that is not happening quickly enough. We cannot magic up new trains, but we have ordered new trains through the franchise. If the Liberal Democrats were in power, there would be no overcrowding on the Borders railway, because there would be no Borders railway. The railway has been delivered by this Government and it provides a fantastic service.

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Question 6, from James Kelly, has been withdrawn, for understandable reasons.

Libraries (Usage by Children)

7. Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it can encourage library usage by children. (S4O-04724)

The Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Europe and External Affairs (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government places great importance on public libraries: everyone should have access to them. Through our work with the Scottish Library and Information Council, we are providing support for many public library projects that encourage use by children.

In August the First Minister launched the every child a library member pilots, which the Scottish Government has funded from the culture portfolio. The pilots will work with children at key stages up to primary 1. There are a number of programmes to improve literacy and provide access to libraries for our children.

Roderick Campbell: The cabinet secretary might be aware that 4,000 primary 4 children in Scotland were provided with a superstar reader card to encourage them to visit libraries and take part in the six-visit superstar readers challenge. Does she agree that children can take part in such initiatives only if there is adequate access to libraries and that closing libraries is likely to have an adverse effect on the number of children who visit them?

Fiona Hyslop: I commend the programme that the member mentioned. Libraries have a central role in our communities. We have published our national strategy for public libraries in Scotland. Any closure must be considered very carefully; we need libraries at the heart of our communities.

The Presiding Officer: Before we move to the next item of business, members will wish to join me in welcoming to the gallery Her Excellency Alicia Castro, the ambassador of the Argentine Republic to the United Kingdom. [*Applause.*]

First Minister's Question Time

12:00

Engagements

1. Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): I know that I speak for all parties when I say that the thoughts and prayers of everyone in the chamber are with the family of Bailey Gwynne, who was stabbed and killed at a school in Aberdeen yesterday. We offer our full support to his parents, and to pupils and staff at this tragic time.

To ask the First Minister what engagements she has planned for the rest of the day. (S4F-03015)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I begin by expressing my shock and sadness at the incident that occurred yesterday at Cults academy in Aberdeen. I also convey my deepest sympathy and condolences to the family and friends of Bailey Gwynne who tragically died in the incident. The circumstances of the young man's death are subject to on-going and thorough police investigation. I am sure that the whole Parliament will want all those who loved Bailey and, indeed, all those at the school who have been affected by the tragedy, to know that our thoughts are very much with them at this desperately sad time.

Later today, I have engagements to take forward the Government's programme for Scotland.

Kezia Dugdale: I appreciate that statement from the First Minister and know that she will be as shocked as everyone is by the incident.

I have four questions to ask and will use most of them to hold the Government to account in the normal way. However, I would like to use my first question to ask about the death of Bailey Gwynne. We do not know all the details of the case yet. Countless families across the country will feel pain and sorrow today: it is every parent's worst nightmare—that they send their child off to school in the morning, only for them never to return home. Will the First Minister reassure parents across the country that everything that can be done is being done to keep our children safe?

Nicola Sturgeon: Yes. Of course, I can and should give that assurance. Parliament may want to know that I have, this morning, spoken to the leader of Aberdeen City Council to offer our sympathies and condolences and to convey directly to her that any support and assistance that the council or the school needs from the Scottish Government in the days, weeks and months ahead will be forthcoming.

Such incidents are deeply shocking and deeply tragic. The impact on the lives of those who knew

and loved Bailey Gwynne is impossible for any of us to imagine. Notwithstanding that, it is important to remember, and to remind ourselves, that tragic incidents such as this are, thankfully, extremely rare in our schools. That does not, of course, take away at all from the tragedy of this incident.

The Scottish Government will, in the fullness of time, ensure that any lessons that require to be learned from the incident are learned. I give the assurance that we will continue to take all steps to ensure, as far as any Government possibly can, the safety of our young people in our schools, but it is worth remembering that violent incidents—incidents involving young people possessing knives and dangerous weapons—are on the decline. That is no reason for complacency because—as the tragic events of the past 24 hours have reminded us—one such incident is one too many. I am sure that we are united today in our determination to ensure that no young person ever has to go through this again.

Kezia Dugdale: I thank the First Minister for that very welcome and full reply.

I turn to student finance. Figures that have been published this week by the Student Awards Agency for Scotland show that, under the Scottish National Party Government, the average student bursary or grant has been cut by almost 30 per cent, and that it is the poorest students who are suffering. Students from deprived backgrounds are being forced to take on an even greater debt burden. Students who have the potential to get on in life and to do great things are being held back because their parents do not have a lot of money. The gap between the richest and the rest has grown on the Scottish National Party's watch.

I know that the First Minister will talk about tuition fees in answer to my next question—it is her standard response whenever we talk about student debt and grants—but I would like her to answer this question very specifically. Can she tell us the total value of student debt in Scotland?

The First Minister: I am not going to talk about tuition fees; I am going to talk about student support, because that is what Kezia Dugdale has asked me about, and it is an important question.

Our students have

“the best support package in the whole of the UK”.

Those are not my words; they are the words of the National Union of Students Scotland. The number of students who are receiving support is higher than ever before, and the average support that is being provided is higher than it has ever been. When we look at the average student loan debt, we find that the figure for Scotland is significantly lower than the figure for any other part of the United Kingdom. In England, the figure is £21,180,

in Wales it is £19,010, in Northern Ireland it is £18,160 and in Scotland it is £9,440. That is the reality.

Kezia Dugdale may or may not be aware that the Scottish Government has also taken the step of increasing the bursary element of the student support package in the current academic year. In the next academic year, we will raise the income threshold for eligibility for the maximum bursary. Those changes were described by NUS Scotland in the following terms:

“great news for Scottish students ... the Scottish Government is to be congratulated for doing more to tackle student poverty.”

That is what the Scottish Government is doing, and we will continue to take action to ensure that all those who want to go into further or higher education can do so regardless of their background or circumstances.

Kezia Dugdale: There was a lot of gloss in that answer, but the reality is that support for the poorest students in Scotland is the worst in all the four nations of the United Kingdom. I asked the First Minister specifically about student debt. I think that, on this occasion, she knew the answer but was too ashamed to say it out loud. The value of student debt in Scotland stands at £2.7 billion—or, as Alex Salmond might put it, £2,700 million. The value of student debt in Scotland is more than the combined cost of the new Forth replacement crossing and the Queen Elizabeth university hospital in Glasgow. In fact, the value of the accumulated debt of students in Scotland is now the Government's single biggest financial asset.

The student debt monster that the SNP once promised to dump is now a debt mountain. Did the First Minister have any intention of keeping that promise?

The First Minister: Kezia Dugdale cannot escape the fact that the average student loan debt is significantly lower in Scotland than it is anywhere else in the UK, or the fact that Scotland-domiciled students—here I will talk about tuition fees—do not have to pay the fees of up to £27,000 that are charged for tuition elsewhere in the UK. That is a real saving that does not become a debt in Scotland, as it does in other parts of the UK. Currently, if the least well-off students in England and Scotland took up the maximum amount of student loan that is available to them during the term of their degree, the English students would accumulate about £12,000 more in debt than the Scottish students. That is the reality.

We have the best student support package in the UK, and the average student debt is less in Scotland than it is in any other part of the UK. We are also taking steps to increase the bursary element of the total student support package,

which stands in sharp contrast to what the UK Government is currently doing. Not content with imposing tuition fees, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in his budget speech that the UK Government is going to abolish bursaries altogether and move entirely to loan funding. That is something that the Scottish Government will not do.

Kezia Dugdale: That is all from a First Minister who told students that their debt would be zero. We were told by the First Minister to judge her on her record. So here it is. The reality is that, today, it is easier to be poor and get to university in England, even under the Tories, than it is to do so in Scotland under the SNP. [*Interruption.*] I heard cries of “Shameful.” Yes, that is shameful.

The First Minister promised to abolish student debt; instead, it has increased. She promised to expand grants; instead, they have been cut. Is not it the case that, despite all the promises and all the moments of self-congratulation, the SNP Government is letting down Scotland’s poorest students?

The First Minister: As I think I said in both my previous answers, in this academic year we have increased the bursary element of the student support package. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Order.

The First Minister: It was that which led NUS Scotland to say that the Scottish Government should be

“congratulated for doing more to tackle student poverty.”

Since 2006, there has been a 50 per cent increase in applications to universities from the 20 per cent most deprived areas in our country. Young people are more likely to participate in higher education by the time they are 30 than was the case in 2006.

On the specific issue of student debt, let me repeat some of the figures, because those are the figures that matter to people and students across Scotland. In Scotland, the average student loan debt is £9,440; in England, it is £21,180. In Wales, which was being governed by a Labour Administration the last time I looked, the average student loan debt is £19,010—almost double the figure in Scotland.

Everybody knows that we live in tough financial times, and tough choices always have to be made, but we will continue to ensure that we provide good support for our students so that more of our students from the most deprived parts of our country can take the opportunity to go to university. We will continue to get on with the job and we will, as usual, leave Labour to moan and whinge about it, regardless of what we do, from the sidelines.

Prime Minister (Meetings)

2. Ruth Davidson (Glasgow) (Con): I add my and my party’s condolences to those that have already been expressed by the First Minister and the whole Parliament to the family and loved ones of Bailey Gwynne. Our thoughts and prayers are with all those who have been affected by that terrible tragedy.

To ask the First Minister when she will next meet the Prime Minister. (S4F-03019)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): I have no plans to do so in the immediate future.

Ruth Davidson: We have just heard a series of quite serious exchanges regarding funding and access to universities, but I did not hear in any of those exchanges a credible alternative plan for how we will fund bursaries for poorer students and ensure the wider access that we all say that we want. So here is one. Under our plans, we would ask all graduates who have enjoyed their university education to pay back a contribution once they get a decent job. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Ruth Davidson: That money could then be used to help to increase bursaries for poorer students who, under the current scheme, cannot even get a foot through the door. That plan is sensible and moderate and would help those who are most in need. What reason, other than an ideological one, would the First Minister have for not considering that plan?

The First Minister: I give credit to Ruth Davidson. She is putting forward her policy, which is to support the introduction of tuition fees, and she is absolutely entitled to put that before the Scottish people at the election in a few months’ time to allow them to cast their verdict on it. However, we have an honest disagreement. I believe in free education. I benefited from that as a young person and I believe that I have no right to take it away from any other young person today. We will have that debate in the months to come.

Students who graduate and benefit from a university education pay that back through taxation. I believe that that is what should happen—not that we should have tuition fees, a graduate tax or whatever terminology Ruth Davidson wants to use.

We will continue to take the steps that I outlined in detail to Kezia Dugdale to support students from the poorest backgrounds to go to university.

I have already said, so I will not repeat myself at length, that we have increased the bursary element of the student support package and I have cited the figures that show the lower levels of student loan debt in Scotland. Ruth Davidson will

be aware that, right now, the work of the commission on widening access is under way, and the commission will advise the Government on what additional steps we need to take to support poorer students to get into university. We will continue to do that hard and serious work and we will have the honest debate about the funding options that Ruth Davidson talks about as we approach the election next year.

Ruth Davidson: I thank the First Minister for confirming that her position is based on an ideological point of view and that the SNP has written so-called free education on a tablet of stone. It is sad that this First Minister is too stubborn to recognise the need for change, because change is needed.

The facts are these: only one in 10 of our poorest 18-year-olds are getting to university, and someone who is rich is three-and-a-half times more likely to go to university. She talked about her situation growing up. Mine was similar. I was also on a full grant of student support when I went to university, which is what helped me to get there. For all the talk of widening access commissions, this Scottish National Party Government has singularly failed in more than eight years of office to close the gap between rich and poor in respect of access to university.

We have a solution, and it works. All that we ask is that the First Minister has the courage to ditch the stone carvings and the vanity projects and move to practical solutions for our poorest students. Will she?

The First Minister: Ruth Davidson calls it "ideological"; I call it "principle". It will be for the people of Scotland to make up their minds. Ruth Davidson will put forward her policy at the election and I will put forward mine, and I am happy to allow the Scottish people to be the judge.

In the meantime, we will continue the hard work to ensure that everyone has an equal chance of going to university. That is why we established the widening access commission. As I said, since 2006, there has been a 50 per cent increase in applications to university from those in the most deprived parts of our country.

I will take no lectures from a representative of a party that, right now, is in effect raising the tax rate for the poorest people in our community by up to 90 per cent as a result of working tax credit cuts. Ruth Davidson might be better advised to wonder about the effect of those cuts on those in the poorest parts of our community.

The Presiding Officer: We have a constituency question from Liam McArthur.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): The First Minister will be aware of the disappointing

news this week that wave developer Aquamarine Power has called in administrators. These are worrying times for the staff employed at a company that has achieved a great deal in taking forward the development of wave energy in this country, including at the European Marine Energy Centre in my Orkney constituency.

Can the First Minister offer an assurance that her Government and its agencies are doing everything in their power to support the company and its staff in securing a positive outcome and an early exit from administration? Will she agree to lend weight to the efforts of her energy minister by getting personally involved in discussions with stakeholders about how we secure the future success not just of the wave energy sector but of wider marine energy development in Scotland?

The First Minister: I am happy to give those assurances. Obviously, the news that Aquamarine Power has entered administration was disappointing. We very much hope that a buyer can be found for what has been and is a leading Scottish wave energy firm.

I was pleased to note that the administrators will continue to trade the company while they seek a buyer and that all 14 staff are being retained.

The Scottish Government remains absolutely committed to the marine energy sector and to doing everything that we can to help to secure a buyer for Aquamarine Power.

It is also important to point out that, as I am sure Liam McArthur would acknowledge, we recently took steps to strengthen our commitment to the sector by establishing the wave energy Scotland initiative, which is the biggest wave technology development programme of its kind. We did that precisely because we recognise the challenges that the industry faces just now, specifically the lack of private backers.

We will continue to back the industry and the sector and I assure the chamber that we will do everything that we can to back the people who work in this particular company at what I know will be a difficult and challenging time for them.

Cabinet (Meetings)

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

I am sure that we all appreciate the way that the community in Aberdeen has rallied round following the horrific circumstances at Cults academy. Our thoughts are with the family and friends, and also with the wider community at this difficult time.

To ask the First Minister what issues will be discussed at the next meeting of the Cabinet. (S4F-03012)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Matters of importance to the people of Scotland.

Willie Rennie: I have just listened to exchanges between the First Minister, Ruth Davidson and Kezia Dugdale. For five years, I have been lectured by the First Minister on student finance. All the while, her Government was breaking its promise to dump the debt. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Willie Rennie: It has—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. Let us hear Mr Rennie, please.

Willie Rennie: I have—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Willie Rennie: I have been lectured for five years. The debt has not been dumped; it has been doubled.

However, the question that I want to ask the First Minister is this. When will her Government publish an estimate of the potential number of refugees who could be accommodated in Scotland? That estimate would help to keep up the pressure on the Conservative Government to be compassionate to the plight of refugees by accommodating more here. When will we get that estimate?

The First Minister: First, I thank Willie Rennie from the very bottom of my heart for so bravely reminding the Scottish electorate, just a few months before a Scottish Parliament election, of the Liberal Democrats' record on tuition fees. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. *[Interruption.]* Order.

The First Minister: That was indeed a most charitable thing for him to have done.

However, on the very serious and important matter of refugees, I am happy to ask Humza Yousaf to update Willie Rennie directly on the work of the task force that I established.

In short, our position here in Scotland is as it has been from the outset. We want to, are willing to and are preparing to take a proportionate share of the number of refugees who come to the United Kingdom. Clearly, the number of refugees who are permitted to come to the UK is not within our control; it is determined by the UK Government.

The Prime Minister has said that 20,000 refugees will be admitted from the camps around Syria over the life of this Westminster Parliament. We are arguing for that number to go higher and for it to extend not just to the camps around Syria but to refugees who have already made the journey to Europe.

The task force is ensuring that everybody who needs to be involved is working together to ensure

that we have plans in place to accommodate refugees. We do not yet know the precise numbers and profile out of that 20,000 figure that has been committed to already. We would expect some refugees to come to Scotland before Christmas and we are working very hard to ensure that we can accommodate them and look after them properly.

Willie Rennie: Just for completeness, on student finance, we will—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Willie Rennie: We will—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order. Let us hear Mr Rennie, please.

Willie Rennie: We will take every opportunity to remind people that this Government promised that it would dump the debt but it has doubled the debt.

On refugees—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Willie Rennie: It is all well and good for people to laugh about refugees, but I think that they will—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Willie Rennie: We need an estimate of how many refugees Scotland could take, but Humza Yousaf said to us this week that he had prepared no such estimate after months on the job. The First Minister has said that Scotland will take its Barnett share of refugees but surely we should be more compassionate than a technical accounting rule when lives are at stake. *[Interruption.]* I think that members should listen to this serious subject rather than—

The Presiding Officer: I think, Mr Rennie, that you should just get on with it.

Willie Rennie: Winter is coming, which will leave many refugees vulnerable. We could send a powerful message to the Conservative Government by agreeing to take more. We should act now. Does the First Minister not agree?

The First Minister: I do not want to overstate this, but I think that Willie Rennie should be mildly ashamed of himself about the tone of his question today.

To his credit, Willie Rennie sat round the table, as did Kezia Dugdale and Ruth Davidson, at the summit that I convened a few weeks ago. I think that we agreed there a degree of consensus about the approach that Scotland would take. I am not setting a technical Barnett share; I want Scotland to do as much as possible. However, I think that it has been an appropriate starting point to say that we would take a proportionate share of the refugees that come here. That is why we are

focused on the work that would support around 2,000, which is a proportionate and reasonable share of the 20,000 refugees whom David Cameron has said will be admitted to the UK over the life of this Parliament.

However, I would like to see the Prime Minister go further than that in two ways: first, in terms of the number, and secondly, in terms of the reach of the programme. I think that that is the appropriate way to behave—to argue for a more expansive approach from the UK Government but do the hard work, which Humza Yousaf is leading just now, to ensure that we have the practical preparations in place to take that proportionate share. We will get on with that work and I really hope—this is a genuine invitation to Willie Rennie—that he will come back into the consensus rather than try to make cheap political points out of an issue that is so important.

Tax Credits

4. Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what correspondence the Scottish Government has had with the United Kingdom Government on its discredited plans to cut tax credits by April 2016. (S4F-03023)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The Deputy First Minister wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer in early July to set out the Scottish Government's concerns about the UK Government's plan to cut tax credits. On 20 July, the Scottish National Party, together with Plaid Cymru, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens, voted against the second reading of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill—the Labour Party abstained in that vote. On 23 October, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners' Rights wrote to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions again voicing our serious concerns about the proposed reductions. Today, again, I urge the chancellor to think again and to abandon a misguided policy that will penalise hard-working families across Scotland and the UK.

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that they should keep to the question wording that is in the *Business Bulletin* and not add words to that.

Joan McAlpine: Thank you very much. Can the First Minister offer the chancellor any advice on how he should proceed with his discredited plans to cut tax credits to working families now that he has been told to go back and think again?

The First Minister: I think that he should abandon those plans. I do not believe that they are right, but I also do not believe that they are necessary. George Osborne has said on a number of occasions this week that he is “in listening mode”, but if he is genuinely serious about listening he will admit that he has made a serious

mistake here and reverse these damaging proposals.

The Scottish Government's analysis of the impact of the proposed changes shows that a quarter of a million working households with tax credits could lose an average of £1,500 a year just from the changes that are to be brought in next April. In the longer term, if the full set of cuts is implemented, low-income households with children could lose on average around £3,000 a year. I think that those changes would be unconscionable and I hope very much that the chancellor will use his autumn statement and the comprehensive spending review to say that he is not proceeding with them.

Nurse and Midwife Training Places

5. Jenny Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): To ask the First Minister whether a reduction in the number of training places for nurses and midwives has contributed to the rise in agency nursing costs as highlighted by Audit Scotland. (S4F-03016)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): Under this Government, the number of qualified nurses and midwives working in our national health service has gone up by over 2,200, which is an increase of over 5 per cent and it takes the number of qualified nurses and midwives in our NHS to historically high levels.

On the question of agency nurses, when we took office there were 728.2 whole-time equivalent agency nurses working in NHS Scotland; in 2014-15, that had been reduced to just 191 whole-time equivalent nurses, which is a reduction of 73.8 per cent in agency nursing under this Government.

Jenny Marra: The First Minister says that, after eight years, we should judge the Scottish National Party on its record. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer: Order.

Jenny Marra: Audit Scotland last week passed judgment on the First Minister's record. She herself took the decision to cut training places when she was health secretary. Scotland's nurses have told us the consequences: agency spend quadrupled from £3.9 million to £16 million. That mismanagement led her to the damning report card that she was given last week. After eight years in government and her failure to address previous warnings, does she now agree with Audit Scotland that we need fundamental change in how we deliver and staff our health service?

The First Minister: Of course, it is this Government that is coming forward with those change proposals. From the transformation in primary care through to the expansion of elective treatment centres, this is a Government that is getting on with the job.

Let me turn to nurses and nurses in training. The number of nurses in training has, on average, been 1,000 a year higher under this Administration than was the case under the Labour-Liberal Administration, and there are 2,200 more qualified nurses working in our national health service today than when we took office. Vacancy rates are broadly the same—they were 3.6 per cent when we took office and are 3.7 per cent now—and agency spend is lower now than when we took office. Jenny Marra has cited the figure of £16 million, but it is worth pointing out to the chamber that that is 13 per cent lower than the £18 million it was when we inherited the position from the last Labour Government.

In common with health systems across the developed world, our NHS faces challenges and pressures, mainly from our country's changing demographics; indeed, we see more evidence of that in the registrar general's report this morning. However, we will continue to make sure that our NHS and all who work in it are supported to face up to those challenges, so that it can continue to do the excellent job that it already does.

Living Wage

6. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): First of all, I associate the Green and Independent group with all the comments that have been made regarding the tragic events at Cults academy.

To ask the First Minister what proportion of the labour force has a secure job that pays at least the living wage. (S4F-03020)

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): The latest figures show that more than 80 per cent of employees in Scotland are paid at least the living wage, which represents a higher proportion of the workforce than is the case anywhere else in the United Kingdom outside of London and the south-east of England. There are now more than 370 Scottish-based living wage-accredited employers, with workers from a variety of sectors across Scotland benefiting from the progress that is being made. However, although that is good progress, there is no room for complacency. We want the living wage to be extended even further. Of course, next week is living wage week. As part of that, my ministers and I will be promoting the living wage at events throughout the country, and I encourage MSPs from across the chamber to do likewise.

Patrick Harvie: I am pleased to welcome the increasing emphasis across society on the quality of employment rather than the overall job numbers in our economy, and the fair work convention and the business pledge as well as the New Economics Foundation's recent report citing job quality as one of the national indicators of success are good steps that add momentum to that

agenda. However, business support services and grants are still being provided by the Scottish Government that are mostly contingent on headline job numbers and which do not place the same emphasis on job quality. Is it not time to start putting every bit as much emphasis on job quality when we decide on eligibility for Government support services and grants that have been paid for by the taxpayer?

The First Minister: Patrick Harvie makes a fair point. Through the fair work convention and the approach that we are taking through the business pledge, we will, of course, continue to consider such issues. I do think that, for people out there across the country, job numbers matter, but Mr Harvie is absolutely right to say that the quality of work matters, too. We want to see more full-time work for people who want it instead of people being in jobs in which they are working fewer hours than they would like to, and we want to ensure that people in jobs are paid a decent living wage, have good working conditions and are respected and well rewarded in those jobs. That is the whole focus of the business pledge and the fair work convention.

Crucially—and this, I think, gets to the heart of why we are seeking to develop a partnership approach to business on this—my message to business is that it should do all these things not because Government says so but because it is good for business as well as for our society. I think that we are making headway on that argument in Scotland, and I hope that we have the chamber's support to push even further ahead on it.

The Presiding Officer: That ends First Minister's questions.

Volunteering and Self-management

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):

The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-13894, in the name of Joan McAlpine, on volunteering and self-management. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament acknowledges the contribution of volunteers across Scotland in raising awareness of self-management; believes that both volunteering and community involvement play a significant role in supporting people with managing long-term conditions and in raising awareness of how self-management can inspire others; understands that third sector organisations, such as New Horizons Borders in the Scottish Borders and Healthy 'n' Happy in South Lanarkshire, support many formal and informal volunteering opportunities for people with long-term conditions and that this has resulted in social benefits, including social connectedness and improved employment prospects; welcomes the continued investment through the £2 million per year Self Management Impact Fund, which is run by the Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (the Alliance), and congratulates the Alliance on establishing its Self-management Network for Scotland, which aims to help people with long-term conditions or who work in health and social care to share their experiences, learn and hear about best practice and to change lives through self-management.

12:35

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): I am very pleased to bring this important debate to the chamber. Before I begin, I put on record my gratitude to the Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland for the help that it has given me in preparing for today's debate. In particular I thank Andrew, Sara, Christopher and Emma, who I believe is in the public gallery this afternoon.

Volunteering brings immeasurable benefits to the volunteers themselves; to the individuals whom they support; and to organisations and communities. However, although it is easy enough to understand what volunteering is, some people are unfamiliar with the term "self-management". It is the name that is given to a set of person-centred approaches that aim to enable people who are living with long-term conditions—and their unpaid carers—to take control of and manage their own health.

It essentially puts people in the driving seat of their care, and it works for a whole range of conditions. The examples that I will use in my speech today concern mental health; however, members will have seen the briefing from Diabetes Scotland, which emphasises strikingly how equipping patients with quality knowledge of their condition and how to self-manage it can prevent

problems from escalating, prevent further disability and even save lives.

The Scottish Government's strategy for self-management for those with long-term conditions and those with a caring role is set out in the "Gau Yersel!" document. The strategy was launched in 2008 alongside the alliance, which remains a key strategic partner in its delivery.

The strategy recognises that everyone has strengths, resources, skills and experience that support their health and wellbeing. It is based on five key principles. Those are:

"Be accountable to me and value my experience ... I am a whole person and this is for my whole life ... Self management is not a replacement for services. Gau yersel doesn't mean going it alone ... Clear information helps me make decisions that are right for me"

and

"I am the leading partner in management of my health".

Self-management is a critical part of the Scottish Government's 2020 vision for a safe, effective and person-centred health service. Much of the financial investment in self-management activity has been undertaken through the Scottish Government's self-management fund, which ran between 2009 and 2012, and latterly the self-management impact fund, which is managed by the alliance. In the past three years, the fund has provided small grants, totalling nearly £6 million, to third sector groups to encourage the sharing of good practice and the development of new approaches to self-management.

The fund has reached almost 21,500 people and created 107 jobs and 622 volunteering roles. There are excellent examples from all over the country, including Edinburgh's network of neighbourhood time banks; Diabetes Scotland's Chinikum at Home project; and Aberdeen Foyer's work with adults with mental health conditions. Sadly there is not enough time for me to mention them all, but I will highlight a couple of examples.

Mo Connelly is a volunteer with Support in Mind Scotland in Dumfries. She was nominated in the inspirational person of the year category at this year's self-management awards. Mo has a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder, and with the help of Support in Mind she learned about her condition and about techniques for managing her symptoms.

Once Mo was in recovery, she felt that it was important that others with a similar diagnosis should benefit from the support that she had received. With the help of Support in Mind, she began raising awareness of the condition, helping others to find sources of support and how to use self-management techniques, including by briefing

health professionals and social workers on dealing with the condition.

Mo says that that volunteering is an important part of her own recovery. She has registered as a member of the alliance so that she can contribute her experience to benefit others with a borderline personality disorder diagnosis. She is also developing a peer support group and training with the wellness and recovery college in Dumfries.

Mo's story shows that reciprocity is an important aspect of self-management. People who have been supported by volunteers or peer workers are often inspired to volunteer themselves. I will mention the New Horizons Borders peer support project titled through the rain. It employed four peer workers with lived experience of mental health problems. People who received support from the project said that they found the service to be non-judgmental, meaningful, empowering and a key impetus in their recovery. A powerful comment that sums up why the peer support workers were so effective is:

"you can learn to be a nurse or support worker but you can't learn how it feels to live with a long term mental health condition."

Self-management has some truly positive impacts. However, as I mentioned, there is sometimes a lack of understanding of what it means. That can be true among health and social care professionals—not all of them, but a few—as much as among the wider public. The great shame of that is that effective self-management can keep people well and ease pressure on national health service acute services, for example by reducing unnecessary admissions. A modest investment in self-management and its volunteers can save considerable sums of money in other areas of care.

We need to keep investing in and promoting the self-management fund. We must also invest in peer support roles, both voluntary and paid, bearing in mind the fact that mentors have their own health to manage. The alliance's self-management network will help with that, but we all have a role to play.

12:41

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): I thank Joan McAlpine for securing this important debate. I also give my apologies because I will probably have to leave just before 1 o'clock because I have the Conveners Group meeting.

Members' business can often be seen as being less important than Government or Opposition debates, but debates such as this can play a very important role in shining a light on issues that matter deeply to a great many people. There can be no doubt that self-management and putting

people who live with long-term conditions in the driving seat of their own condition are of significant importance to many people.

People with long-term conditions need support that is tailored to meet their specific needs and circumstances at a given time, but it is vital that when that support is packaged and delivered, the person with the condition is given the maximum control possible. Such an approach is about two simple but important words: dignity and respect. In short, it is about enabling people to live their lives on their terms.

In my constituency, I recently met Shona Sinclair from a fantastic initiative called the Work4ME—work for ME or work for me, depending on what we want to call it—Co-operative. It was established in 2012, and Shona is the co-founder. She set up Work4ME after research was commissioned into the experience of people living with ME or chronic fatigue syndrome and the challenges that they face in employment and in managing their condition.

I have deep interest in the way that people with ME receive treatment and support. I have two friends who have ME and, with a former MSP who is also a friend, Andy Kerr, I was the co-convenor of the cross-party group on ME.

For many people who live with ME or chronic fatigue syndrome, self-management in the workplace can, not surprisingly, be a huge challenge. During my time as an equal opportunities officer in the then Scottish Office—which, admittedly, is some time ago—the organisation, although progressive in its approach, did not always get it right when dealing with people with illnesses such as ME or chronic fatigue syndrome.

Interestingly, SKS Scotland—a company of which Shona Sinclair is also director—has done work on how the self-employment model could provide improved outcomes for people living with ME or chronic fatigue syndrome and, indeed, people with other long-term health conditions. The challenges of self-employment can be significant, so Work4ME was brought into being with the specific purpose of helping and enabling people and organisations to meet those challenges.

Work4ME offers advice and assistance for those suffering with ME or chronic fatigue syndrome who are entering or returning to the business environment. That could include support with training, project managing, research and development, or marketing and public relations. Work4ME helps to answer any questions and provides encouragement and a bit of help when it is needed, as well as a bit of moral support from mentors who understand the specific problems of returning to work. That allows the individual who is

suffering from a long-term illness to generate personal income and to see the socioeconomic and wellbeing benefits that that provides.

As an example, Shona Sinclair herself, who runs Work4ME, went from having a very active life, which included running marathons, to a life of fatigue, spending up to 20 hours a day in bed. Using her own life experiences, Shona has helped others to find the best way to cope with the work-life balance.

Living with a long term-condition impacts on all aspects of an individual's and their family's life. Organisations such as Work4ME and those that Joan McAlpine mentioned—and I am sure that we will hear of more from other members—can help to create a positive network for those who wish to work but who need a bit of support. I am glad that the Scottish Government has committed £2 million annually to the self-management fund to help such organisations.

With self-management, when people are trying to manage their own situation, they need people like Shona Sinclair and her colleagues in other organisations across Scotland who can provide the right support at the right time to enable individuals to choose how they want to live with their long-term condition.

Once again, I congratulate Joan McAlpine on bringing this important debate to the chamber.

12:46

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I also congratulate Joan McAlpine on securing today's debate.

The availability of modern technology, and with it the ability to share information and advice, means that people are more and more looking towards self-management of their conditions. That is especially the case for people with long-term conditions, to whom self-management gives the freedom to plan their healthcare around their family lives.

We have had a number of briefings ahead of today's debate; Joan McAlpine mentioned the Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland's contribution. Diabetes Scotland represents one of the largest and most recognised groups that benefit from self-management, through blood testing kits and the like. Diabetes Scotland allows people to live with diabetes and to understand their condition, and it helps them to attain stable blood sugar levels that help them to avoid some of the devastating consequences of their disease. It also provides education and support, helping people manage their own care.

Crucial to self-management, as others have mentioned, is the role of volunteers who can use

their own experience to support others to self-manage. Volunteers have been involved in a number of projects using their own expertise, but it is important that that is not seen as healthcare on the cheap. It must be about enhancing patient care and the patient experience and being patient centred and led. The best volunteers are those who have had the same condition and can share that lived experience with patients and professionals alike.

Self-management empowers, giving people the tools to look after their own health, but there are barriers. Sadly, those barriers sometimes come from clinicians who are very cautious and who maybe do not trust patients to look after their own health. There are also barriers with regard to health inequalities and rurality, which can limit access to services and support. We must overcome those barriers to ensure that people can access self-management, because it has a huge ability to deal with some of the health inequalities that we see in our society.

Another organisation that sent us a briefing is Sue Ryder, which has devised multiple sclerosis self-management support based on five Rs. It is a free 10-week course that is currently available in Aberdeen but which we hope will be rolled out elsewhere. The five Rs are relax, rebuild, re-energise, reintegrate and regenerate, and the responses to that programme have been moving. One person said:

"It was brilliant and so inspiring how people manage their lives. I found the course very beneficial in that I didn't feel disabled and can still do lots of things with assistance."

Another person was even more poignant:

"I feel in a better frame of mind than I did 10 weeks ago. I have found myself trying to draw which I haven't tried in years! I think I will follow up some of the therapies ... I saw my GP last week. She couldn't believe how much better I seemed. I am now coming off my antidepressants. I have been on them for 4 years."

Those comments show the power that self-management can have on people's wellbeing.

However, I want to bring to the minister's attention an example of where we are still toiling to roll out self-management: patients on Warfarin. The Public Petitions Committee has been dealing with a petition on that subject. What leaves me amazed is the reluctance to have self-testing among adults when it is commonplace in paediatric cases. I have heard from young people who self-managed through their youth but who then had that equipment and freedom removed when they transferred to adult services. The issue is not only the removal of a freedom but the impact on their health, because the delay in getting test results means that they do not get the appropriate levels of Warfarin straight away, which is what they were used to. There is also the

inconvenience of their having to attend regular clinics and general practitioner appointments, as well as the knock-on effect for the NHS.

The Public Petitions Committee wrote to health boards and found that, out of the 12 health boards that responded, only 209 people were confirmed to be self-monitoring in Scotland out of an estimated 55,498 Warfarin patients, which is around 0.37 per cent. That is a disgrace. I hope that the minister will use the debate as a catalyst to change that appalling statistic and make sure that people, whatever their condition, can benefit from self-management.

12:51

Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con): I, too, thank Joan McAlpine for securing a debate on this important subject. I am delighted to participate in a debate about self-management and to discuss the role that it can play in people's lives. As has been indicated, this is about people with long-term conditions being in charge of their own future on their own terms, with access to the right information. As Joan McAlpine and Rhoda Grant said, the conditions are wide ranging and diverse.

Different people will react in different ways to the knowledge or, indeed, the discovery that they are suffering from a long-term condition. There will be a mixture of emotions—uncertainty, anxiety, fear—and a general sense of knowing neither what lies ahead nor how to cope. In that situation, I think that having information, feeling that you are not alone and knowing that there is partnership support but also knowing that you can direct matters and, as Joan McAlpine said, be in the driving seat is vital. It was right to stress that self-management does not mean having to cope alone and without support; rather, it means that people are better informed about their conditions, well prepared for everyday challenges, and better supported when they ask for it. Being in partnership with health professionals and others who provide support means that self-management can help people to make decisions that are right for them—decisions with which they feel at ease.

Bruce Crawford talked about dignity and respect. People say that self-management is important to them because they are seen as an individual and as a person with strengths, resources, skills and experience. They are then supported to develop their skills, to create and cultivate social networks and to develop their confidence to cope with their long-term condition. They are also provided with the right information in a format that they can understand. All those benefits are hugely valuable.

Volunteering and community involvement are immensely important in supporting and helping

people who are managing long-term conditions and in helping others to understand how self-management can help them. A bit of education is necessary here, as progress is still to be made in broadening awareness of what the benefits can be. Knowledge transfer and the exchange of ideas and experience are a vital component of making all this work even better. Of course, the Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland is extremely important in supporting self-management in a variety of ways, some of which have been referred to.

I want to talk briefly about the self-management impact fund, which was created in 2013. It has certainly benefited recipients in my area, including Voluntary Action East Renfrewshire, Carers Link East Dunbartonshire, Carers of West Dunbartonshire, Inverclyde Community Development Trust and West Dunbartonshire Community and Volunteering Services. I praise all those organisations for the excellent work that they do. The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland's development of the self-management partnership and the practice programme is supporting the development of self-management throughout Scotland.

I congratulate all those who are involved in the initiatives because, quite simply, they are transforming the lives of those who are benefiting from self-management and deriving from it hope and optimism that they might not otherwise have.

12:55

The Minister for Sport, Health Improvement and Mental Health (Jamie Hepburn): I join other members in thanking Joan McAlpine for bringing the debate to the chamber, and I thank colleagues for highlighting the exceptional work that is under way across Scotland to draw on and maximise the assets that our people bring to their health and care. Although the debate has been short, it is very important, as Bruce Crawford said.

We know that good progress has been achieved under the "Gaun Yersell!" strategy that Joan McAlpine mentioned, which is effectively supported by the Scottish Government's continued commitment of £2 million per year to the self-management fund. Members might like to know that that fund recently launched its call for applications for the fresh round of funding, which is entitled "Transforming Self Management in Scotland".

In addition, around 1.3 million people volunteer each year, and we recognise the enormous contribution that those volunteers make to the lives of individuals and communities across Scotland. Volunteering gives people the opportunity to bridge the gap between formal and

informal learning by realising their own individual interests and talents. That is why the Scottish Government is providing funding of more than £10 million in this financial year to local and national third sector organisations across Scotland to offer support to individuals and organisations on volunteering opportunities. The resourcefulness, commitment and innovation of individuals, families, communities and third and voluntary sector organisations across Scotland is truly inspirational not only in providing opportunities for volunteering, but—as Joan McAlpine set out and Bruce Crawford and Annabel Goldie reiterated—in enabling and supporting people to be in the driving seat when it comes to their care. I very much echo and agree with that point.

I turn to some of the specific projects that are mentioned in the motion. New Horizons Borders is an organisation that I am well aware of through my previous work on the Finance Committee and the Welfare Reform Committee, of which Joan McAlpine is now a member. I visited the organisation, which is doing great work in supporting better mental wellbeing among those people with whom it works. It has been awarded £131,000 from the self-management impact fund to train peer support workers to develop and deliver a self-management course.

Healthy n Happy is another organisation that I have been very happy to visit on more than one occasion. Most recently, I did so to open its great new facility in Rutherglen. It has a tremendous ambition to make Rutherglen and Cambuslang the healthiest and happiest places in Scotland, and given the determination of its staff, it might well achieve that aim. It has been awarded £108,000 from the self-management impact fund to build on its previous self-management project by providing opportunities for peer support and learning support for people with a long-term condition and their families and carers. That project has raised awareness of self-management in Cambuslang and Rutherglen.

Rhoda Grant mentioned Sue Ryder and the five Rs course. She might like to know that my colleague Maureen Watt, the Minister for Public Health, recently visited that organisation to see that project in action. We know that it is providing information and support to adults with multiple sclerosis. Rhoda Grant rightly highlighted the great feedback from those who are benefiting from that project.

Bruce Crawford talked about self-management and returning to work. He gave an example from his local area, but we know that there are others out there. For example, the INSPIRE—intensive care syndrome: promoting independence and return to employment—self-management programme at Glasgow royal infirmary is a five-

week programme that aims to empower patients who are recovering from a critical illness to take control of their health and wellbeing, which can help people get back to work.

There are many other examples out there, including the hope cafe in Lanarkshire, which is a peer-led mental health and wellbeing project in rural Clydesdale. It facilitates various activities that promote and support positive mental health and wellbeing and encourage self-management.

Macmillan @ Glasgow libraries is a strategic partnership between Macmillan Cancer Support and Glasgow Life, specifically Glasgow libraries. It has created a network of cancer information and support services across the city that allows individuals who are affected by cancer to access the right support at the right time in their local community.

Other initiatives include the partnership between NHS Lanarkshire and Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland, which makes a difference to people who are affected by stroke by supporting self-management, and link and learn, which is an initiative that Joan McAlpine will be interested in, given her interest in carers. Carers Link East Dunbartonshire provides information events and health and wellbeing courses for carers, but it knows that not enough carers access them, so it came up with the link and learn initiative to increase participation among harder-to-reach carers. The project's unique aspect is that carers are also given one-to-one computer training in their homes by trained volunteers to enable them to access the learning courses that are available.

Those are just some examples of the supportive projects that are out there. We have to find ways of getting those sources of support absolutely integrated and woven into the fabric of our health and social care system, and the person-centred integration of health and social care represents an excellent mechanism by which we can achieve that and make it a reality.

We need to support people to have different types of conversations and forge equal partnerships with their practitioners through collaborative care and support planning, helping them to describe their own preferences, agenda and goals and helping to plan and co-ordinate care and support. Much of that involves practitioners communicating in clear and meaningful ways and speaking to people in language that they understand.

There are opportunities to redesign health and care to make it simpler, more engaging and more responsive to people's capabilities and health literacy needs. On that point, Rhoda Grant mentioned the petition that is before the Parliament about self-management for warfarin

patients. The petitioner contacted us all, I believe, and the Scottish Government will look closely to see how the Public Petitions Committee takes the petition forward. However, Rhoda Grant and other members might like to know that Healthcare Improvement Scotland is about to publish updated guidance that is broadly supportive of the aims of the petition. We need to look at how to take this forward with existing services, but I think that it is helpful to put on the record that some work is under way. We will, of course, look to respond wherever the committee takes the petition.

It is hugely important to rise to the challenge of supporting and enabling people to be in the driving seat of their care, as it has been put. This debate has provided an excellent opportunity to acknowledge the vital role that is played by volunteers, the impact that we are already seeing for those who are effectively enabled to be the lead partner in their care and the successes of third sector co-ordination organisations such as the Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland in changing lives across Scotland through supported self-management.

The debate has been a useful opportunity to put on the record our collective thanks—and I express my thanks—to all those who are involved in that work. I thank Joan McAlpine once again for bringing the debate to the chamber.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you all for taking part in this important debate.

13:03

Meeting suspended.

14:00

On resuming—

Winter Transport Resilience

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is a statement by Derek Mackay on winter transport resilience.

The Minister for Transport and Islands (Derek Mackay): I am grateful to Parliament for the opportunity to make a statement on our winter transport resilience in Scotland.

We know that severe weather will cause disruption, but the Government has taken a wide range of steps to improve our resilience to the challenges of winter, to mitigate its impacts, to recover our transport networks and businesses, and to get daily life back to normal as quickly as possible. That has been done in partnership with a broad range of public, private and third sector partners, and it has included new investment, development and innovation, in all cases learning the lessons from recent winters.

Scotland will experience severe weather in the future, whether it is snow, a deep freeze, heavy rain or disruptive storms such as those of last winter. That does not just happen in winter. The summer flooding that has affected neighbourhoods across Scotland is fresh in everyone's memory in Fife and Perthshire, for example.

We cannot prevent the weather, but we can prepare for it. Our priority is to keep Scotland moving by all modes of transport. On roads, the winter service that is provided across Scotland from the start of October through to mid-May is a critical front-line service. Winter weather has and will cause disruption on our roads but, with the actions that we are taking and with road users playing their part by planning ahead, together we can get Scotland moving throughout this winter.

New contract specifications, specialist plant trials and innovations, greater use of technology and getting information to people on the move are just a few of the ways in which we have strengthened the winter plan, treatments, decision making and communication with road users.

Enhanced preparedness is also beneficial outside of winter, as the procedures and practices that are in place such as the multiagency response team—MART—improve our resilience for other severe weather episodes and for major events such as the Commonwealth games and the 2014 Ryder cup.

We will continue to invest in and trial more technology to improve decision making and

responses by those managing the winter treatments, such as new weather stations and mobile road condition sensors.

Over the past five years, we have strengthened our well-developed winter service even further. High-performance requirements ensure that our road maintenance contractors patrol the most strategically important routes from 1 November, before and through the morning peak, when temperatures are forecast to be low and there is a risk of ice forming. The strategic patrol gritters add to our ploughing capability during snowstorms.

We are continually investing in our winter service, and we have more winter plant this year than ever before. This year's winter fleet will have 205 vehicles available for spreading salt and ploughing snow, averaging one gritter or plough per 17km of the trunk road network. That is a record high, and it is a 3.5 per cent increase from the start of last season. All of the fleet will be available to provide support to front-line and patrol vehicles, as well as covering breakdowns and essential maintenance.

Since last year, 57 new state-of-the-art gritters have been brought in to replace some older vehicles. Of the total number that are operational across the country 152 gritters are less than three years old. That represents 74 per cent of the total winter fleet for trunk roads.

As of 7 October, there is approximately 674,000 tonnes of salt in stock or on order, including strategic salt. This exceeds the total amount of salt that was used across Scotland for last winter and during the severe winter of 2010-11. A range of new resources are in place to improve intelligence and to monitor, patrol and act where necessary.

Last year our crews went out and cleared the trunk roads of ice and snow approximately 14,000 times, and winter service patrols were operational 6,700 times. We have increased stocks of alternative de-icers to improve our resilience if very low temperatures are forecast.

The purpose-built traffic Scotland national control centre at South Queensferry has improved co-ordination and joint working. All motorways continue to be covered by winter patrols, giving a 30-minute response to incidents.

Control rooms can monitor the temperature on key routes remotely through sensors, and they can see the conditions live via a network of cameras. Road users can keep up to date through a range of media, including internet radio and smart phone updates on the move, in addition to more traditional methods. A record number of people are using our information services with more than 100,000 people now following @trafficscotland, which has its own style of communication, as followers know. There is programme of

communications using all channels in a proactive manner to raise awareness of the efforts that go into keeping the trunk roads moving during periods of bad weather such as rain, wind and snow.

We are engaging directly with schools. This year, we have been engaging with schoolchildren to educate them on the winter service on our trunk roads. We are also having an interesting competition to name our gritters. Partnership working is key to making sure that the communications process is as co-ordinated as possible, and Transport Scotland communications will work alongside the trunk road operating companies, contract providers, the traffic Scotland service and relevant partners in the Scottish Government to deliver shared messaging across all channels.

We will also liaise with Police Scotland and other transport providers where appropriate. That will enhance public confidence and make it clear to people that Transport Scotland is well prepared to deal with the conditions that winter may throw at us. That work also sets the scene for the wider Scottish Government ready for winter campaign, which will be launched in early November.

On rail, we are working closely with the ScotRail alliance to prepare for potential severe winter weather. We expect to see further improvements in operational response, customer services and the travel advice offered when compared with severe winters of two and three years ago. The plans for this year feature continued improvements across all ScotRail fleets to improve their robustness to the issues caused by winter weather in previous years.

ScotRail depots and maintenance facilities have additional winter maintenance equipment installed and a winter resilience check has been undertaken for all depots and train fleets. Winter working preparation is on track for all stations and de-icing equipment and materials will be in place. Network Rail has provided additional hand-held snow clearance equipment to local teams and has undertaken a winter resilience audit. Network Rail has also made available new mobile snow and ice clearance machines that can thaw junctions quickly.

Key routes for the busiest passenger flows and business-critical trains have been identified for enhanced resilience measures. A key route strategy has been agreed with all train operators, and a new weather forecasting and alert service has been procured to allow a more localised detail of effects.

In aviation, substantial investment has been made by airports in new measures since 2010 and 2011, and the collective figure for that spending is in excess of £4 million. Examples of that

investment include Glasgow Airport, which has invested approximately £3 million in new snow-clearing equipment, including two new runway sweepers, procuring additional resources and improving general resilience, and Aberdeen International Airport, which has invested further with more than £1 million for new snow-clearing and de-icing equipment. Working towards winter 2015-16, our own airport group, Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd, will benefit from advanced weather forecasting at all HIAL airports and from new de-icing sprayers introduced at our smaller airports for resilience purposes.

On ferries, the Scottish Government is committed to maintaining and improving lifeline ferry services that play a key role in supporting the economic, social and cultural development of island and remote communities. However, due to high winds and seasonal weather, disruptions and cancellations to ferry services across the Scottish ferry network are not uncommon during winter. Operators will continue to inform their customers of disruptions and cancellations as a matter of course via notifications on their websites, emails and text messages and by direct contact.

The decision to delay or cancel a sailing is never taken lightly. Ferry operators fully recognise the importance of the ferry service to the island and rural communities that they serve. Ferry travel has its own distinct challenges, particularly high winds, and the ship's master has a duty to ensure the safety of passengers above other considerations. The Merchant Shipping (Master's Discretion) Regulations 1997 gives the ship's master sole responsibility for deciding whether it is safe to travel.

In conclusion, we will learn something new each time Scotland is beset by severe weather. The Scottish Government and the responder community are doing all that we can to build Scotland's resilience to severe weather for winter and the rest of the year. At a time of severe economic challenges and environmental change, we need to show that Scotland's infrastructure and services are ready to support our businesses and our people to be the Scotland we all want to see.

The Presiding Officer: The minister will now take questions on the issues raised in his statement. I intend to allow about 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I thank the minister for the advance copy of his statement.

Yesterday, I read a press headline that said, "Coldest winter for 50 years set to bring months of heavy snow to UK", and the article referenced the 1962-63 winter, which saw rivers freeze across

Scotland. That might be overstating the Met Office's prediction for the winter, but there are real fears that Scotland faces food and fuel shortages as road and transport networks grind to a halt.

What emergency contingency plans are in place to deal with a situation in which the dire warnings in the press come to fruition, and what direct access does the minister have to emergency contingency funding to keep our trunk roads open, our railways functioning and our planes flying?

The minister referred to Highlands and Islands Airports, which is owned by the Scottish Government. He will know that, in a previous winter, HIAL ran out of de-icer because there was such a huge demand across the United Kingdom. What contingency is in place to stop that happening again?

What particular and specific plans are in place to protect the young, the vulnerable and the elderly?

The minister is not responsible for the weather, of course, but Parliament will be looking to him to ensure that Scotland does not slide to a halt on road and rail in 2016. What reassurances can the minister give that the Scottish Government has learned the lessons of 2010-11?

Derek Mackay: On Mr Stewart's last point, it is fair to say that all of us have learned from the severe weather impacts that were particularly sorely felt during 2010-11. A lot of lessons were learned, an action plan was produced and we have delivered a range of measures, including improved technology, gritters and responses. Fundamentally, there is now better integration in the responder community, and the co-ordination efforts of the national traffic control centre at South Queensferry have made a difference. There has been financial investment and better partnership working across the agencies.

Having said all of that, we can prepare as best we can for the winter episodes but we cannot accurately predict what will happen. There could be a range of weather incidents involving snow, wind, rain, floods and so on. We prepare for the worst and hope for the best. That is why each organisation has its own resilience and contingency plans that set out what it will be required to do, which we oversee.

With regard to our levels of preparedness, the operating companies publish those and we put them on the Transport Scotland website. I have ensured that salt supplies are at levels that I am satisfied with, and we now have alternatives, such as those involving treated brine, which will result in solutions that work at temperatures at which traditional grit and salt do not. There is a range of measures to ensure that we are prepared.

In terms of wider Government resilience beyond transport, further contingency plans have been put in place through the work of Mr Brown, the Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure, Investment and Cities, and Mr Swinney, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, who has overall responsibility for resilience. When required, Scottish Government ministers, our agencies and our civil servants meet, and we can meet with United Kingdom Government representatives, if that is required.

We have a range of plans in place to deal with a range of eventualities. Focusing on transport, I believe that we are well prepared for the events that we face. There have been various reports about the weather that we should expect. We prepare for the worst, but it is hard to predict the nature of the weather that we will have. We know that there will be rain, snow and wind, but the extent to which travel will be disrupted by those factors is yet to be fully understood.

We prepare for the worst and hope for the best and put in enough mitigation to ensure that any disruption to our transport network is kept to a minimum. On welfare issues, plans are in place involving health and social care providers, local authorities and others to support the most vulnerable in the event of a severe winter episode.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): I thank the minister for advance sight of his statement. I have some sympathy for the minister, because the challenge of Scotland's transport minister versus Scotland's winter weather assumes the proportions of Canute trying to order the tide to go back. I start from a position of understanding.

The statement was comprehensive and indicated that the Government is aware of the problems regarding equipment and materials and has taken steps to ensure that they are not found to be in short supply. However, I will ask the minister about two or three key points.

During the last really serious winter five years ago, we had a number of serious disruptions to and total shut-downs of our railway system, which were blamed on frozen points. It was said at the time that a programme was in place to ensure that points on the main lines would be heated, so that we would not experience frozen points in the future. Has that programme been completed and will we be protected from the frozen-points problem if we get another severe winter?

On some of the experiences that we have had more recently, I am interested that the minister talked about alternative de-icers. Five years ago, when the M8 was closed completely with a large amount of traffic stuck on it, it was put down to the fact that salt could not melt ice in the temperatures

at the time. Alternative de-icers would achieve the objectives that were not achieved that night. Do we have those alternatives in quantities such that we could tackle a job such as de-icing the whole M8?

Landslides have been a major problem, particularly in the Highlands, where the A83 is regularly closed as a result of winter landslides. Will the minister assure me that the Government is looking closely at how that problem can be averted in the future and tell me whether any additional remedial action is planned?

At the end of every winter we have the problem of potholes. They are a side effect of cold and wet winters, after which potholes invariably become a problem. Is the Government considering whether anything can be done to ensure that the problem of potholes on our trunk roads and local roads becomes a thing of the past?

Derek Mackay: I thank Alex Johnstone for those comprehensive questions.

On rail, we have made progress on the actions on frozen points and junctions. In my statement I said that there is new equipment for thawing frozen junctions, and there is now understanding of where there are repeat patterns of frozen junctions and points. Network Rail and ScotRail have worked on that, and progress has been made. Alex Johnstone asked me to state whether all the issues have been totally resolved and whether we are prepared for everything. We can do our best, and although I cannot guarantee that there will not be incidents, I believe that the actions have been undertaken.

On the use of alternative chemicals, we are using liquid sodium chloride brine, which has been used in other parts of Europe and the USA. It gives us an alternative to grit, which works only at certain temperatures. Its use has been piloted successfully and we want to roll it out—quite literally—as and when required.

Other measures include pre-treatment of roads if particularly cold weather is anticipated. We understand that points on Scotland's topography will require special treatment, which should, along with the other additional responder commitments, address the pinch points.

Specific actions have been undertaken on landslides, including geotechnical surveys. Netting and fencing, where required, will assist in minimising landslides' impact on the road network. There has been multimillion pound investment around the Rest and Be Thankful road, for example, which has had critical problems in the past. The fencing has captured much of the debris and has minimised disruption to the road network. I have also made a commitment on continuity of access to parts of the west and Argyll, where there

has been disruption because of landslides. There has been better communication and use of variable messaging signs, as well. A range of actions have been taken on landslides.

Finally, some people might see potholes as being inverted traffic-calming measures, but that is not a view that I share. The carriageways and footways of our roads network suffer during difficult winters. Therefore, I am working in partnership with local authorities, which control and are responsible for 94 per cent of the roads network—I am responsible for the strategic roads that make up the other 6 per cent—to address the maintenance backlog, although my priority is to see us through the coming winter. Only yesterday, I had a meeting with the strategic action group to co-ordinate with local authorities in respect of road investments and how we can collaborate to deliver even more for the roads infrastructure of Scotland.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I welcome the minister's statement. We would all agree that the most basic and frequent mode of transport is our feet. However, gritting of pavements—which I accept is the responsibility of local authorities—is often an afterthought. Can the minister use his extensive powers in some way to emphasise the importance of gritting pavements? That would undoubtedly reduce considerably the number of visits to accident and emergency departments—which are increasing substantially—because of wholly avoidable fractures, thereby saving pain and saving pounds of the health service's purse.

Derek Mackay: I am not sure that I understand what "extensive powers" Christine Grahame is suggesting I have. I am not a centralising minister; it is for local authorities to prioritise their local networks. They have done so—as the Scottish Government has—in response to incidents, and have recognised that the preventative approach of treating footways, carriageways, paths and cycle paths will reduce the number of incidents that impact on people and the health service, and reduce the number of future claims. Local authorities are working hard to address concerns locally, but we can do more to support communities through providing self-help kits and advice on community resilience, and through local contingency campaigns. A range of actions can be taken to ensure that our footways are treated as a priority while we keep the country's strategic roads and other transport networks moving during the winter.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): I thank the minister for providing an advance copy of his statement and assure him that if it snows as much as David Stewart fears that it will, I will not hold him personally responsible.

In his statement, the minister mentioned aviation—Highlands and Islands Airports in particular. He will be aware that a pilots' union has expressed real concern about Loganair's aircraft safety record. Is he aware that the Civil Aviation Authority has said today that Loganair does meet European safety regulations? Will he therefore meet Loganair and the CAA to ensure that the right safety standards are being met and that engineering support is in place, as winter approaches?

Derek Mackay: Tavish Scott has asked a fair question. I met Loganair prior to the pilots' letter and sought assurances around engineering progress, partly because complaints had been made about the reliability of the operator's flights to the islands. At that point, I was reassured that there would be engineering interventions to improve reliability. I expect the highest standards in aviation in Scotland. That is a matter for which the Civil Aviation Authority and others have some responsibility, but the Scottish Government expects the highest standards. I will revisit the issue in the light of the pilots' concerns in order to ensure that the commitment that I was given on engineering and resilience improvement is delivered on. Safety is paramount and will not be compromised, and all necessary regulations should be complied with.

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): In previous years, people carrying out community service have been called on to assist in efforts to keep our communities moving. Can the minister confirm that that will happen again, if it is required, over the coming winter?

Derek Mackay: It is for local authorities to decide the nature of the unpaid work that can be carried out in communities using, for example, community payback orders. That can include snow clearing during the winter months, and the Scottish Government is sympathetic to councils' deploying people in that way.

Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab): My question is about another infrastructure issue. During the severe winter of 2010-11, the most significant problem in Dumfries and Galloway was not snow. Without an insulating layer of snow, the water infrastructure froze—not just pipes in homes, but tobies and underground supplies—and many of my constituents were without a water supply for several days over the new year. When that happens, pipes can subsequently burst and the water can then freeze, which can significantly disrupt transport.

If the matter is not his responsibility, can the minister advise—now or in writing—what contingency plans Scottish Water has in place should similar weather conditions prevail this year? Can he assure members that Scottish Water

is also involved in winter resilience planning along with local authorities and Transport Scotland?

Derek Mackay: Scottish Water is, of course, engaged in the wider resilience measures and contingency plans, and will have its own levels of preparedness. I can do that question justice only by writing to Elaine Murray with the full details of what Scottish Water has in place. My statement was primarily about transport, but I am sure that she will be reassured by what Scottish Water has in place. I will write to her with those details.

Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): I was tempted to find out what Network Rail meant by

“additional hand-held snow clearance equipment”.

Is Abellio ready to ensure that any disruption to rail services, especially on long-distance routes, is minimised and that rapid replacement transport is on hand to get travellers to their ticketed destinations without undue delay? Is Network Rail well staffed to tackle problems on isolated rail routes?

Derek Mackay: I do not have the civil service Q and A here that covers such definitions, but I suspect that such equipment is a shovel, which comes in handy for politicians from time to time.

On the more serious point, the ScotRail alliance is looking at getting people to their destinations and at alternatives when rail services are disrupted, and we are considerate about how customers are treated as part of that. That includes providing information and being reasonable about alternatives. It is not just a matter of the critical mass of people; those who are in the more peripheral or remote areas also have that support provided. That is part of the strategic planning that Network Rail and ScotRail have undertaken.

Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): The minister has touched on this subject. He will know that landslides have been a particular problem in the past few years, particularly at the Rest and Be Thankful. I know that the Government has made significant investment in the past few years. Will the minister touch on that, give a bit more detail about what investment there has been recently to prevent, as far as possible, landslides from happening, and give some reassurance, if he can, that resources are on hand to deal with the spoil from landslides, get it cleared and get the road open and functioning properly again as quickly as possible?

Derek Mackay: My first priority is to ensure that the area remains open for business. That is why I have put effort into ensuring that the diversion routes are maintained, such as the old military road. With ferry use as well, that will help us to

have continuity of access, albeit through diversions or detours if the main roads are impacted through landslides.

On mitigating and minimising the risks from landslides, netting has been put in place that effectively captures the debris. The incidents this year have not been as drastic as those in previous years. There is also forestry planting, and geotechnical studies are allowing us to predict where incidents may occur. Specific physical measures will be put in place where there have been incidents in the past.

That is the preventative approach. There is a commitment to continuity of access and a multimillion-pound investment to support that. Information is being shared to ensure that people will know what is happening on the road network if there are further incidents. The operating company is expected to get things moving as quickly as possible and, if a diversion is required, it should be operational within an hour. I have had the pleasure of chairing the task force to ensure that we take all possible actions that we can to ensure continuity of access, even in the event of further landslips.

Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab): I, too, thank the minister for advance sight of his statement. Yesterday, I launched the Equal Opportunities Committee's report on age and social isolation, in which we documented the harmful effects of loneliness. How will the Government ensure that its advice gets to all corners of Scotland and particularly to those who live alone, those who do not have access to the internet and Twitter, for example, and those who do not have a network of family and friends to rely on at this time of year?

Derek Mackay: We will work with our partners to ensure that communication is shared using traditional methods—for example, through community councils and seniors forums and through the range of advice that is provided through voluntary organisations and third sector organisations. In addition to social media, television, Twitter and new media, as well as traditional websites, there is the telephone advisory service.

A range of media can be used to share the Government's message. People who are on the front line understand who the most vulnerable in our society are—be they energy customers or social work clients and so on. The more vulnerable are identified so that, in the event of any incident, we target those who are most in need.

A range of measures that are in place should reassure the member. We are not relying just on new media, but the beauty of new media is that we can get information out in real time to advise people what to do as an incident is happening.

That is a major transformation for the better over the past year or two. The Twitter feed, which reaches 100,000 people, is sharing live updates about the transport network. If there are any further suggestions as to how we can improve communication, I am all ears.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): The minister can pin back his ears, because I suggest that perhaps a 25-year-old technology—message texting—is one of the most effective ways of communicating with people. Almost all fixed land-lines can receive texts, which are read out over them. Will the minister follow the lead of the floodline system, which is good at alerting people to flood risks, in looking at the most effective use of text and also using the data service that is part of FM radio? Traditional methods work, too.

Derek Mackay: I suspect that Stewart Stevenson probably invented that technology, which is why he is promoting it to me. I am more than happy to look into that.

The ferry service uses such technology already to communicate directly with customers so that it can update them. It was recognised that not everyone has internet reception, so text messaging and traditional phones can be a useful form of communication for further updates, which I am happy to explore.

Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): In light of past harsh winters—particularly in 2010, when the M8, M9 and A80 came to a standstill—what assurances can the minister provide to my constituents across Central Scotland that the road networks will remain open should there be a repeat of the unprecedented bad weather that we have seen? Will he outline what contingency plans are in place for any disrupted ScotRail services during the winter and say whether passengers will be compensated for any cancelled services?

Derek Mackay: I would rather focus on minimising disruption than compensating for it, but I understand the reason for the question. If there is major disruption to transport networks, we need to get the country moving as quickly as possible.

Last year's rail disruption was not actually down to the snow. It was because of high winds, which caused trees and other debris to land on the tracks. People who live close to a railway need to be careful about their garages, garden equipment, trampolines and everything else. We had to ensure that the railways were safe so that the trains could operate safely. That was the reason for last year's suspension. I tried to maintain oversight to ensure that the rail system was reopened as quickly as possible, so I offer a reassurance on that.

Safety must always come first, so how have we improved things since the incidents of 2010 to 2011? There is better communication, better understanding of welfare needs by all our partner organisations, more on-road response to incidents and more provision availability in our trunk road response teams around welfare issues, whether that involves food or blankets, as well as connections to make sure that the hard shoulder is maintained for emergency vehicles and other resilience vehicles.

With all that, there is pre-treatment of the motorways and the trunk roads, and treatment while events are occurring. There is also identification of what the hot spots or indeed the cold spots were last time, to ensure that they are addressed. A range of actions exists to minimise disruption and, if there is disruption, to address the welfare issues.

The multimillion-pound—indeed, multibillion-pound—investment in the road network is improving the quality of our infrastructure. On ensuring communication, we can give good real-time information about what is happening on the transport network. If people want to plan ahead, they can check congestion along the roads and see where incidents have happened. I am sure that that means that they can avoid disruption. I hope that the member is reassured by that range of actions and by hearing about how we have learned lessons from the incident in 2010 and 2011.

Education (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-14614, in the name of Angela Constance, on the Education (Scotland) Bill.

14:35

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Angela Constance): The Education (Scotland) Bill brings forward a range of measures that are designed to drive improvements across our education system.

I very much welcome the Education and Culture Committee's report on the bill and its support for the bill's general principles. The report is fair and balanced, and it helpfully identifies a number of areas in which we can look to improve the bill at stages 2 and 3.

Education is at the heart of this Government's plans. The objective of improving school attainment is arguably the single most important one in our programme for government. Improving attainment overall and closing the gap between children in our most deprived areas and those in our least deprived areas is fundamental to our aim of making Scotland fairer and more prosperous. The bill has a key role to play. It sends a strong signal, nationally as well as locally, about the value that we place on ensuring that all our children and young people receive the best education that they can receive and achieve their full potential.

We have a lot to be proud of in Scottish education, and we should all celebrate the achievements of our children and young people. However, more needs to be done if we are to realise our ambition of a more socially just Scotland. We must build on success and ensure that every child and young person, regardless of their background, has a fair chance to pursue their dreams and achieve success.

We owe it to those children and young people to rise to the challenge of the inequalities that exist in our education system. Part 1 of the bill proposes that councils and the Scottish ministers prioritise reducing the inequalities of outcome that are associated with socioeconomic disadvantage when they take strategic decisions relating to education. By strategic decisions, I mean the key, high-level decisions that determine how education services are delivered over a prolonged period. Such decisions relate to matters ranging from budget setting and the identification of measures for assessing progress within and across schools to the development of the school estate. Although such decisions are strategic in nature, they clearly have an impact on the day-to-day experiences of

our children and young people—that is exactly what we hope to achieve.

The duty is designed to enhance the existing framework within which ministers and councils operate. We recognise the need to set the specific requirements of the duty alongside the range of other legal requirements that exist. Statutory guidance under the bill will support councils in carrying out their new duties.

It is right to focus on tackling socioeconomic disadvantage at this point. However, the bill will allow us to extend the duty to other groups of children and young people in future, if that is considered appropriate.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I heard exactly what the cabinet secretary just said. What persuaded her that the matter should be dealt with through legislative proposals, as opposed to other mechanisms that might achieve the objective?

Angela Constance: The nub of the issue is that I want the responsibility that we all—the Scottish ministers, the Parliament and local authorities—have to give consideration to closing the attainment gap to be more than just a passive recognition of the issue. I accept that legislation alone is never the be-all and end-all, but given the keenness that I think that all members share to pick up the pace and close the attainment gap, I think that it is appropriate to anchor such a duty in legislation.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Angela Constance: Does the member mind if I make a little bit of progress?

Members will know that, as part of the programme for government, we published a draft national improvement framework for education to help drive improvement at local level and to help teachers, parents, schools, councils and Parliament better understand how things are progressing. I propose to lodge amendments at stage 2 to place the framework on a statutory footing and to require ministers and councils to work towards the priorities in the framework, which are improving attainment and closing the gap; improving children and young people's health and wellbeing; and improving sustained school leaver destinations for young people. I also want to ensure that the bill provides for effective and transparent reporting arrangements covering both the framework and the inequalities of outcome duty. It is crucial that we can assess the progress being made, but that must be done in a coherent and proportionate way.

However, legislation is not, and cannot be, the only answer. The bill is just one of many areas of

work that are under way to drive improvement and to help raise attainment. The Scottish attainment challenge, which is now providing additional funding and support to more than 300 schools and 21 local authorities, is at the forefront of that work. The decisions that are taken about how to use the resources that we have available to us will ultimately determine our success.

Liam McArthur: My point is in relation to the attainment of those who might be disadvantaged not on socioeconomic grounds but on additional support needs grounds. The cabinet secretary talks about the attainment fund and she will recall my misgivings about that scheme. Although it is now targeted at 21 local authorities, it is still missing out 11 local authorities in which instances of poverty and disadvantage are still failing to be addressed.

Angela Constance: When we started the attainment fund, we wanted to have a very targeted approach, but we always said that we recognise that there are severe pockets of deprivation in every community and that, as we moved forward, we would extend the reach of the attainment fund—we will continue to do that.

The member referred to socioeconomic disadvantage, which is the biggest aspect in the attainment gap. It is right that we focus on that here and now, but I am most certainly listening to information about other aspects of disadvantage. I have seen a lot of the briefings prepared by third sector organisations in advance of this debate that talk about needs and how we can better reflect the needs of, for example, disabled children as we move forward.

Part 2 of the bill deals with Gaelic-medium education. The Government has always been clear about its aim to create a secure future for Gaelic in Scotland and that that will be done only by increasing the numbers who speak, learn and use the language. We therefore made a commitment to explore an entitlement to Gaelic-medium education where reasonable demand exists. The bill seeks to meet that commitment by introducing a process for parents to request Gaelic-medium primary education and by a duty on councils to assess and respond.

We listened with interest to the evidence heard by the Education and Culture Committee and the views expressed that the process proposed in the bill did not go far enough to satisfy our commitment. We therefore intend to bring forward amendments at stage 2 to include a presumption in favour of Gaelic-medium education as part of the process of assessing demand. The bill also proposes a duty on councils to promote and support Gaelic education and a duty on Bòrd na Gàidhlig to prepare guidance. Those are welcome developments and we are confident that they will

contribute to the growth of Gaelic-medium education.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The presumption is based on whether reasonable demand for Gaelic exists. What is “reasonable demand”?

Angela Constance: That will be set out in the process that we hope to address with statutory guidance.

The bill seeks to extend the rights of children by amending the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004. The provisions are complex and technical but are no less important for that. The bill proposes that children should be able to influence directly the provision that is made to support them in their learning. As I said, the provisions are complex and it may be that we have not got them all right as yet. We recognise that that has certainly been the view of some of our stakeholders. We have had a number of very positive discussions with them, and I intend to introduce amendments at stage 2 to help ensure that we get those important provisions right.

The bill seeks to modernise and improve how education complaints are dealt with. The changes that are proposed in the bill will ensure that complaints related to additional support for learning are considered by the Additional Support Needs Tribunals for Scotland rather than by ministers, as can happen at present. That body was established to ensure that experts were at the heart of such complex matters, and that has to be right.

The bill proposes the introduction of strict timescales for the handling of more general complaints by Scottish ministers under section 70 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980. The process deals with issues such as parental concerns about the provision of education for their children, which can be very time consuming.

We all know about the financial situation that we are in. Councils across Scotland are having to look closely at their budgets and take difficult decisions. In order to ensure that all councils continue to have a senior officer to advise them on education issues, the bill proposes the establishment of a statutory chief education officer role. That is intended to ensure that there is someone with an education background in the senior management team of every council. Councils have a range of complex statutory functions, which require a sound, working knowledge and understanding of the practical implications of decisions. The bill is not prescriptive: it provides flexibility for councils to ensure that the requirement is met without recruiting additional staff or creating additional financial costs.

High-quality teaching and strong leadership are key features of our approach to learning. Indeed, they are crucial to effective learning. The bill therefore proposes to introduce a requirement that all teachers working in independent and grant-aided schools are General Teaching Council for Scotland registered, as they are in local authority schools. That would offer assurance to parents that, irrespective of where their children are educated, the standards and quality of teaching staff are regulated by the GTCS. The requirement would also provide schools with assurance about the standard and quality of the teachers that they are employing and it will benefit individuals by giving them access to professional update, which aims to support, maintain and enhance teachers' continued professionalism through professional learning.

I am confident that the bill will provide clarity and impetus on a number of key issues, not least the need to raise attainment and close the gap to help ensure that our young people get the chance to reach their full potential in life.

I would very much like to thank the Education and Culture Committee, the Finance Committee and the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee for their consideration of the bill at stage 1. I very much welcome the scrutiny process that the Parliament offers. The stage 1 report offered clarity on the evidence that was heard by the Education and Culture Committee during stage 1, and I look forward to the debate today.

As a Government, we have listened to the Education and Culture Committee and to those who gave evidence and we will introduce amendments accordingly. We will of course continue to listen throughout the parliamentary process to strengthen and improve the bill and to make it as effective as possible. I urge members to support the Education (Scotland) Bill and its general principles.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Education (Scotland) Bill.

14:49

Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP): I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Education and Culture Committee in this stage 1 debate. In the time available, I will focus on two issues: pupils' inequalities of outcome and Gaelic-medium education, as those issues provoked most discussion during our stage 1 scrutiny of the bill.

As ever, we considered how the draft legislation could be improved and our report successfully persuaded the Scottish Government of the case for change on various issues. I will highlight some

of those issues in my speech, including areas where I think further debate is needed, and trust that my colleagues will discuss those parts of the bill that I do not have time to cover.

First, I wish to make some broader points. The committee was concerned that full consultation was not undertaken on all parts of the bill prior to its introduction. I raise this point again as the Scottish Government intends to lodge amendments that would introduce two new and relatively substantial topics, concerning the national improvement framework and head teachers' qualifications. While we welcome the advance notification, that means that we will have to take further evidence before we can properly begin stage 2.

I welcome the Scottish Government's approach to addressing a further area of concern highlighted in our report, namely that the bill's policy memorandum could have provided more detail. It is encouraging that the Minister for Parliamentary Business is taking steps to improve those documents. If fuller information had been provided at the outset, some of our recommendations might have been different.

I think that it is only fair to thank the Scottish Government for its comprehensive response to our stage 1 report, particularly as October recess meant that it had to be provided well in advance of today's debate. That response and the very detailed evidence that we heard will allow us to have a particularly informed discussion today around some of the issues raised by the bill.

One such issue is the proposed approach to tackling socioeconomic inequalities in education, which attracted some criticism from stakeholders, along with some supporting voices. We considered how that part of the bill could go further and potentially deliver more tangible outcomes. For example, we questioned the wording of the duty, whereby education authorities and Scottish ministers are to have

"due regard to the desirability"

of reducing inequalities of outcome. We found it difficult to imagine when an education authority would not consider a reduction in inequality to be desirable, and asked the Scottish Government to examine how this provision could be made more effective. In its response the Government stated that the proposed duties

"require significantly more than a passive recognition of the need to 'narrow the attainment gap'".

Indeed, the cabinet secretary stated that in her opening remarks.

I believe that the committee would be grateful if, in summing up, the minister could be clear about the actions that would be available to the Scottish

Government and local authorities to assist those children identified as requiring extra support. The question for the cabinet secretary is, what can those children, and perhaps their families, expect to receive as a result of the bill?

Another recommendation called for the bill's reporting structure to be as effective as possible. We came to that conclusion for various reasons. For example, some who gave evidence feared that a reporting duty could simply amount to an exercise in bureaucracy or could divert resources away from more important areas.

We were also conscious of the voices demanding a more joined-up approach to tackling the attainment gap. East Dunbartonshire Council, for example, called for

“a clearer and more coherent strategy nationally to raising attainment.”

There is certainly no shortage of current initiatives; the policy memorandum alone lists 14 different policies of at least some relevance to the bill's goals. Given that context, we called on the cabinet secretary to consider the merit of requiring guidance to be issued before the reporting structure is established. I am therefore pleased to note the Scottish Government's intentions to lodge amendments to provide for that. I stress, however, that amendments should aim to deliver better outcomes and not just a better process.

We have been clear in our report, and in our other work on attainment, that the Scottish Government should clarify some of the terminology used in discussions. While the societal and political consensus about the need to tackle the attainment gap is positive, it is also likely to lead to intense scrutiny of the specific approaches being adopted. Therefore, terminology must be as clear as possible to allow us to understand what is being proposed and to determine whether success is being delivered. I am therefore encouraged that the Scottish Government's response explains the meaning behind some terms, although various others in the bill—including “socio-economic disadvantage” and “decisions of a strategic nature”—will be defined later in statutory guidance.

The guidance will aim to support education authorities in identifying those children who must be supported as a result of the new duties. We also expect efforts to be made to ensure that all pupils and parents clearly understand what is being done in their name; we heard views that suggested that that is not always the case.

A further key issue is the level of improvement that the bill and the wider work on attainment will deliver and the timescales that will be required. To be fair, however, it may be difficult to quantify the bill's impact in isolation. Nonetheless, it is vital that

we know what outcomes are being delivered by other initiatives.

One crucial element that will help to influence success is, of course, the amount of funding allocated. Our report asked for detail of the resources required to eliminate the link between disadvantage and educational attainment. We considered that to be a fair request given how much of a strategic priority educational attainment is for the Scottish Government, and given the £100 million made available through the attainment Scotland fund. We are therefore somewhat disappointed to note the Scottish Government's view that

“it would not be realistic to attempt to put a figure on the amount of resources which are required to address this issue.”

We fully accept that this is a complex area, but we need some indication of the funding calculations that are involved if we are to know when we will see not just progress, but a solution to this long-standing problem.

I want to raise one other issue before concluding on part 1 of the bill. There is a clear and understandable focus on the educational attainment gap that arises from socioeconomic inequalities. However, there are all kinds of attainment gaps. In particular, there are those faced by children and young people who are looked after or who have disabilities, and we asked the Scottish Government whether it would be logical to extend the duty to such groups. It is not seeking to do so now as there are existing protections for other children with low attainment levels. However, I am pleased to report that the cabinet secretary has stressed that she remains open-minded about extending the provision.

I move on to another major part of the bill, namely the provisions on Gaelic education. One of the main criticisms at stage 1—chiefly from Gaelic groups, it has to be said—was that the provisions do not go far enough, and specifically that they do not introduce an entitlement to Gaelic-medium education. Rather, the bill proposes a statutory process for local authorities to use when assessing requests from parents for Gaelic-medium education to be provided in primary schools. Local authorities are not required to provide such education even if they have assessed that sufficient demand and resources exist, but they must provide reasons for their decisions.

We asked the Scottish Government whether it was still examining how to introduce an entitlement to Gaelic-medium education where reasonable demand exists. Its response is significant as it raises issues that will, no doubt, be intensely scrutinised at stage 2. In short, ministers said that they intend to lodge amendments to

include a presumption in favour of Gaelic-medium primary education. The minister hinted at that approach in his evidence, but we questioned how a presumption would work in practice given the concerns that have been expressed about a lack of teachers. Indeed, Scottish Government officials acknowledged the difficulties around teacher recruitment.

Mary Scanlon: Does the member agree that in order for a presumption in favour of Gaelic-medium education to operate, we need to understand what “reasonable demand” is?

Stewart Maxwell: That goes without saying but, as the cabinet secretary said clearly in response to the member’s earlier intervention, the detail of that will be outlined in regulations and guidance, so that has already been dealt with.

Scottish Government officials said of the difficulties around teacher recruitment:

“That is probably one of the main obstacles that we are concerned about. Indeed, that will be one of the key areas of concern for local authorities looking at the bill. They will think, ‘That is all very well, but can we secure a teacher?’”—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 28 April 2015; c 16.]

That is a reasonable question to put. The minister acknowledged that when he gave evidence to the committee, but if he can say anything further today about the likely amendments, including any cost implications, I am sure that we will be interested to hear the Government’s view.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind): Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Stewart Maxwell: I will take an intervention if the member is very quick.

John Finnie: Does the member accept that there is a chicken-and-egg situation here? If there is an endorsement of an assumption in favour of Gaelic-medium education, it will encourage people within education to move to that sector.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Convener, I can give you back the time for the intervention.

Stewart Maxwell: Thank you, Presiding Officer. I say to Mr Finnie that I absolutely accept that, and the Government’s move in that direction is a welcome step. There is an argument in the Gaelic community about whether it goes far enough, but I am sure that we will debate that in committee at stage 2.

There is a further issue around Gaelic that members might be interested in discussing. Our report notes that the bill treats early learning, primary education and secondary education differently, and we asked for an explanation of the circumstances in which the Scottish Government

would make regulations on Gaelic early learning and childcare. Its response notes that Gaelic-medium education is most effective when it is provided from a young age, but that early learning and childcare were not included in the bill as it

“was not the right time to introduce another duty that would impact on a sector that was already undergoing considerable change”.

Instead, the Scottish Government intends to have discussions about the most appropriate time to bring forward regulations under the power.

I now want to briefly highlight two other provisions. First, the committee agreed with the proposal that education authorities should appoint an officer to provide them with advice on their educational functions, although we noted that most authorities already have such a person in post. Our report also asked questions about how the role of chief education officer would work in practice, and the Scottish Government’s response notes that there are on-going discussions on the matter. Again, I would be grateful if the minister could provide an update on that in summing up.

On a separate note, I appreciate the detailed consideration that the Scottish Government has given to our and stakeholders’ comments on the bill’s provisions on additional support for learning. They are complex and technical, and I am sure that we will have a lot to say about them during stage 2. It is a particularly complex area, and I am glad that the Scottish Government has sought to clear up some of the factual misunderstandings, thereby allowing the debate to focus on the substantive policy issues.

The Education (Scotland) Bill is a substantial bill with many different provisions. As we know, two more are due to be added by the Government at stage 2.

I conclude by thanking all those who provided evidence to the committee, the Scottish Parliament information centre and our committee clerks, to whom we are very grateful for all the work that they do to support us. I also thank my fellow committee members for their detailed consideration of the bill and the Scottish Government for its willingness to listen to our views as expressed in our stage 1 report.

15:00

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): I begin by stating clearly that we welcome the bill as a clear signal that the Government wants to tackle the attainment gap in Scottish education. It is unacceptable that it remains the case that a child’s educational outcomes depend more on their parents’ income than on any other factor, be that ability, hard work or, indeed, the school that they go to. As well as being inequitable and unfair for

the individual child and their life chances, that is a gross squandering of potential and talent that diminishes the future prospects of our society and our nation. Every child left behind shames every one of us.

However, this is no counsel of despair. Other countries do better than we do in addressing the issue, and our educational history shows that when we are bold and determined and prepared to invest for the long term, we can make a difference. Earlier this week, we had the 50th anniversary of the day—27 October 1965—on which the then Labour Secretary of State for Scotland Willie Ross signed the memorandum that ended the divisive system of selection at the age of 11 in Scottish education. That set in motion the comprehensivisation of our schools. The comprehensive system is fundamentally rooted in equality of opportunity and the valuing of all pupils.

On Tuesday at Moray house, a group of educational researchers from the University of Edinburgh presented their research on the impact of that reform 50 years on. Perhaps their most startling statistic was that, at the point at which comprehensive schools were introduced, 70 per cent of pupils left school without a single qualification. Thanks to comprehensive schools and consequent reforms such as raising the school leaving age, standard grades, higher still and, latterly, curriculum for excellence, that figure is now only 4 per cent or so. In the 1960s, around 18 per cent of pupils achieved at least one higher. By 2013, that figure was 60 per cent or more.

Therefore, progress has been made, yet we know that a young person is still twice as likely to gain the entry qualifications for a top university if their parents are well off than they are if their parents are poor. A young person whose family is poor is far more likely to leave school unable to read or write properly, and we know that literacy and numeracy standards are falling rather than improving. We know, too, that the replacement for standard grades—the new nationals—has led to a fall in enrolment and attainment for exactly those pupils who gained most from the reforms of recent decades.

We agree with the Scottish Government that the time has again come for a concerted effort to address the unacceptable achievement and attainment gap in our education system. That is the key purpose and principle behind the bill, and we support that. Of course, the great difficulty is finding a way to legislate for such a purpose. We must avoid the equivalent of legislating for sunnier summers and asking someone to report on what they have done to deliver that without having regard to its effectiveness. We must avoid what Keir Bloomer in his evidence to the committee characterised as

“pious thinking masquerading as law making.”—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 9 June 2015; c 20.]

The truth is that, too often, the present Scottish Government—as other Governments have done—has legislated and then failed to comply with its own well-meaning laws. The legislation to reduce carbon emissions and that to provide patient rights are just two examples. In our view, we must ensure that the section of the bill on equalities of outcome is strengthened, and we will seek to do that at stage 2, just as the cabinet secretary indicated that the Government would do. The requirement for education authorities to

“have due regard to the desirability of carrying out the functions in ... a way designed to reduce inequalities of outcome”

is simply not strong enough. We agree with the committee that that shared goal of the Parliament requires more than a

“passive recognition of the need to close the gap”.

There certainly must be a requirement for both local authorities and the Government to report on their successes and outcomes, not only on their plans and inputs. We also believe that both authorities and the Government must report more frequently than biannually. Other reporting requirements that are likely to appear in the bill later are almost certain to oblige them to do that.

The elephant that is not in the bill at all is, of course, resources. It is a well-rehearsed point that Labour members believe that we should commit to a higher tax rate for higher earners and devote the resources to closing the gap. I accept that legislation is not where such a policy would lie, but we will explore ways to ensure that the eventual legislation requires proper consideration of the resources that are devoted to achieving the purpose of the bill.

Although we should hold both education authorities and the Government to account for closing the attainment gap, the changes that will achieve that have to happen in schools, nurseries and communities. Their efforts and results also need to be scrutinised. At stage 2, we will lodge amendments to place obligations on the inspection regime to take account of success in closing the gap. Indeed, both my leader, Kezia Dugdale, and the First Minister have given some indication that they support our reformed inspection regime to that end.

If our aspiration and ambition is high enough, we should not just be comparing ourselves with our own past; we should be comparing ourselves with the rest of the world, too. We will look to amend the bill to reinstate the Scottish education system’s participation in international surveys such as PIRLS and TIMSS—the progress in

international reading literacy study and the trends in international mathematics and science study—and to secure our continuing participation in the programme for international student assessment, or PISA.

We are in no doubt that investing in teachers, early-care workers and support staff is the key to improving results in our schools. We support the new headteacher qualification and the extension of GTCS registration requirements to the private sector.

We called for and support the new post of chief education officer to protect a degree of educational expertise in the management of education at a local level. We have seen the comments from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on the matter, and we believe that the Government perhaps needs to elaborate more on issues such as qualification and seniority in the management structure. In this instance, too much flexibility might not be the best thing, but the principle is certainly correct. We also welcome the sections of the bill on Gaelic-medium education and on the extension of children's rights. Colleagues will speak more about those issues later.

On the section on extending children's rights, we have concerns about how those rights are dealt with in the bill. We note the comments of many people who gave evidence to the committee in support of the principle of the change. We note that the cabinet secretary has already responded in part to some of those concerns, and we hope that the issue can be resolved at stage 2.

The bill is largely about what we, parents and pupils can expect from our education system. In our view, it represents an opportunity to deal with the anomaly that current legislation defines how many days a school should open but not how much teaching time a pupil or parent can expect to benefit from. That has been an issue in recent years in primary schools in particular, and we intend to lodge amendments to explore the definition of what constitutes a minimum school week, at least in primary schools, in order to provide clarity for parents as to what their children's entitlement to education really means.

It is unfortunate—the committee convener was right to refer to this—that the most important section of the bill is not yet in it at all. Therefore, we cannot really discuss its proposals properly. I refer of course to the national improvement framework, on which the Government is currently consulting. The cabinet secretary knows that we support a change to the current position, in which almost all local authorities use different testing, particularly in primary school. However, she also knows that we do not support a return to league tables and high-stakes national testing, which of

course can lead to problems such as teaching to the test.

I acknowledge that the improvement framework is out for consultation at the moment, although I note that some concern has been expressed that the consultation is not functioning particularly well. For example, an article this week in *The Times Educational Supplement* suggested that parents are not engaging with the process. Nonetheless, we expect the Scottish Government to be as good as its word and to produce a framework that will at that point have support from teachers, parents and educationists, which improves the data that we have to drive policy and to measure our success and which avoids the introduction of high-stakes national testing. As they say, we shall see when the framework comes forward. In the meantime, we shall with pleasure support the principles of the bill at decision time.

15:11

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I am pleased to speak on the Education (Scotland) Bill.

I put it on record that we have serious concerns about the bill, although we all want to do our best to ensure that no child is left behind in our education system and that every child, regardless of their background, is given an equal chance to fulfil their potential. That is one issue on which we can all agree—it is good to start on a positive note.

I thank the convener of the Education and Culture Committee, Stewart Maxwell, who did his best to gain consensus on the bill and, when that was not possible, ensured that the views of all members of the committee were stated in the stage 1 report.

We believe that significant amendments and further consultation—sometimes just initial consultation—are essential if we are to pass a meaningful and effective piece of legislation. I appreciate that the committee has already started that process. Paragraph 6 of the committee's stage 1 report states:

“If consultation is not undertaken”

in advance of a bill's publication,

“the Scottish Government should explain why this is the case.”

However, the Government's response to the stage 1 report does not give reasons why consultation did not take place.

After so many years of this Parliament, it is unacceptable for the Government to introduce without consultation provisions in a bill stating that every local authority must have a director of education and that all teachers must register with

the General Teaching Council for Scotland. There might be merit or there might be significant disadvantage in both those provisions—we really do not know, although we have heard some oral evidence on the issues.

Another issue, which Iain Gray referred to, is that the committee will have to take evidence on the national improvement framework—which is absolutely critical to the attainment debate—and on the standard of headship, after the committee has produced its report and the Government has responded to it.

The Government has to be absolutely clear about whether it is aiming to narrow or close the attainment gap. That is fundamental for clarity and in relation to what the Government expects local authorities to report on. The Government's response did not talk about closing the gap, so I thought that that was fine and that we were getting clear. However, when Liz Smith asked a question on that earlier, the cabinet secretary responded by twice mentioning "closing" the gap. We all need to know whether the aim is to narrow the gap or to close it.

The inspection process in Scotland is far from perfect, with headteachers often having to second-guess what the inspectors are looking for. The bill is an opportunity to get clarity at the outset, which would benefit us all.

Under the bill, in terms of what they have to report on, local authorities are to have

"due regard to the desirability"

of reducing inequalities of outcome. We should not wonder why Keir Bloomer described the bill as

"pious thinking masquerading as law making."—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 9 June 2015; c 20.]

I acknowledge the Government's response, which states:

"The term 'attainment' denotes educational performance and the acquisition of the valuable skills, knowledge and attributes needed to succeed in life."

An inspector coming into a school must try to get a measurement against that, but it is a little nebulous as a concept against which to measure success or failure.

As the committee rightly points out, the Government must ensure that there is a clear understanding of exactly what is required for local authorities and for teachers and headteachers, who, I have no doubt, all want to deliver the improvement that we are looking for.

The committee report also states:

"It would be in no one's interests for reports simply to list policies and programmes that have been adopted."

Even on the £100 million attainment funding, we are still looking for an outcome measure. In the Highlands and Islands, there are very few, if any, designated areas of multiple deprivation. That is why the figures say that 4 per cent of people who go to the University of the Highlands and Islands are from deprived backgrounds, but that is not the case. In a rural area, we have poverty next door to those with plenty.

If attainment money depends on measuring deprivation through the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, that does not work in remote and rural areas, so something more appropriate to rural areas needs to be found to identify children who need support, whatever background they are from, and to help with attainment.

We constantly hear that the early years are the most critical part of a child's development. I read the Government's response and I heard the point that the convener made about changes in early years provision at the moment, but let us not allow that to fall off the agenda. We know how critical it is.

Then we get to Gaelic. Despite 11 out of 26 sections of the bill being devoted to Gaelic, what we have is a process steeped in legislation about assessing the need for Gaelic and how to respond to parental requests. I must tell Dr Allan that I do not think that people will be dancing in the streets of Stornoway when they hear about that.

The Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages (Dr Alasdair Allan): Will the member give way?

Mary Scanlon: I would like to finish this point. The SNP manifesto in 2007 stated that it would

"guarantee in law the right to a Gaelic medium education at primary level, where reasonable demand exists",

and in 2001 the SNP said that it would examine entitlement to Gaelic-medium education "where reasonable demand exists". As I have said, we do not know what "reasonable demand" is. I commend Sabhal Mòr Ostaig and others that have set out the issue in their briefing papers for us today.

Dr Allan: I will try not to dance, but I would like to respond to the member's points. I was quite rightly grilled about that issue in committee when detail was sought. I hope that the member will be content to acknowledge that, on the definitions of "reasonable demand", much is set out in the bill and other detail will be set out in guidance.

On entitlement, will the member also acknowledge that the Government has been clear in what we have said recently about forthcoming amendments at stage 2 that will create the presumption of action by local authorities to create Gaelic-medium units? I hope that that means that

she and I are not very far apart from each other in our view on the matter.

Mary Scanlon: I sincerely hope not, because I think that we should all respect the views of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig on the issue. I have quoted from its paper, and if Sabhal Mòr Ostaig is concerned I think that it is my duty as a member for the Highlands and Islands to raise that.

My final point relates to the sudden desire for a chief education officer. Where is the evidence? Where was the consultation? I understand that it was suggested by one person. The Government's response refers to legislation relating to education, but we can equally say that there should be a designated chief officer for planning—there is plenty of legislation there—or for housing, social care or licensing, all of which are steeped in legislation. Even the policy memorandum states that the discussion on the issue—

Iain Gray: Will Mary Scanlon give way?

Mary Scanlon: I am already over my time. The policy memorandum states that there was discussion with only one group.

Finally, I must agree with COSLA's opinion that the proposed measure usurps local democratic accountability. It is incumbent on all of us to respect the democratically elected members of our local governments across Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We come to the open debate. I shall allow speeches of six minutes. At the moment, there is a little bit of time for interventions, but that may change.

15:19

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): It is my belief that the Education (Scotland) Bill can lay the foundations for raising attainment in Scotland. That will not happen overnight and it will not be easy for us to close the attainment gap completely, but the most important things in life are never easy. I welcome stage 1 of the bill and look forward to working with colleagues on the Education and Culture Committee as the bill progresses.

I would like to discuss in more detail a number of aspects of the bill. Most important, the bill will promote equity in education by placing a duty on councils, when exercising their education functions, to have regard to the need to narrow the attainment gap. The bill will ensure that all councils have an appropriately qualified and experienced chief education officer to provide professional advice on the provision of their education functions.

As someone who worked in a local authority and understands how local authorities work, I support

the idea of a chief education officer. It is similar to having a chief. Many education authorities are merging social work and education, so it makes sense to have an educationist as the main officer. The Association of Directors of Education in Scotland stated:

"We welcome the Education (Scotland) Bill and the increased focus it places on the need deliver a better, more equitable education system for Scotland. The action being taken by the Scottish Government to address the disparity in outcomes faced by pupils from disadvantaged communities is positive as is their commitment to ensuring that each and every local authority has a Chief Education Officer."

Poverty is one of the major challenges that we face as we seek to bridge the attainment gap. The Scottish Government is committed to doing everything in its power to eradicate poverty in Scotland. It is not acceptable to use poverty as an excuse for failure or for a young person being disadvantaged from birth. By 2020, an additional 100,000 Scottish children will be living in poverty because of United Kingdom welfare reforms—and that is before the next round of cuts that are due. School education is one of the most powerful tools that we have at our disposal to help to overcome the disadvantages associated with poverty. We must ensure that the education system can adapt to the career paths and work patterns of the future. That is a major theme of the Scottish Government's on-going work to develop the young workforce.

The challenge before us is great but it is one that we must address. The recession, and the deep public spending cuts that followed it, have created pressures for Scottish Government, local government and many families. However, the fact remains that education in Scotland has made progress. In every part of the country, Scotland has good schools and good teachers, and our young people are good learners. Standards have risen and continue to rise. That is a testament to the hard work of our local authorities and the contribution of many other individuals and organisations. Most of all, though, it is a huge tribute to the dedication of teachers, parents and students throughout the country. One of the issues that arose in the committee's discussions on the bill was the importance of parents in the process of attainment. We must ensure that we get parents involved with their child's education, regardless of background.

The introduction of curriculum for excellence has been a major step forward. It gives teachers more flexibility, provides a broader education for young people and sets higher standards for achievement than ever before. The new national improvement framework will help to close the gap in attainment and ensure that all children are equipped with the skills that they need. This year's

ambitious programme for government put education at the very heart of the Scottish Government's efforts to make Scotland a fair country. The Education (Scotland) Bill has a key role to play in that. First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said:

"Improving school attainment is arguably the single most important objective in this programme for government."— [Official Report, 1 September 2015; c 18.]

The new national assessments will be developed in partnership with local government, teachers and parents. They will replace the variety of assessments that are currently used by local authorities—they will not add to teachers' workload. This is not about narrowing the curriculum or forcing teachers to "teach to a test". It will not mean a return to the bad old days of national testing; instead, it will provide a focus on the needs of individual pupils.

The bill proposes measures aimed at narrowing the attainment gap and further progresses the Scottish Government's improvement agenda. The aim of tackling educational inequalities is at the heart of the SNP Government's agenda. We want to ensure that all our children and young people get that chance and opportunity, regardless of where they live.

I welcome the fact that the attainment challenge will draw on the experience of the London challenge that helped to transform school performance in that city. It will also look at the experience internationally. As we all know, the challenge will be backed by an attainment fund of more than £100 million to drive forward improvements in educational outcomes in Scotland's most disadvantaged communities.

We are all aware that the fund will initially target schools with the biggest concentration of households in deprived areas, identified through the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. I was heartened to hear Dr Bill Maxwell of Education Scotland tell the Education and Culture Committee in evidence this week that he believed that 30 of the 32 attainment advisers were already in place in local government and that he thinks that those would be the people focusing on where resource would go as we try to bridge the attainment gap in the future.

This bill is welcome because it provides us with a direction of travel with regard to closing the educational attainment gap in Scotland completely. As I have already stated, that will not happen overnight and it will be difficult. However, I believe that the bill provides the children of the people who we represent with a better opportunity to succeed in life and the tools that they need for their future.

Closing the attainment gap completely might be an ambitious goal, but it is one that we must all get behind and support.

15:26

Cara Hilton (Dunfermline) (Lab): Tackling the attainment gap in our education system has to be our number 1 priority, so I am pleased that there is recognition across the political divide that we have to do a lot more to end the education inequality that continues to undermine the life chances of thousands of children and young people right across Scotland.

It can never be right that a child's opportunities in life are shaped more by his or her family background than they are by their talent, their hard work or their efforts. Education should always be a route out of poverty and it should enable every single child to reach their full potential, but the gap between the rich and poor in Scotland often means that instead of potential being unlocked, inequality is reinforced and reproduced. That is why, although Scottish Labour will always hold the Scottish Government to account on its failings, we want to work together to get this right and to ensure that we really do make a difference for all Scotland's children.

Although Scottish Labour welcomes and supports the general principles of the bill, we feel that, as it stands, it is a missed opportunity and needs a lot of strengthening. The cabinet secretary will be pleased to hear that for once I will not devote my speech to going on about the fantastic achievements in Fife in closing the attainment gap and increasing literacy levels. I know that she is aware of that success and I hope that the Scottish Government will learn from it.

Iain Gray has outlined a number of improvements that Scottish Labour will seek to make to the bill during its progress. One of the most important issues that we believe needs to be addressed is the school week. We will lodge amendments on that at stage 2. Scottish Labour believes that every parent in Scotland should have a guarantee that their primary school child will have a minimum of 25 hours teaching a week. That proposal has the support of the Educational Institute of Scotland and many thousands of parents.

Research by Reform Scotland has revealed that the teaching time that primary school children in Scotland receive can vary by up to 149 hours per year, depending on where they live. In the past few years, parents in Dunfermline and across Fife and in Renfrewshire, Falkirk, the Highlands and West Dunbartonshire have all been told by their local councils that cuts to the school week could be on the horizon.

The sheer scale of the budget challenges that local authorities are dealing with, and the fact that education takes up such a large proportion of council budgets, mean that local authorities are increasingly having to make difficult decisions. For example, last winter parents in Fife were told that one of the options on the table was to reduce the primary school week by 10 per cent. Parents were obviously outraged by that proposal. My inbox was full to the brim with many hundreds of emails from parents who were angry, worried and concerned. They were angry about the potential effect on their children's learning; worried about the impact, given the challenges that every mum and dad already faces in balancing school, work, home and childcare; and concerned that their kids would suffer not only now but in the future, as richer families would be able to make up the difference by paying tutors to plug the gap, while the poorest children and those with additional support needs would be left to fall further behind.

One parent wrote to me to say:

"By taking away 10% of my child's primary school education, you will potentially affect him for the rest of his life. He will never regain that lost teaching time and those lost learning experiences."

Another wrote:

"I have friends in different areas of Scotland who are not facing their children losing 75 ... hours of teaching a year. This works out at 525 lost hours in their 7 years at Primary School. Why should my children lose out?"

In Fife, parents won their fight and Fife Council agreed not to cut school hours for now, but it has warned parents that radical changes will need to be made to address the £75 million budget gap. Given that education accounts for 45 per cent of that overall budget, it will face its share of cuts. Fife is not alone in having to think the unthinkable on school hours.

Angela Constance: Perhaps Cara Hilton cannot answer this question now; it may be unfair of me to ask it in advance of her lodging stage 2 amendments. She said that she wants to give parents the guarantee that every child will have 25 hours of teaching time. Is she talking about 25 hours of children's time in school, or is she talking about teaching time—bearing in mind that teachers are contracted to work a maximum of 22 hours teaching time?

Cara Hilton: I am talking about 25 hours for each child, taught by a teacher. There will be a debate to be had with the EIS, which supports such amendments.

Given the budget challenges that every local authority faces, there is a danger that more parents across Scotland will face the same battle as parents in Fife, Falkirk and West Dunbartonshire have already faced. Scottish

Labour believes that it can never be right for our children to pay the price of cuts by having their time in school cut. We believe that every parent or carer should have the right to expect a minimum number of hours of teaching per week for their child when they send them to school. At a time when we are looking to put in place more measures to close the attainment gap and when we face the scandal of having more than half of our poorest children leaving school unable to read or write properly, cutting the time that our young people have to learn in the classroom will only ever be a backward step.

The Scottish Government is, I hope, looking to extend pre-school provision for three and four-year-olds to up to 30 hours a week. How can the Scottish Government sit back and see time in school cut for five, six and seven-year-olds at the same time? I hope that the cabinet secretary will look at that.

Right now, there is nothing in legislation to guarantee our kids a minimum number of hours in the classroom. That must change. There is a real prospect that financially motivated cuts to our children's learning will be back on the table unless action is taken to protect the school week.

We heard a lot in the chamber yesterday during the debate on higher education governance about the importance of listening to trade unions. I hope, therefore, that the views of the EIS and the fears and concerns of parents and grandparents will be taken into account, and that the Government will act to protect the time that our kids have to learn in school, to ensure that every child in Scotland has an equal right to high quality education.

I was going to turn to other provisions in the bill, but I see that I have run out of time, unfortunately.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: If you want to do that briefly, I can give you a little bit of time.

Cara Hilton: Scottish Labour will support the bill at stage 1, but we want it to be improved and strengthened. We want to work together across the political divide to ensure that every child in Scotland has the best opportunity to succeed.

15:32

Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I commend the Scottish Government for introducing the bill. It shows the commitment of the Government and the SNP to educating Scotland's children. As an SNP MSP, I am very proud of that.

I read in a briefing:

"We want to be able to say, with confidence and with evidence, that there is no better place in the world to be educated than here in Scotland."

That is worth achieving. A child who is born today in one of our most deprived communities should, by the time he or she leaves school, have the same chance of going to university as a child who is born in one of our most affluent communities.

We know that there is still a significant and unacceptable attainment gap within and between schools in different parts of Scotland. I know that more than most—in my constituency of Clydebank and Milngavie, the gap is geographical as well as educational. For example, school leavers from the 20 per cent most deprived areas in Scotland, which includes part of Clydebank, do half as well in highers as leavers from the most affluent areas, such as Bearsden and Milngavie in my constituency.

Scottish Government initiatives such as raising attainment for all are starting to make a positive impact, and we are proud of what we have been achieving, but more needs to be done. The life chances of too many of our young people are narrowed by circumstances that are outwith their control. It was clear from the First Minister's speech in February and from the introduction of the bill that tackling education inequality is at the centre of the Government's agenda.

One aspect of tackling inequality is the new Scottish attainment challenge. It will draw on the experience of the London challenge, which George Adam spoke about earlier. I was pleased that the challenge has been backed by money from the attainment Scotland fund and that among the first beneficiaries were primary schools in West Dunbartonshire—which covers part of my constituency—along with six other authorities. West Dunbartonshire was targeted initially because it has among the biggest concentrations of households in deprived areas. West Dunbartonshire Council alone will receive £4 million over four years. That money will focus on improving literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing, with the objective of ensuring that all primary-age pupils have the best start in life.

However, the Scottish Government's efforts towards securing its objective of ensuring that children have the best start in life do not start in primary school. The Government recognises that improvements have to start in children's early years. High-quality early learning and childcare particularly benefit people who are on the lowest incomes. It will also support parents to work, train or study into employment and out of poverty.

The annual funded entitlement of early learning and childcare has increased to 600 hours, which represents a 45 per cent increase for three-year-olds and four-year-olds since 2007. It is helping about 120,000 children a year and is saving families up to £707 per child per year. That expanded entitlement is being rolled out to the

most disadvantaged two-year-olds and reached the most vulnerable 15 per cent of that age group from August 2014 and about a quarter of all two-year-olds in 2015-16.

We have pledged that the SNP's 2016 manifesto will set out a plan to increase childcare provision by the end of the next parliamentary session from 16 hours a week to 30 hours a week. At a time when UK Government cuts to tax credits and welfare are hurting many households, the work that we are doing to support children and families matters hugely.

We need to overcome the barriers of poverty—not use them as an excuse. However, we cannot underplay the role that poverty plays. An additional 100,000 Scottish children will be living in poverty by 2020 because of UK welfare reforms. That is the situation before we take into account the next round of welfare cuts that are due in 2017-18. That is why it is vital that we tackle poverty and use the Scottish Parliament's new welfare powers wisely when we get them, and why we are supporting parents through investing in more health visitors for young children and in early-reading projects such as bookbug. It is also why our major expansion of early learning and childcare are among the best investments that we can make as a country.

I fear that there is worse to come with the majority Conservative Government in power in Westminster. The Scottish Government will do all that it can to minimise the impact of what will be done, but it has only a limited set of powers to do so—of course, the budget that goes along with that will not withstand much more stress.

I conclude by once again commending the Scottish Government. The bill outlines clear expectations for national Governments in the process of addressing education inequality while introducing reforms in a range of other key areas. It will be welcome legislation for my constituency and for Scotland as a whole, and I look forward to its continued passage through Parliament.

15:39

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I thank all those who helped the committee in its stage 1 consideration of the bill—those who provided written and oral evidence, as well as the clerks, the Scottish Parliament information centre and others. There has been a wide range of engagement on a wide-ranging bill.

At this stage of the parliamentary session, it appears that the Scottish Government is emptying the fridge. A couple of ingredients are still to come, that is, the national improvement framework and the headship qualifications. I do not think that such an approach is unusual at this stage in a session.

However, I am concerned—the Education and Culture Committee’s convener rightly alluded to this—that there was a lack of consultation on key aspects of the bill. That has not been helpful for the people who will be directly affected by the bill, nor has it been terribly helpful for the committee’s scrutiny of the provisions. In a Parliament that has no revising chamber, the more front loading of legislation through preparation and consultation, the better.

An illustrative issue in that regard is the GTCS registration of teachers in the independent sector. At times in the committee, negotiations between the GTCS and representatives of the independent sector appeared to be taking place before our very eyes—not a comfortable place for any of us to find ourselves in. However, it is to be welcomed that the GTCS appears to be taking a more pragmatic approach to the issue and that some concerns that were expressed to us appear to have dissipated.

Similarly, there appeared to be no prior mention of—far less any consultation on—a statutory requirement for local authorities to have a chief education officer. The rationale for the proposal appeared to change during our consideration of the bill, from the reflection of a widespread problem that needed to be addressed immediately to something that was more of a safeguard. In her evidence to the committee, the cabinet secretary initially suggested that the role would be advisory but later suggested that it would be more than advisory. All that creates the impression that the Government is attempting to micromanage and to offer solutions to a problem that does not necessarily exist. I do not accept that the approach is not prescriptive. We need to revisit the issue at stage 2 and potentially remove the provision.

An area that was very well signposted in advance was the SNP commitment on an entitlement to Gaelic-medium education. As members said, the proposal has been comprehensively watered down to a presumption, rather than a right. The idea of having a defined process for considering parental requests for Gaelic-medium education has value and such a process will be helpful.

I had concerns that in areas such as the one that I represent, where there is no tradition of Gaelic speaking, there was a danger that a right or entitlement could lead to already-stretched education resources being deflected from other priorities, such as raising awareness and use of the Orkney dialect—an issue that I know is close to the minister’s heart. However, the provisions in the bill are not in keeping with the manifesto promise. Ministers have no one to blame but themselves for that. As Mary Scanlon said, there

is a degree of disquiet in the Gaelic community, as a result.

If there are key themes in this rather eclectic bill, they fall into the categories of inequalities of outcome and extension of children’s rights. As members suggested, the battle to narrow or close the attainment gap has been a priority of successive Administrations. I think that we would all accept that no one has made nearly enough progress and the issue must remain a priority. I have no difficulty with our restating that.

Iain Gray was right to draw attention to how our priorities tend to be judged by where resources are going. I repeat that if the objective is to close the attainment gap completely, as a number of SNP speakers said that it is, I struggle to understand how, when there is poverty amidst plenty in every local authority area in the country, an attainment challenge fund that is targeted at a limited number of schools and local authorities and ignores other parts of the country, such as the one that I represent, will achieve that objective.

At this stage, what the provisions in the bill will achieve is not entirely clear. The convener very fairly set out some of the concerns that the committee heard in that regard. The challenge at stage 2 is to see where and how we can make the bill deliver a tangible change. In evidence, a number of witnesses gave us some ideas, and the briefings for the debate from the Child Poverty Action Group, Inclusion Scotland, Enable and others, made helpful suggestions.

I draw on the point that I made earlier when I say that closing the attainment gap for young people in poverty should not be the sole priority. There are others, such as disabled children, who have a strong claim to have their needs addressed in the bill.

Political statements are valuable and legislation can reinforce them. However, if we do not give the bill more substance, there is a danger that we will bear out the words of Keir Bloomer that this is simply

“pious thinking masquerading as law making”.—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 9 June 2015; c 20.]

The additional support for learning provisions are another area on which inadequate consultation has taken place. Although I very much welcome the bill’s extension of rights to children with capacity, as Inclusion Scotland and the children’s commissioner have pointed out, the bill creates several barriers to children being able to exercise their rights. Instead of working on the presumption of capacity at the age of 12, in line with the 1991 act, the bill requires children to undergo an assessment of capacity by the education authority or a tribunal even when their support needs are

not related to any cognitive impairment. The Scottish Government insisted that the children's commissioner, the EHRC, Inclusion Scotland, the Faculty of Advocates, the Law Society, Govan Law Centre and others were labouring under a misapprehension. However, I know that there have been further discussions between Government officials and some of those who raised concerns, and the indication that amendments will be lodged at stage 2 is welcome. Nevertheless, the provisions are clearly not sufficient to ensure that we meet our human rights obligations.

The Scottish Liberal Democrats will support the bill this evening, but the lack of prior consultation and some poorly considered posturing have meant that there is much work to do at stage 2 to make the bill fit for purpose.

15:46

Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): As I was yesterday, I am delighted to speak in another education debate, this time on the Education (Scotland) Bill. I congratulate the convener of the Education and Culture Committee, because, in the course of the committee's meetings, there have been some difficulties with the terminology.

William Butler Yeats once said:

"Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire."

That is true at all times, but it is especially worth remembering at this time in Scotland. The fire has been lit by a Government's stated and communicated ambition for every child in Scotland, irrespective of their background and parental income, to have the opportunity to achieve his or her full potential. The bill is one of the flames of that fire and its general principles deserve support. It is, or should be, about why and what, and certainly about how and when.

The policy memorandum to the bill is perhaps less clear than it might be on some points but, as was mentioned earlier, that will change. The aspiration to reduce inequalities in outcomes is right. Let us hold that thought as we eschew the blight of targets. Targets are right only at one moment in time; continuous improvement should be the basis of any measurement of how an operation—in this case, our educational operation in Scotland—works.

The bill goes some way towards creating a generally shared vision of the required attainment of each child's potential and a reduction in the current gap between the attainment of those who come from well-supported families—not always those who are well funded—and the attainment of those who are more disadvantaged in terms of finance and, importantly, support. Just as we seek,

in other policy matters, to reduce the income gap, the socioeconomic gaps across our society demand much stronger legislation in other areas.

One of the most important by-products of the bill—if not the most important—will be a narrowing of the educational attainment gap to create learning fulfilment and life fulfilment. It is not about how many people enter universities; it is about allowing people to achieve their full potential without fear or favour and irrespective of the background of financial support from which they come. The bill will not, of itself, bring about the desired change in this area, but, as amended, it can and will have resonance and impact.

Communication can aid all those with an interest and involvement in education, such as local authorities, teachers, parents, families and students, all of whom must understand the Government's clear aspiration to reduce the gap in learning and achieve the fairness and fulfilment that I have just mentioned.

There cannot be and must not be any equivocation in the wording of the bill, which has been criticised by some organisations, when we amend it. There has to be an unequivocal sharing of the Government's ambitions and clarity of terminology about what we plan to do and why, and how and when we are going to do it. The terminology must be very clear to all in the educational arena regarding how we intend to reduce the gap. To achieve clarity in the reporting of outcomes—I stress "outcomes"—such as on continuous improvement outcomes year on year, it behoves the Government and local authorities to ensure that the reporting mechanisms are clearly understood.

Reports should capture initiatives by an individual school, locality or authority that have contributed—and I hope will contribute more—to narrowing the gap, and they should be disseminated to schools and local authorities across Scotland as examples of best practice for possible implementation. Good operation strategies should be properly disseminated to achieve improvements in outcome. Stewart Maxwell referred to East Dunbartonshire's representatives, who said to the committee that there requires to be a clearer and more coherent strategy nationally for raising attainment.

Clear initiatives, a clear strategy and a clear and cohesive national communication strategy on good and bad practice are all essential for us to make sure that the fire is fully lit. The committee's recommendation that the Government should explain the extent to which education authorities will be expected to report on outcomes arising from, for example, the attainment fund could be a very good starting point.

It would be quite wrong to suggest that in general terms no progress has been made in schools. However, nothing stands still. We have to believe that, on this very important agenda, it is impossible for us to fail, and act accordingly. The raising attainment for all programme, the £100 million attainment fund and all the other initiatives are rungs on the ladder of educational attainment, which allow the less advantaged to climb the ladder to close the gap on those who are higher up.

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

Chic Brodie: The bill gives us a leg up in terms of proposing measures and reports on improvement outcomes to close the attainment gap. I repeat that, to do that, we have to adopt and embrace whole-heartedly the changes that are proposed in the bill so that we focus all our energies not on addressing the old but on building the new.

15:53

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I will touch on a couple of aspects of the bill, including Gaelic-medium education and additional support for learning. However, I begin by emphasising that Scottish Labour has long recognised and will always champion the power of education to transform lives and improve our communities, especially for those who come from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. That is why we have welcomed the bill and the implicit acknowledgment by the SNP Government that it could have and should have done more far sooner to tackle the attainment gap.

For too many children in Scotland, their talent, abilities, hard work and, indeed, even the school that they attend are not the determining factors in shaping their quality of life or future prospects. Recent research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation concluded that when a child from a low-income household starts primary school, they are on average 13 months behind others in terms of vocabulary and 10 months behind in terms of problem-solving ability. That is damaging to them as individuals and is unacceptable to us as a society.

The link between socioeconomic background and educational achievement is neither new nor a surprise to us. Just this week, my colleague Neil Findlay MSP published an analysis that reveals how health and wealth also go hand in hand, and calls for strong leadership to tackle that gap, too. The point is that, as well as having the bill that is before us today and taking specific educational measures, we need SNP ministers to draw up and implement an effective antipoverty strategy.

Railing against Westminster cuts and welfare reforms is simply not enough; we need to use the power that we have. The SNP has been in power for more than eight years. We have to use the powers over housing, health and education to make a difference in reducing inequality.

Turning to the bill, we can unite around the common aim of narrowing the attainment gap, but it matters how we translate that good intention into practice; it matters that we take an evidence-led approach. For example, much of the debate surrounding educational outcomes or school performance looks at the difference between schools. The league tables that are published by the newspapers every year are one reflection of that focus; the cost of property in high-performing school catchments areas is another. Perhaps a more helpful focus would be on the outcomes within a school. We know that, even within those schools that are regarded as the best performing in terms of pupil achievement or attainment, the difference between pupils from prosperous and deprived backgrounds can still be quite marked.

However, it is my understanding and experience that some schools are better at narrowing that gap than others. In my education authority, for example, St Ninian's high school rightly attracts plaudits for its ethos, the record-breaking achievements of its pupils and more. However, St Luke's high school in Barrhead is similarly impressive with an intake—measured by the numbers of free school meals or clothing grants, for example—that is clearly less well off. I do not want to make iniquitous comparisons, and certainly not between two fantastic schools such as St Ninian's and St Luke's, but I would like us to learn from the evidence. I would like to know what works. What teaching methods score highest in added value? What schools are most successful at overcoming disadvantage in their communities?

If we are willing to look at evidence-led approaches, there are many examples in our midst or on our doorstep. The London challenge approach is one; the slightly more controversial teach first is another. As the Joseph Rowntree Foundation pointed out, the bill helps to put poverty clearly on the education agenda but, however well intentioned it may be, what matters is how we put it into practice. How will we measure success? How will we compare schools? How will we gather the evidence and will we learn from it?

At a practical level, Scottish Labour believes that, if the attainment gap is to be bridged, legislation is certainly not enough—it is teachers who make the difference. The Scottish Government needs to do more to offer financial support to provide more teachers and to reform the school inspection system to reach this end.

Fine words, however well meant, are simply not enough.

Tapadh leibh, Oifigier Riaghlaidh—thank you, Presiding Officer. I turn now to the proposal in the bill to promote Gaelic-medium education. First of all, I am fully supportive of any measures that will help us to protect and promote the Gaelic language. As members will know, the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005, which was passed by the Parliament 10 years ago, marked a critical point in our country's attitude to and treatment of Gaelic. For the first time, the status of the language was secured in Scotland. It was hoped that it would slow, halt and reverse the long-term decline in Gaelic usage and the number of Gaelic speakers. The act has undoubtedly helped to do just that, but it is also true to say that, if we are ever to secure a vibrant future for the language, the answer must lie in Gaelic-medium education and in new Gaelic learners.

There is still much ignorance, antipathy and worse towards Gaelic across much of Scotland from people who see it as of little relevance to their lives or heritage. I have no wish to force Gaelic on anyone, but if we do not take active steps to support the language—not just passive measures but positive action—there is no doubt that the language will die out. The bill is a step in the right direction, but it is a tentative step indeed. Bòrd na Gàidhlig, Comann nam Pàrant and Sabhal Mòr Ostaig have all asked why we cannot not take the step from assessing parental demand to creating entitlement. The minister is a fine example of a Gaelic learner, so why will he not take the step? It is in the SNP manifesto—

Dr Allan: All I want to say in answer to the member's question is what I said to Mary Scanlon: we are introducing amendments that seek to achieve exactly what he is talking about.

Ken Macintosh: The amendments are about a presumption. A presumption is not an entitlement. The promise in the SNP manifesto is for an entitlement in law. It is the SNP's promise, not just my ask. Even if the minister cannot answer that particular query, the question comes round again of the practical matters that we need to face up to. There is a shortage of Gaelic teachers. There are barely enough teachers to cope at the moment, and we need more if we are to grow the language.

I turn now to additional support for learning. I particularly want to emphasise Enable Scotland's submission. It is to do with a point that Stewart Maxwell, the convener of the Education and Culture Committee, made. Enable Scotland said that socioeconomic circumstances are not the only reason for a widening attainment gap and that disability is a key factor. We could use the bill to emphasise not just mainstreaming but inclusion. Sometimes, children with disabilities, including

learning disabilities, are in a mainstream school but they are not included.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You must close, please.

Ken Macintosh: We could make sure that the views of the parents and children themselves are taken into account when assessing that choice and the bill gives us that opportunity.

16:00

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): It has been well established that there is a clear connection between socioeconomic status and school attainment levels. Scotland's education system has seen much improvement in recent years. In my constituency over the past five years, there has been a 7 per cent increase in school leavers going to positive destinations in Midlothian and an 8 per cent increase in East Lothian. There has been a nearly 20 per cent increase in students staying on at school through sixth year since 2007; there are over 14,000 fewer primary 1 students in classes larger than 25 students than there were in 2006; 91.7 per cent of school leavers are in work, education or other training; and there has been a 3 per cent increase in the number of Scottish students being accepted into universities.

Those improvements are definitely encouraging, but we cannot allow ourselves to grow complacent. With the increasing imposition of austerity measures, it is now more important than ever to ensure that every child has a good start in life. High educational attainment is a clear route out of deprivation for many.

In February, I shared statistics from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which reported that as early as five years old, children from low-income backgrounds are 13 months behind their counterparts from high-income households in their vocabulary development and 10 months behind in problem solving. Those disparities only become more evident as children progress through school, with pupils aged 12 to 14 from better-off areas doing twice as well in numeracy skills as those of the same age from low-income areas. That inequality continues, as students from poorer areas still tend to leave school earlier than those from better-off areas.

By adulthood, low attainers are three times more likely to be unemployed than students who achieved highly in school. Unfortunately, it is often the students from the most deprived backgrounds who are less likely to have been among the more high-achieving students, being only one third as likely to continue on to higher education and thus twice as likely to be earning substantially less than those students from higher-income backgrounds.

The socioeconomic circumstances of a student's parents evidently have a substantial influence on the student's attainment, making it much more difficult for them to leave less privileged backgrounds. That reinforces a pattern of low attainment in these children, trapping them in a vicious cycle.

The Education (Scotland) Bill recognises the dangers of that cycle and endeavours to solve the issues by bridging the educational attainment gap. By making the issue of—in the words of the bill—the “inequalities of outcome” based on “socio-economic disadvantage” a necessary consideration for education authorities when making decisions and for the Scottish ministers when exercising their powers, the education bill will hold ministers and authorities accountable for the welfare and progress of even the most disadvantaged students, while keeping those involved focused on improving overall attainment.

The bill provisions for consultation, advice, and support on questions pertaining to the attainment gap will give ministers and education authorities a wide field of information to consider. Under the bill, it would be the duty of the education authorities to consult headteachers, pupils, their parents and any relevant voluntary organisations, as well as to take into account the advice of the Scottish ministers, before taking any steps to change functions relating to school education.

The Scottish ministers in turn would be expected to consult the education authorities, the parents of pupils, and any other relevant organisations before making their decisions. That network of consultation will give a voice to all parties that stand to be affected by the actions of the ministers and authorities. It will also inform authorities of the many facets to their decisions, ultimately allowing them to have a more complete picture of the effect of their actions.

That complete picture will make tackling the attainment gap more efficient and more effective. When pupils, teachers and parents have a space to directly give their feedback on what processes work well or on what needs to be changed, authorities can know sooner and more clearly how they can best help all students make the most of their education. It will also keep the education authorities and ministers aware of and responsive to the needs and expectations of all parties involved.

The bill will also hold education authorities and the Scottish ministers accountable for achieving their goals in reducing the educational attainment gap by requiring mandatory reports to be filed every two years. Under that provision, the education authorities will report to the Scottish ministers and the ministers will be answerable to us in Parliament. The education authorities and

the Scottish ministers will both be expected to publish reports describing the steps they have taken to reduce the attainment gap during the previous two years, how those steps have provided educational benefits to pupils and what plans they have to continue their progress in the following two years. Those reports will give us a clearer insight into their workings and provide a stronger measurement of the success of their programmes. We will be able to observe past progression and hear future expectations.

An increase in educational attainment brings benefits not only to the students who achieve more but to society as a whole. This September, Economic Modelling Specialists International put out a report that stated that, for every pound that is invested in Scotland's colleges, society receives back £6.30 in benefits. The report also found that taxpayers see £5.70 in benefits for every pound that they spend on education.

Queen Margaret University in Musselburgh is an institution that is based in my constituency. This year, it announced plans to build a commercial and innovation hub surrounding its campus. The QMU innovation centre in the hub alone is expected to create more than 1,000 jobs for Musselburgh, and it is predicted that the entire hub will make thousands of jobs in the entrepreneurship, retail and creative industry sectors. That development will enrich the East Lothian economy and support growth in Musselburgh and beyond. That is just one of many instances in which supporting education in the early years and at the university level strengthens bonds between universities and local society and encourages the community to thrive.

Although major advances have been made in Scotland's education over the past eight years, there is no doubt that we must continue to do better. Children from low-income backgrounds are still at a disadvantage in school from their very first days through circumstances that are entirely out of their control. The steps that are taken in the Education (Scotland) Bill are essential to help our schools to bridge that attainment gap. It is our moral duty to ensure that children, regardless of their background, have an equal chance to succeed in school and beyond.

16:06

Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I welcome the bill because it gives us the chance to work together to tackle the attainment gap in Scotland. That principle must surely be accepted by everyone in the chamber. From the speeches that I have heard this afternoon, there certainly seems to be a very positive response to the bill and a willingness to take it forward.

Essentially, the bill places a duty on local authorities to reduce inequalities of outcome based on socioeconomic background. Proposals for a national performance framework will be introduced at stage 2.

The reduction of educational inequality is one of the central motivating forces for Scotland's future. I want to live in a Scotland in which young people from all backgrounds can achieve their potential and realise their goals. I am sure that we all agree that we want that. I therefore welcome the chance to speak in the debate, and I especially welcome the chance to talk about attainment.

The starting point for the debate must surely be establishing the baseline of the current situation. More than 6,000 children in Scotland leave primary school unable to read properly. Pupils from wealthier backgrounds are twice as likely to get a higher A than pupils from deprived backgrounds, and school leavers from wealthy backgrounds are twice as likely to go on to higher education than those from deprived backgrounds. Standards in literacy and numeracy in Scottish schools have fallen since 2012. Just 25 per cent of secondary 2 pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds have the numeracy skills that they should have.

I am really pleased that the bill recognises that that is not all down to teachers. Responsibility for that does not sit with the teachers, who work incredibly hard and are passionate about those whom they teach, and it is not the fault of parents or guardians, who do the best that they can for their children.

Educational inequality is closely linked to economic factors that are beyond the control of schools, but we must be very careful not to use poverty and inequality statistics to excuse rather than explain performance in some schools. It is a whole-system structural problem, and it will need a whole-system structural response.

Such an approach does not apply only to schools; Scotland also has a disappointing record in getting people from disadvantaged backgrounds into university. We heard at First Minister's question time today a plethora of facts, figures and comparisons around that topic. I hope that we can come together around the bill—that we can work together, get to the bottom of what needs to be done and make it happen.

It is clear that closing the attainment gap should be at the heart of everything that we do in the Parliament and everything that the Scottish Government does. Much of the whole-system response to educational inequality will be found in areas that are devolved to local authorities. COSLA supports the principles of the bill, but has expressed concerns that the proposals in it might

not have been thought through enough and that they merit more attention.

It is my experience that local authorities are already thinking strategically about reducing educational inequality when they look at schools. In recent times, there has been an emerging focus on early years and, at the other end of the scale, links with employers and colleges. All that has been supported by the Government, and it is to be welcomed.

COSLA has also cautioned against an excessively bureaucratic response to the attainment gap problem, with a warning that that could lead to the diversion of resources from the front line to the completion of forms and reports for central Government, and that the approach needs to interact with existing legislation that is designed to improve educational attainment, rather than set up standalone systems and procedures.

It also seems to me that, with so much data pertaining to the attainment of pupils being published for each school, the creation of league tables is unavoidable. Parents with the means to do so already go to great lengths to get their children into schools with high performance. I wonder how the Government feels about, albeit inadvertently, encouraging that trend. There is more work and discussion to be done at stage 2 if we are to establish a coherent and strategic approach.

On Gaelic-medium education, while the principle is one that we can all agree on, there is precious little in the way of specifics on implementation in the bill. There are not enough Gaelic language teachers in Scotland already and, with continuing reductions in local authority budgets, the lack of resources is only going to worsen. We need to hear more from the Scottish Government on how it plans to implement the policy.

I close with a comment about the creation of chief education officers in every Scottish local authority. I agree with COSLA when it asks what problem is being solved here. If that is the answer, what was the question? Most local authorities already have a comparable post in place so it seems to me that the principle is agreed, and I would ask only that more work is done on the fine detail that is required to ensure a better fit with the existing structures.

Scottish Labour will work to improve the bill as it moves forward. What matters is how many lives are transformed for the better by education. We need to work constructively across parties, across layers of Government and across the country to ensure that Scotland's young people get the education and the opportunities that they deserve.

16:12

Roderick Campbell (North East Fife) (SNP):

As someone who is not a member of the Education and Culture Committee, I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate. Even if it is not actually stated in the bill, I think that narrowing—or dare I say closing?—the educational attainment gap between children from different socioeconomic backgrounds is absolutely fundamental to creating a fairer society.

It goes without saying that tackling educational inequality is at the heart of the Government's agenda. I am sure that all members will agree, however, that the achievement of a good level of education is one of the greatest ways in which a young person can create the best possible opportunities for their future. It cannot be right that, in respect of highers—to take one example—school leavers from the most deprived 20 per cent of areas of Scotland do half as well as school leavers from the most affluent areas. However, as we know, the number of students obtaining at least one higher or equivalent in Scotland's most deprived areas has doubled since 2008.

I very much welcome the progress that has been made since 2007 in the numbers staying on at school. In 2007, 45 per cent of students stayed on at school until the sixth year, but the proportion is now 62 per cent. I also welcome the rise in the number of higher passes to 156,000 per year, and the rise in the number of young people in work, education or training after school, and accordingly having a positive destination. We should also be grateful that the EMA has been retained in Scotland, in contrast to the position in England and Wales.

However, we should also recognise that much more needs to be done. That is why the Education (Scotland) Bill and the attainment challenge, backed by the attainment Scotland fund, are to be welcomed. I suggest that it is important to focus initially on the areas with the highest rates of deprivation. Therefore, in my view it is right that we look at particular local authorities such as West Dunbartonshire and North Ayrshire.

We must also ensure that children can read, write and count as early as possible. It is good that all primary 1 and 3 children will receive a gift of books and literacy materials. That is fundamental to their progress, and we should be ensuring that, as far as practicable, children have easy access to libraries. Closing libraries, as is proposed by some local authorities in Scotland, is not the answer.

I am pleased that the report that was published earlier this month on 10 years of the growing up in Scotland survey found that vocabulary and problem solving for those with the lowest incomes are getting better, and that more children from all

backgrounds are experiencing the joy of reading at an early age.

The bill places a duty on the Scottish Government and education authorities to report on their efforts to reduce inequality, but the policy memorandum provides little information on how that is to be achieved.

I agree with the cabinet secretary that having 32 varieties of report is not the answer. We certainly do not want to create a new industry in report writing but, clearly, some form of guidance, as recommended by the committee, seems sensible. As Professor Sue Ellis of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation said in evidence,

"What will make an impact and a difference is the extent to which national advice, local authority advice and school advice line up and marry together, so that schools and headteachers are getting clear advice and signposts about what matters and clear information about what works."—*[Official Report, Education and Culture Committee, 9 June 2015; c 6.]*

We want to avoid an overtly prescriptive approach, so that we can achieve attainment on a "what works" basis, as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation describes it. The most sensible approach is to apply the policy appropriately on an individual basis, depending on the local needs of pupils. The policy needs to take account of the poverty level and social divides in each school. If we are really to close the attainment gap that is found across the social spectrum, the aim must be to create a consistent framework for pupils across the board, regardless of social background, and across the entire span of their school education.

Mary Scanlon is concerned about the absence of consultation on the bill's requirement for compulsory registration with the General Teaching Council for Scotland. I accept that it is an important issue, but we do not live in a perfect world. It is important that teachers in independent and grant-aided schools are required to register, as that will offer guarantees that standards and the quality of teaching staff across the board will be more consistent, no matter where a pupil is educated.

The technical amendment on free school meals tackles one of the fundamental factors that poorer children can face when they are expected to learn on unequal terms with other more fortunate and literally better-fed children. I therefore welcome that element of the bill, too.

The bill must work in tandem with curriculum for excellence, which gives teachers more flexibility, provides a broader education for young people and sets higher standards for achievement than ever before. The bill should work alongside curriculum for excellence and seek to create an environment where attainment gaps can be steadily narrowed.

More generally, when Iain Glennie of the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association gave evidence, he supported the bill but raised concerns about the further resources that are required to make it happen. However, he rightly said:

“Resources do not make education; education is made by teachers with the support of resources.”—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 9 June 2015; c 6.]

I agree with him on that.

Closing the attainment gap will not happen overnight. It should, I hope, be a process of gradual but consistent progress. Neil Mathers of Save the Children Scotland has said that there is “no greater priority” than closing the attainment gap in Scotland. I am sure that at least some of us would agree with him that

“A legal requirement to close the attainment gap shows that Scotland no longer accepts that lottery of birth matters more than a child’s talent or effort at school.”

16:18

Hanzala Malik (Glasgow) (Lab): It is an honour to speak on the Education (Scotland) Bill. All members support improving attainment and the delivery of greater equality of education outcomes. However, there are differences of opinion on the best way to achieve those aims, and I am concerned that the bill as introduced will fall short of its aims.

One major point is the need to strengthen the duty to reduce inequalities of outcome. The bill requires education authorities and the Scottish ministers to

“have due regard to the desirability”

of reducing inequalities of outcome. Personally, I would like a duty on the Scottish ministers and education authorities to take steps to reduce inequalities of outcome.

I am under the impression that there is no clear definition of the term “inequalities of outcome”. In addition, three major children’s welfare charities have said in a statement that

“There is currently a lack of clarity around how to tackle inequalities of outcome at the local level”

and that the bill can help by

“identifying the key steps and policy areas that need to be tackled”.

I firmly believe that we need to flesh out the bill with useful and meaningful detail.

There is a consensus on the importance of reducing inequality, and we can work together to make a meaningful change for our children and young people. We can go further on improving

attainment and on reducing the attainment gap between the rich and the poor, and the gap that affects minority communities in Scotland. The SNP Government, which has been in power for eight years, should be held to account for the fact that more than 6,000 children still leave primary school unable to read properly.

The Government appears to be in a rush to look as if it is doing something through the national improvement framework, which I understand will be added to the bill at stage 2. It is being consulted on and has already provoked significant opposition. I will reserve my position on it, as we do not know in what form it will appear in the bill. However, we should not rush into major changes to the education system. We cannot afford to mess up the legislation or the implementation of reforms, because that would risk damaging the lives of our young people, which would be too high a price to pay.

I will make three points clear to the Scottish Government. First, we must improve the attainment of our young people. Secondly, the bill must not be rushed and it must address the shortcomings that exist. We know that we have work to do to improve the attainment of our young people and address the inequalities in outcomes. Last but not least, we must ensure that the bill reflects all the needs that are identified. We must take on board the recommendations that are made to us by teachers, the EIS, parents and community groups, all of whom expect the bill to reflect the needs.

To end on a personal note, I note that we have not really addressed the issue of languages. I look forward to a commitment from the Government on that.

16:22

Fiona McLeod (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): It is interesting to be the last back-bench speaker in the debate. I have noted how much consensus there is on the bill; every party is saying that it will support the general principles at stage 1 and almost everybody is coalescing around the understanding that closing the attainment gap is the most important thing that the Government can do. It is interesting to note that, because we all know that the First Minister has made that a priority not just for her Government but for her time as First Minister.

In the time that I have available, I will look at two aspects of the bill. The first is closing the attainment gap. Given that I was formerly a librarian, members will not be surprised to hear that I will focus on literacy. I promise that I will not harp on about that, but it is fundamental. A couple of members talked about the studies that have

shown that, when children start at school, there can be a 10-month gap and a 13-month gap in their abilities in reading and problem solving. Literacy is fundamental to our ability to learn, and I will talk about parental and carer involvement in the work with our youngest children on their literacy and numeracy levels. I also want to leave enough time to talk about a second aspect, which is the national improvement framework.

I have spoken before in the chamber about the read, write, count programme, which was introduced this year. It is a fantastic initiative. All our pupils in primaries 1 to 3 will be involved in it. It will be carried out in school, but it is also important that we will involve parents, carers and families in the whole read, write, count experience for our young children. George Adam spoke about how important that is, and there is loads of research on it.

The programme involves our parents, carers and families working with our youngest children on their skills. It is about embedding those skills in everyday life, so that children do not realise that they are learning. I have previously referred to the Government website that has videos about how to take kids along for the messages without them realising that they are reading the labels on the tins, adding up the money in the purse and working out what the goods will cost. That is all about read, write, count skills.

It is important that the Government has embedded outreach work into that. The attainment advisers and those who are working on read, write, count will work with the parents, bring them in and make them part of the experience for their children.

I make a plea to the Government: this is not just about encouraging parents to work with their children; it is about looking at what we have wrapped around that to support parents and carers with their own literacy skills. There is a lot of evidence that, when a parent has doubts about their own literacy skills and lacks confidence in numeracy, they are less likely to support their children and to help them on that journey.

There is loads of evidence on that, and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has found loads of stuff about it. I will give members all the references later; I will not take up the time on that now. We all accept the work that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation does and how good it is, but I also came across some stuff by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. As a health librarian, I always thought that that was where to go to find out how to cure snakebites, but the organisation has brilliant research on parental engagement and strategies for involving parents, and it is studying the health and wellbeing of the child, of which literacy is one aspect.

I will leave members with those thoughts on parental involvement and the research that they can read, as I wish to take some time to look at the national improvement framework. This is about evidence. The Government is investing £100 million in the attainment fund and is recruiting attainment advisers, involving parents and supporting our children. In the end, how will we know that all of that works? Through the national improvement framework, for every single pupil, we have to embed the baseline where we are starting—Jayne Baxter talked about that—so that we can track everything that we do. That will ensure that the work that we are doing works and closes the attainment gap.

Liam McArthur spoke about how many local authorities and schools are getting money from the attainment fund. If, through the national improvement framework, we can embed a way to ensure that we have the evidence that shows what works and where it works, we can roll that out across the country to every pupil. Is that not the way to close the attainment gap—by ensuring that, every time a teacher stands up to teach a pupil, the approach is evidence based and is based on what we know will do the work that we need to do?

As has been discussed already, we know that 30 out of the 32 local authorities already do assessment. We need to get consistency into assessment so that we have reliable evidence. We need to develop that in partnership, and the Government has committed to doing that.

The improvement framework will give us indicators that teachers and parents can use—and, let us not forget, that pupils can use, so that they can know that their learning is progressing and that they are doing the best that they can. I say to Iain Gray that the point is about improvement, not testing. It is about ensuring that we have an evidence base so that every child gets access to the best teaching that there is in Scotland.

Roderick Campbell referred to the report on 10 years of the growing up in Scotland study that was published this month. Let us hope that, following the evidence that we will gather through the attainment challenge, the GUS results in 2025 will show that, even if we have not closed the attainment gap, we have made it as narrow as possible.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Before we move to closing speeches, I remind all members who have taken part in the debate to return to the chamber for closing speeches.

16:30

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): When any legislation is proposed, it is important to

ask what it is for, what it is designed to do and what problems it is trying to address. As Mary Scanlon rightly said in her speech, the Scottish Conservatives firmly believe, having analysed the bill and listened to the experts, that as it stands the Education (Scotland) Bill is very mixed in its ability to answer those key questions successfully. That is because in places—as the Education and Culture Committee’s report evidences, and as Chic Brodie mentioned in his speech—there is complete lack of clarity in use of terminology. In addition, there are discrepancies between the use of terms in the bill and in the policy memorandum, as well as in ministers’ utterances. That makes for rather confusing reading. If we do not sort that out quickly, it could have serious implications for the bill’s intentions.

I will deal first with raising attainment. Although members often disagree on policy responses to the challenges in our education system, we agree unanimously that one of the most significant challenges—if not the most significant challenge—is the attainment gap between children from the most affluent communities and those from the least affluent communities. Many members have spoken about the evidence for that. That evidence is recognised by experts and by politicians who have devoted many years of their political lives to examining the themes that we are discussing. The Education and Culture Committee is no different—it has spent a long time investigating the attainment of looked-after children and other disadvantaged groups, and I credit the committee’s current convener for the assiduous way in which he has considered the issues.

The idea of enacting in legislation that education authorities must have “due regard” to the desirability of reducing inequalities of outcome bears further scrutiny—not least because it is a statement of a broad aim rather than a specific commitment that relates to the precise problems that are faced in our classrooms. The methods that are to be used to raise attainment as a result of the bill are not all that clear, nor is the terminology.

That last point is worth emphasising. When the solution to the attainment gap is framed only as “closing the gap”, in theory that could mean a weaker outcome for the children who are performing a little better, and it is clear that no member wants that. It is essential that we define “raising attainment” in its best qualitative sense. The bill’s failure to explain that is a serious problem, and it raises questions about the need for legislation in the first place. What in the bill will deliver qualitative change?

Angela Constance: We always endeavour to improve terminology and definitions. Does Liz Smith accept that the duty to address inequalities,

combined with the reporting duties—whereby Scottish ministers and local authorities will have to account for what they are doing and why they are doing it, and provide evidence on what they are doing and its impact—along with measures in addition to the bill, will have a collective impact?

Liz Smith: I am grateful for the cabinet secretary’s intervention, but I say to her, with respect, that I do not think that that is what some of our education experts are saying. Their fear is that some aspects of the bill focus too much on increasing the reporting duty, and that the bill does not provide for specific measures in the classroom that will deliver the qualitative change that we seek.

It is all very well to have broad aims at the start of a bill—of course that is necessary—but we need something that is much more specific, and I think that there is a terminology problem, as Chic Brodie has mentioned.

The education experts—Sue Ellis, Lindsay Paterson and Keir Bloomer—have concerns that there might be a negligible effect on outcomes. As others do, they speak with considerable authority on the matter and they worry that the bill will engage councils in an excessively bureaucratic reporting exercise that focuses a bit too much on paperwork, rather than on proven measures of the kind that Cara Hilton mentioned are being taken in Fife and which seem to be working well. That is much more what we are looking for.

Those who want to draw to the cabinet secretary’s attention the call that was made by the committee are highlighting the fact that the duty does not include the early years. We should listen closely to what Fiona McLeod said about that. Those early years matter a great deal, because literacy and numeracy are embedded at those stages, so it seems to be illogical to exclude that indisputably important stage in the child’s learning experience. I agree that there are other measures, but it is part of the effort.

Fiona McLeod: Does Liz Smith not think that the already achieved increase in early-learning hours from 475 to 600, with the intention to increase it further to 1,140, is a huge investment in the early years and in the learning opportunities of our youngest children?

Liz Smith: Absolutely—that is something that the Conservatives have supported and I do not have any problem with that. What I am saying is that a bill that is about qualitative improvement of attainment levels must surely include the most important ages when it comes to ensuring that children acquire basic numeracy and literacy.

How much time do I have left, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have a little time.

Liz Smith: The duties that the bill seeks to impose in relation to Gaelic education are also unclear. It is a hugely important area, and the committee has obviously had lots of submissions on it. There is an important difference between uptake in primary schools and that in secondary schools that we need to address. Ken Macintosh spoke eloquently about the staffing problems that affect Gaelic teaching and which are clearly an issue, and Liam McArthur raised a good point about the pressure that the entitlement puts on many areas that do not have native Gaelic speakers. However, Gaelic speakers need 100 per cent support, so we must ensure that resources are in the right place.

There are clearly major issues in respect of additional support for learning, because far more children are now identified as having additional support needs because we have got better at identifying those needs. There are issues about the test and about the definition of rights, and I note that many submissions to the committee raised those points about definitions.

In closing, I must declare an interest as a registered teacher with the GTCS and as a governor of an independent school. I am absolutely in favour of professional development. The independent sector has come a long way on GTCS registration. That is not something that anyone would move against. I want to flag up to the Government the need to take great care when it lodges a stage 2 amendment about the “into headship” qualification, which will have implications for the independent sector. Technically, the Government is not really in a position to regulate that, so it needs to be discussed.

16:38

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate and I welcome the bill. As the saying goes, the first step towards fixing a problem is recognising that there is one. I congratulate the cabinet secretary, eight years into Government, on speaking honestly about the attainment challenge that we face. Like Fiona McLeod, I have been encouraged by the fact that members in all parties are committed to ensuring that educational inequality is a top priority for Parliament in this session and the next. As has been pointed out by other members, there is a gap between attainment among children from poorer backgrounds and that of those who are in more affluent circumstances.

It is clear from the contributions today that educational inequality is a symptom of a deeper

problem of poverty, which we need to address. However, what should focus the minds of education policy makers is what can be done in our school system to ensure that a child’s coming from an impoverished background does not lead to reduced opportunity.

Although I accept the point that was made by Ken Macintosh and others that educational inequality also results from other issues, including pupils having English as a second language or their having additional support needs for speech and language therapy, it is right that the measures that we introduce to tackle the attainment gap should focus mostly on our more deprived communities.

It is unfortunate that although the bill and the accompanying national improvement framework recognise the challenge, there is little in the way of strategy, substance or resources to begin to tackle it. Given the strength of feeling and commitment that have been shown throughout the chamber today, the key test that the bill must meet in order to command support will surely be whether it provides a step change in the education of our poorest children. Stewart Maxwell and Liam McArthur questioned whether that will be achieved by the bill in its present form; it is difficult to see that it will. A few members have quoted Keir Bloomer. A more generous summary of the bill, based on the evidence that we received at committee, is that the bill is “mostly harmless”.

So far, much of the media attention and rhetoric have focused on the reporting requirements and national testing. That is understandable because they are the only concrete measurements in the bill. However, I welcome the cabinet secretary’s commitment—if I heard her correctly—to lodge an amendment to put into legislation a requirement to address the attainment gap to go further than the “due regard to the desirability”

issue that has been raised by Mary Scanlon and others.

Greater clarity is needed from the Government on standardised testing. I hope that, in summing up, the minister will offer further details. COSLA has rightly raised the point that the Scottish Government should carefully consider the information that would be put into the public domain, so that it avoids encouraging league tables and placing undue stress on pupils and teachers as a result of heightened media attention.

Jayne Baxter asked how ministers propose to stop league tables being created if data are published about individual schools—in particular, in the context of freedom of information legislation. However, testing and reporting are means to an end—the end being substantial improvements in the educational outcomes of disadvantaged pupils.

So far, the bill falls short in that area. It is difficult to disagree with the Royal Society of Edinburgh's view on the reporting duty, which is that

"unless something is known about how that might effectively be achieved, then the legislative reporting duty will be of limited value."

While welcoming the laudable aims of ministers, the RSE found that there is little evidence of a strategy in the Government's approach. The late introduction of material, which was raised by Stewart Maxwell and Liam McArthur, has contributed to that concern about the lack of a coherent strategy.

The concerns are echoed by the EIS, which believes that the introduction of the bill alone will not contribute to a significant reduction in inequalities of outcome, nor will it impact greatly on the attainment gap that has been created by socioeconomic inequality, because it creates duties but fails to link them to discernible means to secure the desired outcome. On this side of the chamber, we believe in action beyond what the Government proposes, and we have set that out in our speeches today. The amendments that we have talked about would make a difference.

In the coming years, Parliament will have a substantial suite of new powers that will open up new choices in funding education. I agree with Chic Brodie that legislation is needed to tackle disparities in pay and wealth, which is why Labour would use additional revenues from a new 50p top rate of tax to redistribute money from those who can afford to pay to those who need resources the most, and to invest additional resources over and above the Government's proposals to tackle educational disadvantage. We would double the number of teaching assistants in the primary schools that face the greatest deprivation challenges, we would introduce a new literacy programme for schools, and we would recruit and train literacy specialists. We would also offer support to parents to enable them to learn with their children, and we would introduce a special literacy programme for looked-after children. As Iain Gray said, we will be exploring options for amendments around a review of resources in the context of the further powers that are coming to Parliament.

There are other areas of concern in the bill. I am pleased that, where the minister seeks to extend the rights of children with capacity beyond making an application to the additional support needs tribunal, she is committed to listening to the concerns that were raised in our evidence sessions. Liam McArthur highlighted the concerns that have been expressed by the children's commissioner, the EHRC, the Faculty of Advocates, the Law Society of Scotland, Govan Law Centre and others. They all expressed

reservations about the proposal to require education authorities to determine whether a child has capacity, and about whether the move would be in the child's best interests before allowing the child to exercise its rights. I am pleased that the cabinet secretary has listened to the submissions that the committee received and has made a commitment to lodge amendments in that area.

As I have said, Labour would use the additional revenue from a new 50p top rate of tax to redistribute resources from those who can afford it to those who need resources most. We would invest the resources over and above what the Government proposes in tackling educational disadvantage, in order to ensure that the pupils who face the greatest educational challenges have the opportunity to achieve the qualifications that they need for careers in science, maths, engineering or technology. Additional resource is only part of the answer, but it is an integral part. There has been a call for the Government to evaluate the funding that is required to close the attainment gap.

We await with interest the publication of the Government's amendments. We will engage constructively as the bill progresses and we hope to work with the Government on the amendments that we are likely to lodge. There must be some recognition from the Government that bill as it stands will not have the impact that all parties seek. However, today is the first step, and we will support the bill at decision time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Alasdair Allan. You have until just before 5 o'clock.

16:48

The Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages (Dr Alasdair Allan): That is perhaps just as well, because there is a lot in the bill. We have heard a range of considered views this afternoon and it has been good to hear a shared enthusiasm for improving outcomes for all our children. That is at the heart of this bill and the relative consensus around its principles is welcome.

I will do my best to pick up on as many as possible of the wide variety of comments that members have made. As Mr McArthur said, there is a lot in the fridge when it comes to the bill. However, I assure him that, as is the case with my fridge, there are items within it that have been maturing carefully for quite some time.

Many members commented in detail on the bill, but it is worth saying first that many also commented on the principles. Iain Gray, Gil Paterson and others rightly referred to the moral imperative to ensure that our schools represent

equity of opportunity for all our young people and that we close the gap that still exists.

The new duty in the bill will require councils to have due regard to the desirability of reducing inequalities of outcome through the delivery of education. We believe that that is the right approach. In response to Mr Maxwell's question about what action might be open to local authorities to achieve the aim, I merely say that I am sure that statutory guidance will give examples, but I think that we can say for certain that it will include issues to do with the setting of education budgets, arrangements for monitoring standards, decisions about the school estate and decisions about specialist provision.

Liz Smith: I do not think that there is any doubt about the desirability of reducing inequalities; it is absolutely right to have that objective. The convener and, I understand, the committee in its report asked about specific actions. On that basis, I ask again why legislation is necessary to achieve what is sought.

Dr Allan: It is right that we put our aims at the heart of legislation, as we have explained. The member would probably be concerned if we legislated to the point that detailed matters such as I have just mentioned were imposed on local government. I am happy to discuss with the member her outstanding concerns.

Liz Smith and others asked about the terminology in the bill. The Government is keen to respond as helpfully as we can to those comments and to the comments in the stage 1 report in that regard. In our response to the report, for example, we clarified that

"The term 'attainment' denotes educational performance and the acquisition of the valuable skills, knowledge and attributes needed to succeed in life."

I heard what Mrs Scanlon said in that context, but I think that the relevant provisions in the bill include fair definitions. Although "socio-economic disadvantage" is not defined in the bill, we will use statutory guidance to support education authorities to identify the children who are to be supported. I am more than willing to correspond with members who have outstanding concerns about terminology in the bill.

In response to a point that Ms Smith made, I clarify that the national improvement framework will encompass early years education. The annex to the draft national improvement framework makes that clear. I hope that I have reassured the member on that point.

Mark Griffin asked about league tables. As he will appreciate, the Government has never produced league tables of schools, which we regard as unhelpful constructs; they are produced by others. We are alive to the issues that he raised

and we are working with the EIS and local authorities to ensure that there are no perverse or unhelpful consequences of our direction of travel on standardised assessment.

The attainment Scotland fund is a targeted initiative over four years, totalling £100 million, which focuses on supporting pupils in the councils that have the highest concentrations of deprivation—initially, seven local authorities. The Scottish attainment challenge is intended to help all councils and all schools to consider how best to use their existing resources to support pupils from more deprived backgrounds. Twenty-four attainment advisers have been assigned to local authorities; the remaining eight will be in place by the end of next month.

During the debate, many members mentioned the provisions on Gaelic-medium education—the issue came up in the committee, too. I will try to pick up on as many comments as possible.

Mr Maxwell raised the issue of pre-school education. It is worth referring to the order-making powers that exist in the bill, which allow the Government to return to the issue, although, as has been said, there are reasons why it is not being addressed at the moment, given the number of things that are happening all at once in the pre-school education world just now.

The points that have been made about the shortage of Gaelic-medium teachers, which is particularly acute in secondary, are relevant, but I hope that not only what is being said about Gaelic-medium education in the bill but the responsibility that is being given to local authorities to promote Gaelic is relevant to promoting Gaelic in secondary schools.

Ken Macintosh: Will the minister take an intervention?

Dr Allan: Yes.

The Presiding Officer: I call Ken Macintosh. *[Interruption.]* Can we please have Mr Macintosh's microphone switched on? *[Interruption.]* Oh, it is Mr Macintosh's fault—he does not have his card in.

Ken Macintosh: I could try to project a little more, Presiding Officer. Does the minister believe that when the presumption in favour of Gaelic-medium education is introduced he will have delivered on the 2011 SNP election manifesto promise?

Dr Allan: Yes I do. As I indicated to Mr Macintosh earlier, I can see very little distance between what the Government is likely to propose in the amendments that it lodges and what the member is talking about and what Gaelic organisations have been talking about. I feel very strongly about the need to promote Gaelic-

medium education and to strengthen the bill. I am very happy to meet organisations to discuss that—indeed, I have been doing so.

The question that has been asked throughout, not unreasonably, has been this: what happens at the end of the processes that are described in the bill, once a need for a Gaelic-medium unit has been demonstrated locally? I recognise the strength of the concerns raised and I have asked that Government amendments be drafted to make it clear that a presumption in favour of Gaelic-medium primary education will exist in those circumstances.

In response to one or two of the wider comments that have been made on Gaelic provision—not so much in the chamber as outwith it—I say that I make no apology for supporting learning through the medium of Gaelic. As I think most members would agree, and as has been evidenced today, it is not really possible to be supportive or even accepting of the future existence of Gaelic and then complain when it is then either seen or heard. The bill and the Government amendments should be seen in that light.

I share Mr McArthur's concern that we do not see the loss of the Orcadian dialect or indeed the loss of others of Scotland's dialects. However, let me also be clear about this point: if we do lose the Orcadian dialect from the speech of people in Orkney, it is not likely to be the Gaelic language that displaces it. Scotland's dialects, the Scots language and Gaelic have much in common and many shared interests in relation to how Government policy should approach them. I do not think that they need to compete.

Liam McArthur: I certainly acknowledge the efforts that the minister has made, specifically in relation to the Orkney dialect. The point that I was making was that when education budgets are under considerable strain, there is a danger that, if we add in more pressure, something will end up getting lost off the other end. The Orkney dialect is perhaps as much at risk as anything else.

Dr Allan: As I said, I completely acknowledge both that risk and the value of Orcadian.

I want to pick up a couple of points in the couple of minutes that I have left. On the provisions on additional support for learning in the bill, officials have benefited from significant discussions with stakeholders and have agreed to lodge some amendments to the bill at stage 2, which have been detailed in our response to the committee.

It is our intention, through the regulations, to introduce strict timescales on the relevant parties affected by the section 70 process.

I appreciate the points that were made by Ms Smith and others about the need to ensure that all pupils, whatever kind of school they go to, in whatever sector, enjoy the benefit of having teachers who are registered with the General Teaching Council for Scotland.

Ministers acknowledge the concerns raised with regard to detailed consultation. It is, and will remain, normal practice for the Scottish Government to consult fully on the content of bills prior to their introduction. Ministers had a desire to inject some further measures on social justice into the bill; because of the timing, detailed consultation did not take place. However, that does not mean that it was not the right thing to do.

I welcome the support that we have heard today for the general principles of the bill, and I hope that the Government's willingness to amend the bill is evidence of our openness to constructive ideas from other quarters. As the cabinet secretary has indicated, we will continue to listen throughout the legislative process to further improve the bill and to ensure that we keep always at the forefront of our minds our shared determination to do the best for Scotland's children and young people.

Education (Scotland) Bill: Financial Resolution

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of motion S4M-13938, in the name of John Swinney, on the financial resolution to the Education (Scotland) Bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Education (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3(b) of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.—[*John Swinney.*]

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

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of two parliamentary bureau motions. I ask Joe FitzPatrick to move motions S4M-14632, on the designation of a lead committee, and S4M-14650, on a suspension of standing orders.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Private Housing (Tenancies) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

That the Parliament agrees that, for the purpose of allowing the Justice Committee to complete its consideration of the International Organisations (Immunities and Privileges) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2015 [draft], the second sentence of Rule 10.6.4 of *Standing Orders* be suspended.—[*Joe FitzPatrick.*]

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

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S4M-14614, in the name of Angela Constance, on the Education (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Education (Scotland) Bill.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-13938, in the name of John Swinney, on the financial resolution to the Education (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament, for the purposes of any Act of the Scottish Parliament resulting from the Education (Scotland) Bill, agrees to any expenditure of a kind referred to in Rule 9.12.3(b) of the Parliament's Standing Orders arising in consequence of the Act.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-14632, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on the designation of a lead committee, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Private Housing (Tenancies) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-14650, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on a suspension of standing orders, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that, for the purpose of allowing the Justice Committee to complete its consideration of the International Organisations (Immunities and Privileges) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2015 [draft], the second sentence of Rule 10.6.4 of *Standing Orders* be suspended.

Meeting closed at 17:01.

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