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Thursday 16 November 2017

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 16 November 2017

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

General Question Time

Transport Strategy

1. Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what progress is being made with the national transport strategy and strategic transport projects review. (S5O-01473)

The Minister for Transport and the Islands (Humza Yousaf): The national transport strategy review is progressing on schedule. All the working groups are taking forward their respective remits. Our stakeholder engagement programme is also progressing to plan. Last week, I attended a national transport event co-hosted with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to engage with newly elected councillors. The strategic transport projects review is being informed by the national transport strategy and is also proceeding as planned.

Joan McAlpine: I welcomed the commitment that the Scottish Government made last year to improve the A75 as well as the links between Dumfries and the A74, having advocated for those improvements in my submission to the national transport strategy. How soon will we know what specific road improvement projects in the south-west the Government will commit to in the strategic transport projects review?

Humza Yousaf: The member will remember from the First Minister's programme for government that we reaffirmed our commitment to commence work this year for the second STPR in Dumfries and Galloway. The work will consider the rationale for improvements to road, rail, public transport and active travel on the key strategic corridors, particularly the A75 and A77, and the rail corridors to Stranraer and Carlisle via Kilmarnock and Dumfries.

This week, I met representatives from the A77 action group, and I have also discussed the A75. I also attended a cross-party meeting on the A77 the week before. I am confident that Dumfries and Galloway, in particular the A77 and A75 strategic roads, is getting a lot of attention. Studies and other work have been done to bolster the case for future investment. The member will understand that the STPR has to go through a review process and I welcome her thoughts and comments.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Will the national transport strategy help or hinder the Government's ambitions on reduced emissions and climate change? Does the minister think that it will bring about any monumental modal shift in Scotland?

Humza Yousaf: I certainly do. However, we will not wait for the national transport strategy to progress with some of the work that we are already doing. In the programme for government, the First Minister was incredibly strong on our intention to phase out petrol and diesel cars by 2032. I know that the member has commented on and made a useful contribution to the draft climate change plan, which seeks to reduce transport emissions. We will continue with that work, and reducing emissions will be an inherent part of the national transport strategy. Again, I would welcome the member's thoughts on that.

Gypsy Traveller Strategy and Action Plan

2. Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the implementation of the Gypsy Traveller strategy and action plan. (S5O-01474)

The Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities (Angela Constance): The Scottish Government recognises that Gypsy Traveller communities are among the most disenfranchised and discriminated against in Scotland. We will publish a race equality action plan by the end of this year that will include specific Scottish Government-led activities for Gypsy Travellers, and which will be followed by a detailed programme of work for the community. I look forward to informing Parliament about our proposals for work in this important area when we do so.

Mary Fee: Gypsy Travellers are a protected group under equalities legislation. Despite that, they remain one of the most marginalised and discriminated-against groups in Scotland. Social attitudes studies show little change in the deeply entrenched views against them. The first inquiry into Gypsy Travellers that the Scottish Parliament carried out was in 2001, and subsequent inquiries have shown little change in their living conditions or their lives. The Gypsy Traveller community feels let down and ignored by politicians nationally and locally. Will the cabinet secretary agree to meet representatives of the Gypsy Traveller community to hear at first hand about the issues that they face? Will she also agree to take direct control of the issue to make some progress to help this community?

Angela Constance: I thank Mary Fee, who has been a champion and advocate for the Gypsy community for many years now; we need more people to act in that fashion. Mary Fee is

absolutely correct to underline the issues that are often raised in the Scottish social attitudes survey. The Equality and Human Rights Commission describes attitudes towards the Gypsy Traveller community as

“the last bastion of respectable racism”.

I will indeed meet members of the community and, as I indicated in my first answer, there will be Scottish Government-led action. I am very conscious that there have been two previous committee inquiries and we now need to get on with the delivery of that action. I look forward to informing Parliament of that work in due course, but I can say to Mary Fee and others that we have been working very hard on the race equality delivery plan. We have been open to the advice, support and, indeed, challenge of our race equality framework adviser, Kaliani Lyle, among others.

Homelessness

3. Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to Shelter Scotland's appeal to alleviate homelessness. (S5O-01475)

The Minister for Local Government and Housing (Kevin Stewart): We agree with Shelter Scotland's call to alleviate homelessness this winter. Its latest report contains more evidence that United Kingdom Government welfare cuts are causing major hardship and housing insecurity for many people. That is why we have established the homelessness and rough sleeping action group, which includes Shelter, with the objectives of ending rough sleeping and transforming temporary accommodation.

The action group has already been working hard on its first objective of minimising rough sleeping this winter, and I will shortly receive its practical recommendations on the actions that we must take. It will then focus on its other questions on ending rough sleeping, transforming temporary accommodation and ending homelessness. We are supporting that approach by creating the £50 million ending homelessness together fund over the next five years.

Johann Lamont: Given the wide range of causes of homelessness, not just rough sleeping, the Scottish Government must be aware of the importance of support services to prevent homelessness and to prevent failed tenancies where those have been secured. Does the minister recognise that an understanding of the scourge of homelessness must be matched by the resources to tackle and prevent it? In that vein, can I ask what representations the minister has made to the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Constitution to reconsider the disproportionate cuts to local government over many years, which

make it exceptionally difficult for those lifeline services to be sustained, leading to untold misery for those who may find themselves homeless as a consequence?

Kevin Stewart: The finance secretary has treated local government fairly over many years. That included increasing funding for local services by some £400 million last year. As I pointed out in my original answer, we also have the £50 million ending homelessness together fund from the finance secretary, which will go a long way in helping out. What I would really like to see is the Chancellor of the Exchequer standing up at his budget and abolishing the benefit cap, reintroducing housing benefit for 18 to 21-year-olds and ending austerity. That would be very helpful indeed.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): What effect is the UK Government's benefit cap having on increasing the risk of homelessness for low-income families, as has been the case for several families in my constituency, and what action is the Scottish Government taking to pressure the UK Government to protect households from further austerity?

Kevin Stewart: This Government will continue to put pressure on the UK Government to end austerity. I hope that the chancellor hears what I have said today and will listen to my colleagues as we move forward. The Scottish Government continues to oppose the benefit cap, which is clearly impacting hardest on low-income families with children. That is why we have called again and again on the UK Government to reverse that unacceptable policy.

The latest Department for Work and Pensions figures show that at August 2017 around 3,800 households were affected by the benefit cap, containing more than 11,000 children. In September, a Scottish Government report highlighted 30 per cent of families affected by the cap in Scotland are lone parents with three children, who are losing up to £3,320 per year.

It is about time that the chancellor listened. It is about time that the UK Government reversed its decisions on the benefit cap and on abolishing housing benefit for 18 to 21-year-olds, and got a grip of universal credit, which is failing families right across the country.

Diabetes (FreeStyle Libre Glucose Monitoring System)

4. David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had regarding the roll-out of the FreeStyle Libre glucose monitoring system, in light

of it being available in the national health service in England and Wales. (S5O-01476)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Shona Robison): Following due process, the flash glucose monitoring device FreeStyle Libre has been included on the Scottish drug tariff from 1 November 2017. As with all other prescriptions on the tariff, NHS boards must ensure that prescriptions are appropriate, evidence based, safe and cost effective. It is essential that investment is used wisely to maximise the health benefit to patients.

Given the limitations of the current evidence base, to support a consistent approach across boards, the Scottish diabetes group has provided advice to help to identify people who should be considered for NHS-funded FreeStyle Libre. That advice is broadly in line with the Diabetes UK consensus guideline.

David Stewart: The cabinet secretary will be well aware that FreeStyle Libre is a form of flash glucose monitoring using a small sensor that is worn under the skin and that it reduces the need for frequent finger-prick blood tests. As the cabinet secretary said, the NHS placed the device on the Scottish drug tariff earlier this month. When will it be available in every health board in Scotland?

Shona Robison: As I said in my initial answer, the listing of a medical device on the drug tariff should not be interpreted as a recommendation to prescribe a particular product. Patients will need to discuss the on-going management of their condition with their healthcare professional and consider whether flash glucose monitoring is suitable for them. As I said, the guideline that Diabetes UK has developed is consistent and in line with the Scottish diabetes group's advice, which aims to help clinicians to identify people who should be considered for NHS-funded FreeStyle Libre. It is a clinical decision and, as the member will appreciate, the device will not be suitable for everyone to use. I am happy to keep him updated as the matter goes forward, but it is initially for patients to discuss with their clinicians whether the device is suitable for them.

Dyslexia and Inclusive Practice Professional Recognition Pilot

5. Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the dyslexia and inclusive practice professional recognition pilot. (S5O-01477)

The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I am delighted that, through the £200,000 grant funding that the Scottish Government provided to Dyslexia Scotland this

year, we have been able to support the development of the pilot. The pilot responds to the recommendations in the 2014 Education Scotland report "Making Sense: Education for Children and Young People with Dyslexia in Scotland" and was developed in partnership between the Scottish Government, Dyslexia Scotland, the addressing dyslexia toolkit working group, Education Scotland, the General Teaching Council for Scotland and the Open University.

I can confirm that 30 teachers, representing 24 local authorities, are participating in the pilot. The first of three masterclasses was held on 30 September and another two masterclasses will be held next year. Further support will be provided through online glow sessions. The pilot will run until October 2018, and we intend to have a final evaluation by the end of December 2018.

Margaret Mitchell: I thank the minister for that detailed response. I very much welcome the pilot, but is the minister aware that independent schools were not included in the pilot's parameters? Can she confirm why that was the case and say whether that omission can be rectified? Clearly, participation of a wide group of stakeholders is most beneficial.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I appreciate Margaret Mitchell's work on the issue over a long period, and I am more than happy to look into the detail of her question. There are a number of ways in which teachers can improve their professional learning around dyslexia, including through the addressing dyslexia toolkit, which I mentioned, and through further online training modules that teachers and support staff can register for and take part in. I am more than happy to address any specific areas that we still need to address to broaden out that professional learning.

Cycling Proficiency Training

6. Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the Parliament passing the Scottish Liberal Democrats' amendment in October following the debate on active travel, what action it is taking to ensure that every child in the country has access to cycling proficiency training. (S5O-01478)

The Minister for Transport and the Islands (Humza Yousaf): I welcomed the member's amendment to the Scottish Government's motion. In the past two debates that I have led in the Parliament, I have found myself agreeing with Mike Rumbles on a number of occasions, despite my better instincts.

For a number of years, we have provided funding to Cycling Scotland for bikeability Scotland cycle training for all primary school children in Scotland. This year, we are investing around

£800,000 for that training. On the back of the amendment that was accepted, the member will know that we will double our spend on active travel. It is fair to assume that a reasonable proportion of that money will go towards ensuring that the ambitions in the Liberal Democrats' amendment are met.

Earlier this month, I met Cycling Scotland and a number of active travel stakeholder organisations to discuss this very issue. I have asked that Cycling Scotland redouble its efforts to promote the funding to local authorities and schools, and I would be happy to listen to any ideas that the member has.

Mike Rumbles: I thank the minister for that comprehensive response. I am grateful for his support on the issue. When will the entire programme be completed? How long will that take to achieve?

Humza Yousaf: I will try to give a little more detail as the programme develops, and I will keep the member updated. He will understand that, in doubling the budget on active travel, we want to get as much bang for our buck as we can. We are talking to active travel stakeholders, and we are looking at international and United Kingdom comparators to see how we can meet those ambitions.

In 2016-17, 36,711 primary school children—a record number—took part in bikeability Scotland cycle training. Nevertheless, in keeping with the member's amendment, we would like to see many more children take part. I will endeavour to keep the member updated.

With regard to increasing cycling rates, we are putting a lot of effort into encouraging our young people to be more active through active travel. However, the programme should be seen as something not just for young people; I also recommend active travel and cycling to those of a vintage disposition.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): In teaching our children to cycle safely, we must create an environment in which there are safe places for children to cycle. Will the minister look at how we can create an environment around our schools such that our children have the opportunity to cycle to and from school?

Humza Yousaf: The member makes the point well. I remember him talking in the active travel debate about his family circumstances and how he would be more comfortable if there were segregated cycle paths. The Scottish Government thinks that segregated cycle paths will make our roads safer, and I give the member a guarantee that we will continue to invest in segregated cycle paths through our community links and community links plus programmes.

Bikeability training, which was previously the cycling proficiency test, contains an element of on-road training, which I think is excellent for children.

The member will know about our guidelines and recommendations to local authorities on 20mph zones around schools, which we think are a great idea. If he has further ideas about how we can improve safety on our roads, particularly for those who are travelling to our schools, I am all ears.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Can the minister tell us how per capita spending on active travel in Scotland compares with the spending that prevails elsewhere in the UK?

Humza Yousaf: After our active travel debate last week, I asked that very question so that I could examine the figures. From next year, when the active travel budget increases, we will spend at least £14.80 per head of population in Scotland on active travel. In England, if we exclude London, the figure is £6.50; in Wales, it is estimated to be between £3 and £5; and according to Cycling UK, spending in Northern Ireland is acknowledged to be "limited and spread thinly." I am pleased to say that Scotland leads the way on that endeavour.

Electric Car Charging Points (Housing Estates)

7. Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what steps it will take to improve the availability of electric car charging points in housing estates. (S5O-01479)

The Minister for Transport and the Islands (Humza Yousaf): The member will know that our switched on Scotland action plan takes forward our ambitions on electric charging points. In the programme for government, we announced our increased ambition to phase out electric—sorry, I should have said "petrol and diesel"—cars by 2032. It is lucky that I corrected that for the record.

Richard Lyle: I welcome what the minister says. I raise the issue because a constituent recently discussed the matter with me following a local housing association's refusal to take part in the Scottish Government's scheme—which I welcome—and fund the installation of a personal car charging point in his home. What further action can be taken to encourage the installation of such points and to utilise wonderful Government initiatives in our local communities?

Humza Yousaf: As I said to the member, we are investing heavily in the electric charging infrastructure. We have about 700 charging points, of which about 150 are rapid charging points. The infrastructure is hugely important.

I refer the member to the switched on Scotland action plan, which I mentioned. I do not know the

specifics of the case that he mentions but, if it would be helpful to the member, I will have my officials make contact with the housing association to see where the barriers may be and whether there can be a resolution to the issue.

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): That concludes general question time. Before we come to First Minister's question time, members will wish to join me in welcoming to the VIP gallery Her Excellency Tiina Intelmann, the Estonian ambassador to the United Kingdom. [*Applause.*]

First Minister's Question Time

12:01

Taxation

1. Ruth Davidson (Edinburgh Central) (Con):

A month before last year's Scottish elections, the Deputy First Minister promised that basic-rate taxpayers would not see their tax bills rise. He said that that was

"the right reassurance to give to people who are already finding it challenging to make ends meet. We'll give them that assurance for the remainder of the parliamentary term."

Will he stick to that promise? Yes or no?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): As Ruth Davidson knows, the Scottish Government is engaged in dialogue and discussion with the public—which is the right thing to do at this moment—to consider the steps that we should take on taxation. That debate has been led by the finance secretary. A range of options have been set out, including an assessment of the plans of various political parties.

The questions that the Government is engaged in discussing with members of the public are about the correct stance to take on taxation to make sure that we can fund public services effectively to meet the needs of people in our country and to invest in developing the Scottish economy, given the significant economic challenges that we face arising from Brexit. Those are the issues that the Government will discuss as part of the consultation with members of the public. That is the right approach, and the finance secretary will announce the conclusions in the budget in December. [*Applause.*]

Ruth Davidson: Aw—that was a bit lacklustre.

It sounds to me as though the Deputy First Minister is not prepared to stick to that promise, but I will give him another chance. Again, before the 2016 election, he made another promise. When he was asked about what he would say to local government staff who were worried about their jobs, he replied:

"I say to those individuals that the Scottish National Party is determined to protect their incomes, not punish them with a tax rise".—[*Official Report*, 3 February 2016; c 21.]

Before the election, the Deputy First Minister said that a tax rise would be a punishment. Now, apparently, it is a virtue. Will the Deputy First Minister explain why the Scottish National Party said one thing to people about taxes when it needed their votes and another once it had them?

John Swinney: I do not think that Ruth Davidson follows closely what the Government says on these questions. The Government says that it will act to protect, at all times, the interests of low-income individuals in our society. That is what runs through this Government's promise.

When the United Kingdom Government slashed council tax benefit, the Scottish Government—this former finance secretary—came to the rescue of low-income families in Scotland. When the bedroom tax was applied by the Conservative Government, this former finance secretary came to the rescue of low-income households in Scotland. I am absolutely determined to make sure that we stand shoulder to shoulder with low-income households in Scotland and take the right decisions to protect their incomes.

Ruth Davidson: The truth is that the SNP wheeled out Mr Swinney—Honest John—before the election to tell people that their taxes would not go up, but as soon as the party got back in, those promises turned to dust.

Just to be completely fair, I will give the Deputy First Minister one more opportunity. Just a few weeks before the election, he said:

"I want to say to teachers and public service workers the length and breadth of the country ... that I value the sacrifices that they have made, and that the last thing that I am going to do is put up their taxes."—[*Official Report*, 3 February 2016; c 19-20.]

He said "the last thing". It turns out that the only thing that his lot are going to do with taxes is put them up. It is one thing before an election and the exact opposite after. Does that sound to the Deputy First Minister like honest government?

John Swinney: The Scottish Government is engaged in a substantive debate with members of the public about the real choices that we face in government when we try to address the fact that the United Kingdom Government has slashed public expenditure and that austerity continues to roll forwards year by year—although the chancellor has an opportunity next week to bring that to a halt. We are involved in that discussion because we have to take the real, hard decisions in government.

Ruth Davidson comes to the Parliament and raises the issue of tax but does not talk about her proposals, which would reduce taxation for some of the richest people in our society and would remove £140 million from public expenditure in Scotland. I will give Parliament an illustration of what £140 million looks like. It looks like going to every school in this country that is in receipt of pupil equity funding and saying that, because of the Tory tax cuts, we are taking that money away from them and giving it to the richest in our society.

The Government is determined to use public expenditure to close the equity gap in Scottish education to deliver the best future for young people in our country and we are determined to resist the Tories' attempt to take it away from them. [*Interruption.*]

Ruth Davidson: The SNP members are all shouting today, but they were shouting something completely different a year ago. Last year, they were shouting, "Vote for us and we won't put taxes up." It is all change.

Members on the Conservative benches are just saddened that the Deputy First Minister has lost his way. There was once a time when he and Alex Salmond used to preach the merits of competitive taxation. Now, Mr Swinney takes his directions from Derek Mackay and Mr Salmond takes his from Mr Putin. How the mighty have fallen. That is the SNP: broken promises, higher taxes and Putin's pals. Is it not time that the SNP apologised to the people it misled?

John Swinney: The only sad thing today is Ruth Davidson's miserable contribution to First Minister's question time. [*Interruption.*] That is what is sad. Week in, week out, we have that miserable contribution to the debate about the future of Scotland. The Government takes the serious decisions about our country's future and will leave Ruth Davidson weeping in the Opposition benches.

Burntisland Fabrications Ltd

2. **Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** I declare an interest as a member of the GMB trade union.

The announcement earlier this week that Burntisland Fabrications Ltd, known as BiFab, is possibly going into administration is deeply worrying news for communities in Fife and the Isle of Lewis and for the wider Scottish economy. Some of the workers are here today and such is their commitment that they have been working without pay to keep things going. I hope that the Deputy First Minister will join me in welcoming them to the Parliament.

More than 1,000 skilled jobs are at stake. The business is a key strategic player in Scotland's renewable energy sector and, thanks to its workforce, has built up a solid reputation for carrying out such work. We understand that BiFab is experiencing financial problems due to disputed contracts with Seaway Heavy Lifting, a Dutch company that has received significant public funding from the United Kingdom Government for SSE's Beatrice offshore wind farm development. What discussions has the Scottish Government had with BiFab, Seaway, SSE and the UK Government to keep the work and jobs in Scotland?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): I welcome the issue that Jackie Baillie has raised. BiFab is very important to the communities that Jackie Baillie referenced, but it is also important to the whole country. It is important to our proposition on manufacturing and renewables and I cannot overstate the importance of the contribution that the company makes.

I deeply admire the workforce, not only for their skill, capability and capacity but for their tenacity in working through the difficult and unnerving circumstances that they all face at the moment. I reassure Parliament, the workforce and the communities involved that the Scottish Government is doing everything that we can to try to bring the matter to a resolution. Fundamentally, this is a private contractual dispute among players in the consortium involved—the Scottish Government has been talking to each of them.

The Government has had an extensive relationship with BiFab for many years. Fergus Ewing, Keith Brown, Paul Wheelhouse and I have met the company and know it well. On Thursday evening, when the present circumstances became clear to us, Keith Brown and Paul Wheelhouse became immersed in discussions with the trade unions, BiFab, SSE, SHL and the United Kingdom Government.

Yesterday, the First Minister, who is in Bonn attending the climate change talks, spoke to the leadership of SSE and SHL. She is returning early from her trip to Bonn to be available this afternoon to convene face-to-face discussions at St Andrew's house, if those are required. Further discussion will take place shortly, during First Minister's question time, which will give us further information about progress that has been made.

However, I want to reassure Jackie Baillie that the Scottish Government is doing absolutely everything that we can—by convening discussions and by driving the process—to ensure that we protect BiFab, that we protect the employment of everybody involved in the three sites and that we protect the enormous investment that has been made to build the skills to develop manufacturing and renewable energy capacity in Scotland.

Jackie Baillie: I very much thank John Swinney for the tone and content of his response. I hope that it reassures the thousands of workers whose jobs are at stake.

The Scottish Government's energy strategy prioritises renewables. It is an industry in which more work is expected and BiFab should be at the forefront of delivering that infrastructure. That is one of the key reasons why the Scottish Government has interests in BiFab, through Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands

Enterprise. Will the Deputy First Minister tell Parliament the total value of the disputed contracts that led to these problems? Has an impact assessment been carried out of the value of BiFab to the wider community, both in Fife and in the Isle of Lewis?

John Swinney: The total value of the Beatrice project is the best part of £1 billion. It is a colossal investment in the renewable energy sector, although not all of that activity is taking place at BiFab. The various parties are in dispute over issues in the contractual arrangements, and the Government is actively involved in trying to resolve those disputed sums and reach a conclusion that will create the pathway for future stability and activity at BiFab.

The Scottish Government, through our agencies—Scottish Enterprise at Burntisland and Methil and, in the Highlands, HIE at Arnish—has been heavily involved in supporting BiFab in developing its capacity and capability. The Government and our agencies are very much prepared to continue to take forward discussions in that respect.

On the economic analysis, the Government is involved with BiFab because we recognise the economic significance of the organisation to the renewable energy sector. Jackie Baillie very fairly refers to the fact that there are significant opportunities in the renewables sector—a process to which BiFab would be a fantastic contributor. That is why the Government is determined to ensure that we secure the future of BiFab.

Jackie Baillie: I very much welcome the return of the First Minister from Germany, where she has been talking about climate change, particularly given that one of Scotland's biggest sources of renewables jobs is facing administration. Members on these benches will support the Government in any way that we can in its efforts to secure the jobs that are at risk at BiFab and keep the work in Scotland. It is essential that all options are explored, and I am encouraged by the Deputy First Minister's words. I am sure that workers in Burntisland, Arnish and Methil will welcome them, too.

However, what those workers need is a cast-iron commitment—a commitment that will allow them to continue to work and prepare for future renewables work. Will the Deputy First Minister give them a commitment to provide financial support up front if required, so that the company can remain operational until the jobs are secured and the work remains in Scotland?

John Swinney: My ministerial colleagues Keith Brown and Paul Wheelhouse have been keeping members in touch on this issue. Keith Brown responded to a topical question from my colleague

David Torrance, who is the local member, earlier this week. Later today, a briefing will be issued to members of the Scottish Parliament to advise colleagues of the progress that has been made in these discussions—it should be available later today.

The Government, of course, stands ready to engage in any discussions on financial involvement and assistance. Quite clearly, there are rules within which the Government has to operate in the deployment of public expenditure, but our fundamental focus just now is on resolving the contractual issues that have led us to this situation. Our energies are concentrated on that. That is why the First Minister is coming back early from Bonn; it is why she has been involved in dialogue; and it is why Keith Brown and Paul Wheelhouse have been involved directly in discussions to try to resolve these questions. Of course the Government will remain open to discussions about financial support, should that be required.

We are in the situation that we are in, with an opportunity of a slightly longer time window to try to resolve this than we first thought we had, because of the commitment and dignity of the BiFab workforce. That is why we are where we are. I thank every one of those workers, who have been having a very uncertain time since the news broke, for demonstrating that tenacity, which is seen around the world as an illustration of the commitment of workers in this country to manufacturing. We are proud of all of them. *[Applause.]*

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): There are a number of constituency questions. I imagine that the first of them, which is from David Torrance, is on the same subject.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): Further to my question to the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Jobs and Fair Work on Tuesday, will the Deputy First Minister guarantee that he will keep Parliament and local MSPs updated on any discussions with BiFab in the future? What message does he have for the members of the workforce who have gathered outside Parliament today?

John Swinney: The Government will keep members of Parliament informed in the course of today. We will issue a briefing from the relevant ministers later this afternoon and of course issues will be communicated more widely if there is further progress. We are seeing some progress in the discussions with the relevant parties, but we have not reached a conclusion at this stage. I think that we have some way to go before we can get to a conclusion that provides the workers with the assurance that they are quite understandably and quite rightly searching for.

We very much value the contribution and expertise of the workers at BiFab, which is a key strength in our renewable energy sector. The Scottish Government is determined to do all that it can to protect their long-term future.

Chronic Pain Service (Shetland)

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): The Deputy First Minister will appreciate that Shetland's chronic pain service has been provided by two consultant anaesthetists. One left Shetland last week and the other will leave by Christmas. That will affect not just chronic pain sufferers and patients but, potentially, women waiting to deliver babies, given the need for anaesthetists with the necessary maternity skills. What will the Deputy First Minister do to ensure that there is continuity of care for those who need it, particularly given the need for the requisite skills in the maternity service?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Mr Scott raises a significant issue that is directly related to the continuity of important services that we all want to see delivered in Shetland in a way that is accessible to members of the public. We will have discussions with NHS Shetland about these questions. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport will be happy to discuss the issue directly with Mr Scott to make sure that we take all necessary steps to ensure that there is a continuity of service for members of the public who clearly depend on it in our remote island communities.

Parcel Delivery Charges

Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP): Today, I will meet Ofcom to discuss the impact of parcel delivery charges on customers in Moray and the wider region, which, as the Deputy First Minister can imagine, is a growing issue that is at the forefront of people's minds in the run-up to the festive period, as more and more people buy online. Is the Deputy First Minister aware that it is now cheaper, according to many of my constituents, to buy online from overseas companies than to have things delivered from elsewhere in the United Kingdom? There seems to be neither rhyme nor reason for the wild variation in delivery charges. Even some Ellon-based companies, as we learned this week, are charging more to deliver to Elgin than to Essex.

Will the Deputy First Minister join me in urging consumers to shop around and name and shame those retailers that are fleecing northern and rural customers? Will he discuss with his colleagues what more can be done to tackle the issue, which is costing rural Scotland millions of pounds in ridiculous surcharges? How can we put more

pressure on the UK Government, which, after all, has the responsibility for regulating such issues?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Richard Lochhead raises a very important issue. I understand its significance for his constituents in Morayshire, but it will also apply across a much wider geography in rural Scotland. I welcome the conversation that he is having with Ofcom. That is mirrored by conversations that the Scottish Government is having, and I reassure him that we will do all that we can to influence the discussion and debate around these questions with the United Kingdom Government and Ofcom.

I certainly associate myself with his call to consumers to set out their concerns about these issues, because consumer opinion on them is very strong and it can be of enormous significance in changing the minds of individual companies that are not responding in a sympathetic and positive way to the issues that Mr Lochhead raises. They should not have to be raised, because individuals in the country should be able to have access to delivery services without being punished for the location in which they live.

Climate Change

3. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): It has been acknowledged that the Deputy First Minister is answering questions today because the First Minister has been at the climate change conference in Germany. Greens have been pushing for Scotland to follow the lead of countries such as Sweden and set a target for net zero emissions, and we believe that meeting that target can be achieved by 2040. Achieving it any later than that would involve a slower rate of improvement than Scotland has been achieving so far.

I welcome the statement that the First Minister has apparently made that the Government will come to an early decision on when Scotland will aim to have net zero emissions. That implies that it is a matter of when and not if. Is a goal of net zero emissions now Government policy? Will a target date be made explicit in the forthcoming climate change bill?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): The first thing that I want to do is to set out to Parliament the reaction that the First Minister has had to the commitments that have already been made by Scotland and the performance that we have already delivered on climate change. The First Minister and I have spoken a number of times over the period in which she has been in Bonn, and she has been struck—as has the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, Roseanna

Cunningham, who was there earlier in the week—by the tremendous level of international respect for the leadership that Scotland has deployed. That includes not just this Government, but this Parliament, which unanimously approved the Climate Change (Scotland) Bill back in this Government's first session. That leadership has inspired other countries. The Government clearly wishes to maintain that position of leadership on the issue of climate change.

Mr Harvie is absolutely correct in that the First Minister said yesterday that we will come to an early decision on when we will aim to reach net zero emissions. That is the issue that we are currently considering within Government. How we will take it forward will be set out to Parliament in due course, and that will obviously have a bearing on the commitments that are made in relation to the climate change bill, which will be before Parliament shortly.

Patrick Harvie: It will be for all political parties to commit to ensuring that a realistic—and ambitious—date for that target of net zero emissions is set in legislation. However, it is very clear that reaching such an ambitious target and making that progress cannot be done without much more offshore wind energy. I therefore welcome the comments that the Deputy First Minister and others have made about Burntisland Fabrications—a company that has been at the forefront of our transition from fossil fuels towards a renewables economy. The commitment that has been shown by the workers, which the Deputy First Minister has recognised, needs to be repaid by us all—by this Government, the Westminster Government and the other companies that are involved. They deserve no less than that.

If we are going to retain the jobs, it is important that we show commitment to a transition to a renewable future for Scotland. After all, if the Scottish Government can bail out an airport, we can surely show a level of commitment to, and investment in, the renewable energy industries that will be critically important for our future. Can the workforce at BiFab have confidence that the Government's transition plan will involve urgent support for their jobs and the many others that can be generated, and involve an industrial strategy that commits wholeheartedly to fossil fuel decommissioning and to our renewable industries?

John Swinney: In my answers to Jackie Baillie and David Torrance, I hope that I have made clear the Government's determination to ensure that there is a secure future for the three BiFab sites in the country. In so doing, we are fulfilling the practical manifestation of our commitments on renewable energy.

This Government has been criticised by many people for being very determined to pursue a renewable energy route, and others in this Parliament—I am looking at some of the Conservatives—have challenged us to take a different approach to energy policy. However, we have been trenchant in our commitment to renewable energy development. I make no apology for that; it is one of the many things that this Government has delivered over the past 10 years and I am enormously proud of my association with that.

Patrick Harvie fairly says that it is not all in our gift because there is an interaction with UK energy policy and the wider energy debate, and we pursue that actively with the UK Government. When I attended the convention of the Highlands and Islands recently, I was pleased at the news that had emerged from the UK Government about some better opportunities for us to activate renewable energy in our island communities such as the Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland.

We are beginning to make some progress on putting in place a framework that will enable us to support wider renewable energy development. I give Mr Harvie the assurance that renewables will be at the heart of the Government's energy policy. He should also take heart from the fact that we made it crystal clear in the programme for government that transforming our approach to energy generation will be a central part of our industrial strategy, particularly in relation to the decarbonisation of transport in the course of the next 20 years, and that we are determined to take forward that agenda. I hope that that reassures Mr Harvie about the continuity of Government policy in that regard.

Alex Salmond (Russia Today)

4. Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Does the Deputy First Minister believe that the presenter of a talk show that legitimises RT—Russia Today—would be a fit and proper person to own Scotland's oldest national newspaper?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): One of the things that I do not control is the ownership of newspapers in our country—or not yet, anyway, although Mr Rennie is no doubt suspicious that I might find myself in that position at some stage.

Alex Salmond has made a choice about the platform for his television programme and the First Minister has set out her perspective on that. I understand, although I have not seen it myself, that Mr Salmond had guests from the Labour Party and the Conservative Party on the programme that was broadcast earlier today, so I suspect that that

reflects the plurality of the choice of guests who will be on his programme.

Willie Rennie: I am disappointed that the Deputy First Minister is seeking to make light of the matter. Newspaper regulation is devolved, so it is reasonable to ask whether Alex Salmond would be a fit and proper person to own *The Scotsman* when he is being paid by President Putin's propaganda channel. Members should remember that it is a TV channel that seeks to undermine western democracy and ignore human rights abuses at home. The Estonian ambassador told members this morning that Russia Today is Kremlin-backed propaganda, so it should turn our stomachs to know that a former First Minister of this country is giving the channel credibility and legitimacy by launching his show on it.

Scotland's reputation abroad has been damaged and the small countries along the Russian border in particular will be deeply concerned by the decision of Alex Salmond. However, he does not speak for Scotland in that regard. What is the Government doing to distance itself from Alex Salmond?

John Swinney: I thought that Willie Rennie might have checked up before asking me his question today, because on 23 September 2015, none other than Vince Cable appeared on Russia Today.

Members: Oh!

John Swinney: It is important to say that the First Minister set out that if she had been asked what channel it was appropriate for Alex Salmond's programme to be broadcast on, she would not have chosen Russia Today. However, it is an issue that Alex Salmond, who is not currently an elected politician, is free to take forward as he wishes. It is fair for me to say about the whole question, however, that I have been struck by the stinking reek of hypocrisy from every other political party on it. That is perhaps the best way in which I can close my answer to the question.

The Presiding Officer: We have supplementary questions, and the first is from John Finnie.

ScotRail (Jobs)

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Two days ago, ScotRail issued the document that I hold in my hand, which is about the launch of a voluntary leaver scheme that is available to a range of positions in the organisation. I am advised that this is the third time since 2015 that ScotRail has sought to encourage people to leave the organisation, which relies heavily on agency staff. I am also told that there are 256 vacancies and that the total worth of their salaries is £6 million per annum. Will the Deputy First Minister

get the Scottish Government to intervene to ensure that the 256 posts are filled and that it is public service rather than profit that drives Scotland's railways?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): First, there are in the Abellio ScotRail contract clear contractual obligations that have to be fulfilled. What is clear from events over the past few months, when this issue has been raised and has been a significant topic of discussion, is that the Minister for Transport and the Islands has assiduously pressed Abellio ScotRail to ensure that those contractual obligations are fulfilled, and that the services to which the organisation is committed are delivered. It is important that that monitoring and presence are sustained by the transport minister. I give Mr Finnie the assurance that that will be the case.

Obviously, there is a commitment and an obligation in the contract to there being no compulsory redundancies. That is a contract stipulation. Clearly, Abellio ScotRail will make judgments about recruitment and deployment of its staff, but that must be done in the context of fulfilling the contractual obligations to which the organisation signed up. I assure Mr Finnie and Parliament that the Government will ensure that that is the case in all circumstances.

Secure Residential Psychiatric Care for Children

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): The Deputy First Minister will have seen the tragic story earlier this week of Libbi Toledo, the 17-year-old young woman who took her own life following a life of struggle with severe mental health issues. Her mother powerfully made the point about her frustrations regarding the lack of secure residential psychiatric care for children in Scotland. Indeed, the Scottish Government has now agreed in principle to create nine secure beds. Will the Deputy First Minister take the opportunity now to clarify when we will have those beds? Does he agree that Libbi Toledo's case seems to follow the weary pattern of missed opportunities, with Libbi having been identified as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism spectrum disorder, but with that not being followed by formal diagnosis, specific follow-up or support?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): First, I appreciate unreservedly the deep sorrow that is associated with the death of Libbi Toledo, and the deep anguish that it will be causing her family, given the struggles that the young woman clearly had in her life. Daniel Johnson will understand that I cannot go into an awful lot of detail about the case, but I assure

Parliament that there has been interaction with services over a sustained period. However, that is of absolutely no comfort to her family, given the trauma with which they are now having to come to terms.

The Government is committed to the creation of secure in-patient units, so work is under way to implement that commitment. The unit will be housed by NHS Ayrshire and Arran, and is at a relatively advanced stage in the planning process. We are working to complete it as quickly as possible.

I give Daniel Johnson the assurance that we recognise the significance of the issue and the necessity of creating the facilities, so active work is under way to ensure that that happens as quickly as possible.

Building Industry (Training)

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): It is widely accepted that there is a skills shortage in the building industry and that the industry is sitting on a demographic time bomb. I was therefore concerned to hear that the Construction Industry Training Board is seeking a new operator for its national construction college's site in Inchinnan, and that it will withdraw from the site once a buyer has been found. What steps will the Scottish Government take to ensure a seamless transition? How does it plan to step up training in the sector?

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): It is clear that the Government recognises the importance of having appropriate and adequate skills available to the construction sector. We will need those skills to ensure that the house-building programme that the Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities will preside over in the public sector can be taken forward, in addition to our wider infrastructure ambitions.

The work that we will take forward on the development of apprenticeships and the expansion of apprenticeships to 30,000 over this session of Parliament is an important foundation of that commitment, as is our commitment to the developing Scotland's young workforce agenda, which is about ensuring that we develop the skills that are required.

On the specific question about the Construction Industry Training Board's facility, obviously the Government will engage with the CITB to ensure a seamless transition, because disruption in that respect is in nobody's interests.

This week, we saw a 4 per cent unemployment rate in Scotland—the equal-lowest rate in the United Kingdom. It is equal to Northern Ireland's unemployment rate and lower than the

unemployment rate in the rest of the United Kingdom. We have a very strong position with growth in employment in Scotland. A very large—indeed, overwhelming—proportion of our population is in employment, and we still have vacancies in various parts of the public sector and the private sector. We want to encourage the filling of those vacancies. I simply pose this question to Parliament: how on earth can we think that that will be helped by turning off the tap of free movement of labour, which can help us to address the issues? That is the lunacy that the Conservative Party is associating us with.

United Kingdom Budget

5. Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): To ask the Deputy First Minister what representations the Scottish Government is making to the United Kingdom Government ahead of the autumn budget. (S5F-01710)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Constitution wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 10 November, ahead of the forthcoming budget. The letter called on the chancellor to recognise the serious challenges that Scotland faces as a result of Brexit, to bring forward sustainable measures to boost the economy, and to ease the pressure on the public sector and those who work in it. The cabinet secretary also urged the United Kingdom Government to reverse plans to impose a further £3.5 billion-worth of cuts on Scotland and to pause the roll-out of universal credit. In the Prime Minister's meeting with the First Minister this week, the First Minister reiterated the Scottish Government's long-standing opposition to the United Kingdom Government's austerity agenda.

Bruce Crawford: I welcome the representations that have been made to the chancellor ahead of the UK budget next week.

I turn specifically to the payment of VAT by our police and fire services. I may be naive, but I hope that four years of consistent Scottish National Party campaigning on that issue will pay off and that the chancellor will at last give Scotland's police and fire services the same exemption from VAT that every other territorial force in Scotland has. Does the Deputy First Minister agree that, in all fairness, the Treasury should also pay back the £140 million that has already been paid? *[Interruption.]* Does he also agree that the noises from Conservative members show that they are more concerned about standing up for their masters in London than about defending public services in Scotland?

John Swinney: I think that Mr Crawford makes a strong point to Parliament today. I agree that the

Treasury should hand back the £140 million already paid. We welcome the Prime Minister's commitment, given yesterday, to look at the issue of VAT paid by Scotland's emergency services. Police Scotland remains the only territorial police service in the United Kingdom that is unable to reclaim the VAT that it pays on goods and services, with the same inequality applying to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service. We have consistently pressed the UK Government over that disparity, and we urge it to finally bring this unfair situation to an end and to do the right thing for Scotland's front-line emergency services.

High Street Shops

6. Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I declare an interest as a small business owner.

To ask the Deputy First Minister what action the Scottish Government will take in light of reports that one in 10 shops are lying empty and fewer people are visiting high streets. (S5F-01718)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): The Government is taking forward a number of measures, principally through Scotland's town centre first principle and through the town centre action plan, to tackle key issues such as empty shops and to improve the vibrancy of our town centres. This year, we have reduced the rates bill's poundage by 3.7 per cent and have funded total rates relief of around £660 million, including the small business bonus scheme, which will lift 100,000 properties out of rates altogether. We also plan to increase the incentive for occupation of empty properties through an expansion of our fresh start rates relief from April of next year, and we have introduced powers for councils to further reduce rates in their areas.

Rachael Hamilton: I thank the Deputy First Minister for that answer, but the Scottish National Party's large business supplement is double the United Kingdom rate and, despite its name, it does not punish only large businesses. Many struggling high street stores that already have to cope with reduced footfall are being hit by that additional rate, although they are family-run local businesses. Will the Deputy First Minister accept, as he did once in 2012, that the poundage rate should be

"no higher than that set in England",

to help attract and retain businesses?

John Swinney: As I said in my original answer, the Government has taken a sustained range of measures, particularly through the small business bonus scheme, to relieve many of the businesses on our high streets that are in exactly the situation that Rachael Hamilton describes from the burden

of business rates. As I go round the country, I have met many small business owners who are deeply appreciative of the fact that that commitment has been in place. The Government has, over the years, given consistent support to our small business community in our town centres, and we will continue to do so as we take forward our commitments to boost the Scottish economy.

Alcohol Awareness Week

7. Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Deputy First Minister, in light of it being alcohol awareness week, whether he will provide an update on what action the Scottish Government is taking to reduce alcohol harm. (S5F-01705)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): The Government's efforts to reduce alcohol harm will be significantly enhanced by yesterday's judgment by the Supreme Court, which confirmed unanimously the legality of our minimum unit pricing policy in Scotland. We will implement minimum unit pricing as soon as practicable, and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport will make a statement to Parliament on Tuesday about tackling the high-strength, low-cost alcohol that is causing so much damage to our communities. We also have about 40 other measures in our alcohol framework, which has had an impact and which we will update shortly to take further measures to assist in that respect.

Monica Lennon: I join the Deputy First Minister in welcoming the Supreme Court's decision to approve the implementation of minimum unit pricing. Alcohol harm costs Scotland £3.6 billion each year and is ripping lives apart. Minimum unit pricing will help to reduce alcohol harm over the longer term. It is the right thing to do and I congratulate the Government on pursuing it. However, minimum unit pricing on its own is not a panacea. Changing Scotland's relationship with alcohol and reducing harm will require a radical culture change. Will the Scottish Government consider initiating a national information campaign about the consumption of alcohol to proactively increase awareness of the chief medical officer for Scotland's updated guidelines on weekly alcohol intake?

John Swinney: I whole-heartedly welcome Monica Lennon's comments on the Supreme Court judgment. I talked of my pride in this Government's record in my response to Patrick Harvie, and I am enormously proud of the tenacity of my ministerial colleagues, who have led in this process. It is nothing to do with me. It has been the First Minister, Kenny MacAskill, Alex Neil, Shona Robison, two Lord Advocates, our health and justice officials and many stakeholders who have absolutely led this, and we appreciate the

support of Parliament in getting us to this position. There has been an enormous challenge to our agenda, and I am so delighted that this Government and Parliament held its nerve and won the day at the Supreme Court this week.

Monica Lennon has a close and very personal contribution to make to the debate on alcohol. She spoke about costs; she knows better than all of us that costs are not just the monetary costs of the impact of alcohol on people's lives. We will certainly consider the suggestions that she has made about a national information campaign. As I indicated in my original answer, the alcohol framework will be updated; Aileen Campbell, the Minister for Public Health and Sport, will lead on that process in the Government and she will be delighted to discuss the suggestions that Monica Lennon has made.

I accept Monica Lennon's point that minimum unit pricing will not be the panacea. There has to be a culture change in our society. However, if we look back at the culture changes that have taken place in the country—with regard to the ban on smoking in public places or since we entrenched equality between individuals—and the changes that they have led to in our society, Scotland is a better country for being bold in those respects. I am very proud of what this Parliament has legislated for. [*Applause.*]

Incontinence

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S5M-08218, in the name of Alex Cole-Hamilton, on incontinence in Scotland. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I ask members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament understands that incontinence has the potential to affect everyone at some point and that the condition can arise as a symptom of a range of varied medical conditions, such as obesity, traumatic childbirth and muscle weakness; believes that 20% of women between 17 and 30 will experience so-called giggle incontinence, which has the potential to lead to greater complications in later life, in particular the need for surgical interventions, including transvaginal mesh implants; understands that the only country to have calculated the costs associated with this is Australia, which estimates these to be around \$43 billion (£25 billion) per year as they go beyond the provision of sanitary wear, medication and surgery, and include the cost of dealing with the depression and anxiety that can arise; recognises what it sees as the importance of physiotherapy in alleviating the symptoms, and notes that, when provided early, this has reportedly proved effective in 80% of cases; understands that there is no formal training around basic incontinence prevention in Scotland for the midwifery, health visitor or physiotherapist workforce; acknowledges the taboo around the subject, which, it believes, suppresses an open discussion about it and often prevents people experiencing the condition from seeking help, and notes the view that the case for a national incontinence strategy is compelling, as it would be important to improving the life quality of hundreds of thousands of people in Edinburgh and across the country and would be of benefit to the public purse.

12:48

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I thank the Cabinet Secretary for Health, Shona Robison, for remaining for the debate.

If we ask anyone in this chamber or beyond it what their top five fears of age or infirmity might be, we can be sure that the subject of this debate will sit right up there. However, I state from the outset that, if we, as legislators, assume that incontinence is a condition only of the old or infirm, we are mistaken and are part of the problem. I called for the debate because women and men of all ages suffer in silence. It is high time that they are made aware of, and given, treatment, support and—most important—hope.

Incontinence is still taboo. Patients are shy and embarrassed to talk about it or to seek medical help, and many of them assume that nothing can be done for them. This may be the first time that we have debated the problem with such a focus in the Parliament. I am glad that members from all parties are present today and are prepared to put

aside our hang-ups on the issue and look collectively towards relatively straightforward solutions.

Here are the facts: one in three women and one in nine men leak urine. A remarkable 30 per cent of women who have given birth vaginally will have damage to their pelvic floor, while those who sustain a third or fourth-degree tear during childbirth are likely to have problems with faecal incontinence. Statistics show that incontinence has a bigger impact on a person's quality of life than nearly any other condition, and a recent survey of those over the age of 60 and in hospital characterised incontinence as a fate worse than death.

We do not know the true cost to Scotland of incontinence, associated products and the causal impact on physical and mental health. However, in 2010, Australia made a stab at researching the scale of the problem. A study there examined the cost not only of sanitary wear, medication and surgery, but of dealing with the depression and anxiety that can arise from the condition. It amounted to \$43 billion dollars annually, which is astronomical. Our two countries have similar societies and face similar health challenges, so we can extrapolate that to around £5,000 for every Scot with the condition every year.

A range of additional health complications stem from incontinence, and they have much bigger associated costs. For example, incontinence is linked to falls. Many older people fall and break their hip by slipping in the night after not making it to the loo in time and may become part of the 25 per cent of those over the age of 80 who will be dead within a year after such a fracture. We are still waiting for the national falls strategy, which will build on the 2014 falls framework that the Scottish Parliament voted for earlier this year.

One of the only surgical interventions available when sufferers are beyond the help of physiotherapy is the transvaginal mesh implant. Last year, along with colleagues from all parties, I met mesh survivors on a visit arranged by Neil Findlay. Thanks to their campaigning efforts, we have all heard the awful traumas that they have endured as a direct result of botched treatment for incontinence.

There is also a direct causal relationship between male incontinence, erectile dysfunction and male mental health issues. Given that much of the increase in the suicide rate last year related to young Scottish men, we cannot afford to ignore that link.

There are, nevertheless, solutions to this terrible condition, and they are not rocket science. Those women who, after childbirth, are left with rectus abdominis diastasis—separated tummy muscles—

are more prone to developing back pain and vaginal prolapse. They could easily be identified on the maternity ward and referred to a physiotherapist. We also have a six-week postnatal check in place, but there is currently no requirement to check how those muscles have healed and not all general practices routinely follow that up. We can prevent more women finding themselves with that debilitating condition if they are empowered with knowledge both before and after giving birth.

It is astonishing that a country that provides a box to new parents that contains a poem from the makar does not yet routinely train midwives and health visitors in basic pelvic physiotherapy. We must ensure that that is done as a matter of course, so that mothers are informed about post-partum exercises, what to look out for after tearing and when to seek treatment.

An understanding of pelvic floor exercises must be included as part of the curriculum in either personal and social education or physical education, so that young people are aware of their own pelvic health. There is evidence that physiotherapy works for all ages as well as years after the onset of symptoms, yet many people who suffer incontinence do not realise that treatment could improve their symptoms.

We need to normalise the discourse around the issue. Given that only 30 per cent of sufferers are coming forward for help, we need to build awareness so that everyone who is affected knows how to get help and that they are not alone. That would not cost much money but could significantly improve the quality of life of those who experience the condition at any time of life.

Incontinence is a huge and underrecognised public health issue in our country, but evidence shows that we can prevent and manage it with physiotherapy. We need to better support the many Scots who contend with the problem every day, some of whom are known to us personally.

I will close by thanking my friend and constituent Elaine Miller, who is a pelvic physiotherapist and comedian. She is leading a one-woman campaign to bring the issue out of the shadows and to an international audience. She is sitting in the public gallery today and will bring her show to the Parliament next Tuesday. I heartily recommend it to colleagues.

Incontinence is one of those health conditions that are indiscriminate of class or lifestyle. It ruins lives but we seldom give it the attention that it deserves.

12:55

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I thank Alex Cole-Hamilton for bringing forward this important debate. I remind members that I am the parliamentary liaison officer for the health secretary.

I will focus specifically on care homes—my reason for that will become clear—although I completely accept what Alex Cole-Hamilton said about the condition affecting not just one group.

Incontinence is common among care home residents, with its prevalence ranging from 30 to 80 per cent. Research has identified incontinence as a risk factor for increased skin damage, infection and falls in older people.

In care homes, incontinence is primarily managed with absorbency pads, which contain rather than promote and improve continence. National continence guidance suggests that interventions such as toilet assistance, optimal fluids, nutrition and medication can promote continence rehabilitation and reduce the use of pads in older people by up to 50 per cent.

Taking on that guidance, the care home continence improvement project was developed by teams in NHS Lanarkshire and NHS National Services Scotland with the aim of improving the continence care of people living in care homes in Lanarkshire. The primary outcome that was sought was a reduction in the use of high-absorbency products, and a secondary outcome was a reduction in the safety risks that are associated with incontinence.

A pilot took place in David Walker Gardens in Rutherglen and Summerlee house, which is a Balmer Care Homes residence in my constituency of Coatbridge. Both homes were recently put forward for awards, and Elaine Smith and Clare Haughey have lodged parliamentary motions recognising that. On 25 October 2017, the homes were successful at the recent UK-wide GO awards, which celebrate excellence in public procurement.

By chance, I had the pleasure of visiting Summerlee house on Monday and personally congratulated those who were involved in the project. I spoke to a number of individuals including Alice Macleod, the nurse adviser for national procurement and the project lead, and Margaret McDonald, the care home manager, as well as the owners, who have a particularly good reputation locally for providing good care home services. Far too many people were involved in the project for me to mention them all, but they include Irene Barkby and Jean Donaldson.

I especially thank the carers, residents and families who were involved. When I was at the

care home on Monday, I was shown a video of some of the families and residents talking. It was emotive to hear them talk about how their loved ones' lives had changed since the project started.

The initiative involved the interventions of frequent toilet assistance, medication reviews, regular fluids and reduced caffeine intake, and the results were better than anyone expected. Episodes of incontinence and pad use were reduced and less distress was experienced. Record keeping improved and staff had more quality time for residents, and that was reflected in the video. There was a 65 per cent reduction in the number of falls and a 50 per cent reduction in urinary tract infections, and skin damage was reduced by one third. There was also a 40 per cent reduction in unplanned hospital admissions for falls relating to UTIs, and residents began asking to be taken to the toilet—as I heard that day, some of them had not asked for such assistance for years.

The initiative demonstrates how small changes can make a big difference to people's lives, but there is a wider impact. It means less pressure on hospitals and a reduction in procurement. The economic analysis showed a saving of £250,000 in nine months, so there is real potential in that aspect.

The initiative could be transferable to other care homes across Lanarkshire and Scotland. I am in the process of setting up a reception, which I will ask the cabinet secretary or ministers to attend.

I see that the Presiding Officer is asking me to finish. I therefore thank Alex Cole-Hamilton for bringing the debate to the chamber and giving me the opportunity to speak about the good work on continence that is going on in my constituency.

12:59

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): I thank Alex Cole-Hamilton for bringing the debate to the chamber. It is a very important subject, as incontinence can affect a person's physical and mental health at any point in their life. The Scottish intercollegiate guidelines network's 2004 clinical guideline on the management of urinary incontinence states:

"Urinary incontinence is not a condition in itself but is a symptom resulting from one or more underlying conditions."

Therefore, the effective treatment of urinary incontinence depends wholly on thorough assessment and diagnosis.

Estimates of the prevalence of urinary incontinence vary widely due to differences in definition and the expectation that many of those who are affected will not admit to having continence difficulties. National health service

research estimates that between 3 million and 6 million people in the United Kingdom suffer from some degree of urinary incontinence. Estimated figures show that between 210,000 and 335,000 adults in Scotland endure significant problems with urinary incontinence, which equates to between 5 and 9 per cent of our adult population.

Urinary incontinence affects both men and women at varying points in their lives, although women are five times more likely to experience it than men. The broad forms of urinary incontinence can be brought on by factors including age, the menopause, pregnancy and childbirth, a high body mass index and a history of urinary continence problems in childhood.

Fifty per cent of women will experience urinary incontinence at some point, but figures show that only one in five will seek clinical help. In 2004, an American survey by the National Association for Continence reported that, on average, after beginning to experience bladder control problems, women wait six and a half years whereas men wait just over four years before seeking the advice of a healthcare professional.

Urinary incontinence is consistently associated with adverse effects on the quality of life of those with the condition, which are extensive and particular to the individual. Those effects include social isolation, loneliness and sadness, depression, severe embarrassment, stigmatisation, effects on sexual relationships and disturbed sleep. Quality of life is also adversely affected by the practical inconveniences associated with the condition such as the frequent changes of clothes and bed linen and having to bathe more often. Such things greatly impact on a person's day-to-day life.

Given that only about half of those with moderate or severe urinary incontinence seek clinical help, we desperately need to identify barriers and improve awareness so that those who experience incontinence can live full lives. By tackling the lack of awareness of treatment options and promoting the perception that incontinence is a normal part of getting older, we can start to change the fact that many adults with the condition attempt to manage the problem themselves, often resorting to inappropriate measures that may worsen their condition.

SIGN suggests that adults with urinary incontinence can benefit from changes in lifestyle and adherence to behavioural advice as much as, if not more than, from pharmaceutical or surgical interventions. Simultaneously improving awareness-raising campaigns, reducing people's perception of the associated stigmatic barriers and promoting awareness of physiotherapy techniques for managing urinary incontinence will undoubtedly

encourage more people with urinary incontinence to seek life-changing help.

13:03

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I congratulate Alex Cole-Hamilton on bringing forward this motion for debate. As the motion rightly highlights,

“incontinence has the potential to affect everyone at some point”

in life and can arise from a variety of medical conditions, but the taboo around the subject often prevents the vital discussion that enables people to get help. Stigma and embarrassment prevent many people with the condition from seeking help. Research shows that more older women experience incontinence than breast cancer, heart disease or diabetes, but the condition is very rarely discussed and fewer than one third of those who are affected seek professional help.

That is why I welcome the fact that we are debating the issue openly in Parliament and why we should explore any actions that we can take to implement policy to improve life for people with the condition. I note in particular the calls from researcher Jo Booth of Glasgow Caledonian University, who has outlined the need for a national strategy on continence that considers bladder and bowel health across the lifespan, as well as a public health campaign to challenge the normalisation of the issue of incontinence.

We should encourage people to seek treatment and help from preventative services, because the bladder condition of almost three quarters of those who experience incontinence can be significantly improved or even cured with lifestyle and behaviour techniques. There is clearly more work to be done to get the message out there that, for many people, incontinence is a medical issue and is not something that they just have to put up with or that is a natural part of ageing. People can take action to help ease the condition. I hope that the cabinet secretary, in her closing remarks, will address some of the issues around the need to tackle stigma and raise public awareness of incontinence and its treatment.

One of the vital issues that were raised during my preparation for the debate is the obvious and necessary requirement for those who experience incontinence to have access to public toilets. Crohn's and Colitis UK has raised the important point that incontinence is a hidden disability. Being unable to access a toilet has a huge impact on the ability of people with bladder conditions to access public life and go about their everyday lives, including activities that many of us take for granted such as travelling, shopping, socialising and working.

The social model of disability points out that disability is caused by the way in which society is organised and, using that model, we can see that those with bladder conditions that cause incontinence can be disabled from full participation in daily activities because of the inaccessibility of public toilets. I fully agree with that view. Ensuring access to toilets is a public health concern. There should be a duty on authorities to ensure that there is an adequate supply of local toilet facilities. When council budgets are experiencing sustained year-on-year cuts, it is perhaps not surprising that there is pressure on councils to try to make savings by closing facilities such as local public toilets. However, we should recognise that access to those facilities is a right and that they are a public good. Any savings that are made by closing public toilets are surely offset by the even greater social and economic costs that are caused by social exclusion.

I recently raised the issue of access to public toilets with Network Rail as part of my on-going campaign to improve access to vital sanitary products and ensure that legislation is in place so that no one goes without them. In many railway and bus stations, a charge is in place to access toilets, which is a real barrier for those who need to access a bathroom urgently. I hope that all public bodies in Scotland will look more closely at that issue.

I would welcome any progress on the calls for a national strategy or action plan on continence, which would address some of the issues that have been raised in the debate.

13:08

Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green): I am pleased that we are having the debate and I thank Alex Cole-Hamilton for making it possible. We have heard that incontinence is a public health issue that affects millions but is covered up and hidden from view for a variety of reasons, including stigma, as Monica Lennon mentioned. It is also a public health issue with some real win-win solutions. The advice for preventing urinary incontinence is in many ways the same as that for reducing a whole spectrum of medical problems and living a healthy life. NHS Choices advice suggests working towards a healthy weight, cutting down on alcohol, keeping fit and, for incontinence in particular, keeping those pelvic floor muscles strong. Following that advice will not mean that people never experience incontinence, but it can help.

For those who are living with incontinence, access to the right medical help is vital, and getting treatment early can help massively. Incontinence should not be allowed to limit our life choices. That phrase kind of brings to mind some

of the adverts that members will have seen on television, but I am trying to make the broader point that the brilliant physiotherapist-comedian—there's a job title for you—Elaine Miller made in an email to all MSPs. She said that a

“significant, and almost totally unrecognised factor is that incontinence is a barrier to exercise—diseases of inactivity are now responsible for 1:6 premature deaths, which is on a par with smoking.”

Indeed, in Parliament last week, Professor Nanette Mutrie said that inactivity has actually exceeded smoking as a global killer.

However, incontinence is largely missing from obesity management. Once a person's BMI is over 36, they will probably wet themselves when they run, which may be significant in the consideration of poor exercise compliance.

Alex Cole-Hamilton spoke about how incontinence can affect both men and women of all ages, but it is something that I started discussing with other mums after my child was born, which was some time ago. After having a child, one is more likely to find oneself trampolining with toddlers, but less likely to do so without worrying about incontinence. The link with physical exercise is well made and it is important.

I have not seen Elaine Miller's award-winning show but I am looking forward to a taste of it on 21 November when the arts company, Fair Pley, the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy and Elaine will visit Holyrood. I hope that we all see one another there again. Elaine Miller may also be the only comedian to star on the NHS Choices website and to have her show accredited as continuing professional development for healthcare professionals. However, importantly, tackling incontinence in the most effective way will require more physiotherapists to guide people through exercise, more people in health and outwith who are comfortable and have the time to talk about this issue, and less taboo as a whole about recognising and discussing incontinence, especially among younger people.

The chartered society's main message is that physiotherapy is highly clinically effective, and cost-effective too. It reports that 50 per cent of women reporting incontinence said they were moderately or greatly bothered by it, 27 per cent were unwilling to go places where they were unsure about the availability of a toilet, and 31 per cent dressed differently because of the problem.

Monica Lennon highlighted the important issue raised by Crohn's and Colitis UK and I would be grateful if the cabinet secretary could address that in closing, as well as the issue of free access to incontinence pads for those who need them. I would also be grateful if the cabinet secretary would address how we might all work together in

this Parliament to make sure this issue will no longer be taboo. Today should be the start of a broader discussion in order that we tackle this issue with the seriousness and urgency that it deserves.

13:12

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): In essence, this debate is about the competition and tension between social embarrassment about talking about the functions of our bowels and bladders and the underlying medical urgency that might be associated with dysfunction in that regard. If social embarrassment wins, there is a risk that we delay engagement with the medical assistance and advice that might well be necessary to protect us from the severe impacts of underlying conditions that need urgent attention.

I often learn things in members' business debates that I had not previously been aware of. It had never occurred to me that the issue that we are considering had a gender aspect to it. Members might forgive me, given my age, for being a little fixated on the future operation of the older gentleman's prostate and for neglecting to understand issues that are associated with pregnancy and incontinence in females. We have heard that the problem is bigger for the female than it is for the male. I have learned something.

I am grateful to Alex Cole-Hamilton for securing this debate, which I hope will, more broadly, enable people to feel a little more comfortable about talking about issues that are rarely discussed at the dinner table.

The issue is important. Glasgow Caledonian University reports that 30 to 40 per cent of people over 65 who live in their own homes and 70 per cent of frail older people who live in care homes struggle with incontinence—so it is not a trivial matter.

Despite what Alison Johnstone said—I will look out some of the references that she cited—I had not previously thought that incontinence was a matter of humour. However, if humour can be used as a vehicle that allows us to talk about and recognise the condition, that is very much to be welcomed.

A lot is expected of healthcare professionals. I hope that practice nurses, who will often be the ones to be consulted on the condition rather than general practitioners, have the appropriate training and the sensitivity to raise with patients something that may be of considerable embarrassment to them. Patients often go to their primary health provider for a reason other than incontinence, and the condition may emerge as a secondary issue, or it may simply be that questions about general

health reveal an incontinence problem that is part of their deterioration in health.

I hope that midwives, health visitors, physiotherapists, practice nurses and GPs are, in future, better equipped for, and more comfortable with, raising difficult issues about incontinence. As the Australian numbers illustrate, the key point is that if we tackle incontinence early, there is an economic saving in addition to the benefit to the quality of life of sufferers. Sustained and regular exercise is important and helpful, with the caveats that I have just heard about from Alison Johnstone.

We have the potential to alleviate unnecessary pain, anxiety and aggravation, and to improve the quality of mental health of incontinence sufferers. The topic has been neglected for too long. This debate is a contribution, but not the end of the story in improving matters for incontinence sufferers.

13:16

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. In addition, a close relative of mine is a healthcare professional working in the NHS.

I, too, congratulate Alex Cole-Hamilton on securing time in the chamber to raise awareness of this issue. Many people find incontinence difficult to talk about—indeed, the motion

“acknowledges the taboo around the subject”.

Even when we find ourselves talking about incontinence, it is frequently as the basis of a joke rather than a serious discussion. That is not to say, as has been said, that we should not make light of a serious subject. The first step towards dealing with the impact of conditions such as incontinence is to make people more comfortable when talking about them.

I am reminded of how Billy Connolly deals with his Parkinson's disease by weaving it into his show and leaving the stage to the track, “Whole Lotta Shakin Goin On”. We find ourselves laughing at that black humour, even though we probably find the material uncomfortable. His legendary skit in “An Audience with Billy Connolly” is how I know that incontinence strikes at all ages.

It is important that we never lose sight of the people who live with incontinence. As has been mentioned, the condition can have a profound physical, psychological and economic impact on a person's life. It can place a hurdle between them and their being able to undertake the day-to-day activities that many of us take for granted. Because of their condition, they always have a question in the back of their minds about whether they will be able to do something.

There are those who see incontinence as little more than an inconvenience, but the reality for many is that it is a life-changing condition. That was forcibly brought home to me during the Public Petitions Committee's on-going work on transvaginal mesh issues, which are mentioned in the motion. The committee has heard harrowing details of the fallout when the procedure goes wrong. Often, it is linked to incontinence issues after childbirth. The evidence sessions that I have taken part in have been some of the most challenging of my short time in this Parliament. We heard from many who suffer horrendous pain in the aftermath of the operation, as well as having to deal with the realisation that the normal everyday life that we all take for granted has been ruined for them. Many of the sufferers are young women

The image of the cabinet secretary and the chief medical officer being cross-examined in committee with rows of women in wheelchairs sitting behind them reacting to their answers has stayed with me as the most challenging session that I have been involved in, such was the strength of feeling in that room. It certainly highlighted the responsibility that we as MSPs carry in this place and how the decisions that we make and the discussions that we have can have a profound effect on the lives of others.

Unfortunately, there appears to be a connection between our difficulty in talking about incontinence and a lack of joined-up support and treatment for sufferers. As Alex Cole-Hamilton points out in his motion, many cases of incontinence could be prevented through greater and more consistent training for nurses, midwives, health visitors and other medical professionals.

It is worth pointing out that some cases, such as those caused by obesity, can be treated at least partially by encouraging changes in lifestyle. Such joined-up thinking, especially in early intervention, is a crucial element in preventing such conditions or, potentially, at least lessening the need for more invasive interventions. The role of the GP in that is vital, which is why Conservative members put such an emphasis on primary care.

Early intervention with physiotherapy has been shown to be effective in addressing incontinence. The key to that early intervention is incontinence being taken seriously and enough trained physiotherapists being available. I am concerned that that might not be the case at the moment. That need for more physiotherapy specialists will have to fight for oxygen in an atmosphere in which many other healthcare professionals are crying out for more investment. Therefore, it is crucial that we use members' business debates such as this to highlight those issues and the subsequent needs.

I thank Alex Cole-Hamilton for bringing the debate to the chamber.

13:20

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): I declare an interest in that my wife and daughter work in the healthcare sector.

I thank Alex Cole-Hamilton for bringing this important debate to Parliament and for agreeing to sponsor jointly the event next week at which we will hear from Elaine Miller. Its theme is, "Is pee a feminist issue?" I look forward to that performance on Tuesday night. Of course, everyone is welcome to attend.

We often hear revelations in members' business debates. Today has been no different: we found out that Stewart Stevenson has learned something today, when most of us who have listened to his contributions over the years had thought that he already knew everything. Apparently not. That is today's revelation, for me.

Incontinence is a deeply personal issue and has a huge impact on people's quality of life. I am glad that Brian Whittle mentioned Billy Connolly's sketch, which was a very funny routine. However, for the people who are affected by it, incontinence is far from funny because it affects their relationships, jobs, sex lives, social lives and their ability to do normal everyday things. That is no laughing matter: it is thoroughly miserable.

As members have said, for many women childbirth causes the problem. Tears, strains, prolapses and damaged muscles are all contributing factors. For many, it is the start of a life of trying to cope with the constant fear of embarrassment and of their thought processes being dominated by wondering where the nearest toilet is.

Of course, many women who have suffered could have their condition improved or completely resolved through better prenatal and postnatal education, and better care and rehabilitation. Simple checks—we read about questionnaires and self-assessment tools in the briefings for the debate—pelvic floor exercises and physiotherapy can all help. They can all have dramatic results, but many people do not get that information, advice and care.

Far too many women were told that the problem could be solved quickly by a new gold-standard procedure that would fix their prolapse or incontinence. That new gold-standard procedure was sold to them by the medical multinationals such as Boston Scientific and Johnson & Johnson, and was enthusiastically promoted by surgeons who bought the spin or were pressured by health boards and the medical establishment. The reality is that that gold-standard procedure has left tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of women throughout the world horribly injured, disabled, unemployed, wheelchair bound and with broken

relationships and broken dreams. Mesh implants are, though, still being implanted in women. I hope that Parliament will debate the mesh scandal in the next few weeks. It is the least that we can do for the people who have been suffering. We must get answers to the problems that have been exposed in that global scandal.

Incontinence is not just "part of life"; it is a condition that can, with the right interventions, be improved and resolved, which gives people back their lives, confidence, wellbeing and self-esteem.

I thank Alex Cole-Hamilton for securing the debate, and I look forward to women and men receiving much better help and support for this distressing condition. I urge the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, and you, Deputy Presiding Officer, to join us next Tuesday for a performance of "Gusset Grippers", in which Elaine Miller will use comedy to address this serious issue.

13:25

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport (Shona Robison): I, too, thank Alex Cole-Hamilton for lodging the motion. I am sure that there will be a fantastic turnout for Elaine Miller's performance on Tuesday night.

As Alex Cole-Hamilton and others have said, continence issues affect people of all ages and can have a profound effect on an individual's quality of life. There may also be an impact on wider health issues, including through increased risk of falls and fractures for some people. In order to achieve better outcomes for patients, it is vital to diagnose the cause of incontinence, rather than just treating the symptoms. I am therefore determined to ensure that all patients with continence issues receive the first-class service that they deserve. My aim is that patients should see the right person at the right time, and certainly early enough, to provide them with support and advice on how to manage their condition.

Early intervention is crucial, and NHS boards are trying to address that. For example, NHS Lothian is piloting a system for redirection of patients from consultant care to physiotherapy care, where that is clinically appropriate. Patients can, thereby, access the most appropriate care, reduce unnecessary consultant appointments and be seen faster. In addition, an increasing number of specialist physiotherapists are being trained in prescribing, which is improving patient care and decreasing the need for multiple general practitioner appointments. That, again, reduces time.

My aim is that, whatever the setting, care will be provided to the highest standards of quality and safety, with the patient being at the centre of all

decisions, in line with recognised standards and best practice.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for delineating the clinical response. As she will have heard, there is much unanimity in the chamber about the issue—all party politics has been stripped from it. Will the cabinet secretary take that unanimity and commit to considering a national strategy on continence that addresses not just the clinical response, but all the social aspects relating to the issue, including awareness, access to public toilets and other matters that members have raised?

Shona Robison: I will certainly look at what more can be done and at what is the appropriate way to address the many issues that have been raised in the debate. The motion mentions—as did many members—the lack of formal training on basic incontinence provision for the midwifery, health visitor and physiotherapy workforce. Members will be aware that, as part of their undergraduate preparation, midwives receive education on incontinence that results from childbirth. Significant training resources are also available for staff at local level, including for the care sector. Those include e-learning opportunities and modules that are provided by board continence teams. We need to ensure that those resources are being used and that staff are getting the opportunity to train.

The majority of boards have dedicated continence teams that provide direct care and support to patients. They also provide advice and support to other health professionals, including the care sector and carers, who manage bladder and bowel problems. It is important that all NHS and social care staff are aware of the effect that their practice can have on a patient's continence status: for example, some medication may exacerbate continence issues.

With the appropriate continence care, there is huge potential for achieving an improvement in people's quality of life. Midwives, nurses and allied health professionals have particularly important roles in supporting people with continence issues.

Boards also provide continence care for residents of care homes. I was particularly interested in what Fulton MacGregor said about that. That can vary from providing direct care through boards' continence teams to providing support to registered nurses in care homes to enable them to carry out patient assessments. Although many older people remain fit and well, health problems generally increase with age and many of us will need some help and support at some stage.

It should be acknowledged that many people are supported to manage their continence issues

by the NHS as well as the third sector so that they can live full, independent and, in many cases, active lives at home and at work.

I am aware that barriers to seeking help include embarrassment, lack of knowledge of available treatment options and misconceptions, such as that suffering from incontinence is a normal part of ageing, which of course it is not. I therefore encourage anyone who has a continence problem to seek help from our caring and compassionate health professionals. I also thank the wide range of NHS staff who are doing excellent work in supporting people who have continence issues.

Boards also seek to promote good bladder and bowel health, as part of a public health message, in order to prevent continence problems arising in the first place. For example, many boards have public information leaflets on how to maintain a healthy bladder and bowel.

In addition, NHS Grampian holds a joint clinic that focuses on a 12-week health promotion and education programme on continence.

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has also redesigned its continence service to focus on preventive measures. It aims to support patients to manage their symptoms better, and it aims to break down the myths and stigma that are often associated with incontinence. I am delighted that the board's specialist bladder and bowel service was awarded the national care award for 2016-17.

Members will, I hope, be aware that there is a national contract in place for supply of continence products, which is tendered for every three years. I appreciate the sensitivities of continence provision and the degree of distress that is caused if patients are not confident in the products that they use. People already have access to free continence pads—the issue that Alison Johnstone raised. People may, of course, choose to buy extra pads. Continence pads are also free to people in care homes.

I expect all boards and staff who are involved in the provision of continence care to engage appropriately and sensitively with patients, and to support them fully to ensure their dignity, comfort and independence.

The Scottish Government is also keen to have continued dialogue with stakeholders, including the Association of Continence Advice's Scotland branch, on how services and care can be improved nationally and locally. Perhaps that would be a good starting point for exploring how some of the issues that have been raised in the debate can be taken forward. Some of that work is already happening: for example NHS board continence leads meet quarterly to discuss and share good practice. I get the sense from members who have spoken today that there is

more to be done, so I am happy to consider whether we can use the existing structures for that.

A number of members mentioned transvaginal mesh implants. I could spend a great deal of time going over many of the issues that have been raised and the experience of the Public Petitions Committee. I look forward to using the debate opportunity that we will have in the near future to update Parliament on progress that has been made on some of the actions that the chief medical officer and I undertook to progress—no least, the independently chaired mesh oversight group that is being set up by Healthcare Improvement Scotland, which will meet before the end of the year. I look forward to providing more detail on that in the debate.

Neil Findlay: We look forward to the Public Petitions Committee having a debate, but the cabinet secretary has the option of having a debate in Government time.

Shona Robison: As Neil Findlay knows, the Public Petitions Committee has spent a great deal of time going into all the detail of the issue. It is therefore quite right that the information be brought forward through a committee debate. It is as valid for a committee to bring forward debate as it is for the Government to do so.

We have to think carefully about the purpose of the debate. NHS England published a report on mesh during the summer, which made similar recommendations to the report that the Public Petitions Committee discussed. During the committee debate, we can reflect on the NHS England report and what it adds to this complex and difficult issue.

I thank members for their contributions and for sharing patient experiences with Parliament. I certainly recognise that more can be done. I am happy to ask the chief medical officer and the chief nursing officer to write jointly to NHS boards to reinforce the importance of a continence service that is person centred and tailored to people's needs, including prevention and early intervention—which picks up on some of the points that have been made in this important debate.

We must and will keep looking at what we can do better, how we can transform and improve care and how we can equip ourselves to deliver even better health and social care services in the future for those who live with continence issues.

13:34

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Pow of Inchaffray Drainage Commission (Scotland) Bill: Preliminary Stage

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): Good afternoon. The first item of business this afternoon is a debate on motion S5M-08649, in the name of Tom Arthur, on the Pow of Inchaffray Drainage Commission (Scotland) Bill. I call Tom Arthur to speak to and move the motion on behalf of the Pow of Inchaffray Drainage Commission (Scotland) Bill Committee.

Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I am pleased to open this preliminary stage debate on the Pow of Inchaffray Drainage Commission (Scotland) Bill.

Members could be forgiven for thinking that the subject might be dry and technical, but I assure them that the pow is literally anything but dry. It has a rich history that involves no less a figure than King Robert the Bruce. Before I dive into the pow in detail, I thank all those who engaged with us and the other committee members—Alison Harris and Mary Fee—for their hard work. I also put on the record the committee's thanks to the clerks and the Scottish Parliament information centre for their invaluable support.

This private bill was introduced on 17 March 2017. A private bill is introduced by an outside promoter and will make specific changes to the law that affects the promoter rather than changing the public and general law. The bill has been promoted by the Pow of Inchaffray commissioners, who have responsibility for the arrangements, management, maintenance and improvement of the pow. For anyone who is wondering what a pow is, I will explain shortly.

Anyone who considers that a private bill would adversely affect their interests can formally object to it. Three admissible objections to the bill were lodged and none was rejected at the preliminary stage, so all will be considered in detail should the bill progress to the consideration stage.

The objections helped to inform our scrutiny. The committee took evidence from the promoters on two occasions. We questioned them not only about comments and concerns that were raised in the objections but on a wide range of written submissions, including those from the Scottish Government, Scottish Natural Heritage and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency.

Before I set out some of the areas of concern, I will explain what the Pow of Inchaffray is. "Pow" is a Scots word that means a ditch, slow-running

stream or channel of water. The Pow of Inchaffray provides drainage to approximately 1,930 acres of surrounding land near Crieff in Perth and Kinross and is the equivalent of 13.7 miles long. The land that it drains is defined in the bill as “benefited land”, and those who own land or property there are called “heritors” and must pay the commission a share of its annual budget for the upkeep of the pow.

The origins of the pow date back to the 13th century. Further work was carried out in 1314 at the behest of King Robert the Bruce, and it was first put on a statutory footing in 1696 in the old Scots Parliament. That act was updated in 1846 at Westminster to give the commissioners greater powers to carry out works and improvements and made provision for the costs of work to be shared among landowners. The commission now wants to replace the Pow of Inchaffray Drainage Act 1846 with something that is fit for purpose so that it can carry out its responsibilities more effectively in the future and ensure that there is a fair and proportionate system for calculating the annual assessments that heritors must pay.

Historically, the pow has been managed by the owners of the agricultural land that surrounds it. It was never envisaged that the benefited land would include a large number of residential properties but, because of centuries of drainage work, some land was made suitable for development and a new housing estate was built in the Balgowan area. Some older properties were also redeveloped for residential use. Most of those residents are already liable to pay the commission for the upkeep of the pow, and the remainder will be made liable by the bill.

The issues of which land benefits, who should pay, how much they should pay, and the balance of power between the commission and the heritors are at the heart of many of the concerns that have been expressed to the committee. Much revolves around the commission’s annual budget, as that determines what individual heritors will pay. The committee therefore spent some time clarifying what the budget of the commission has been historically and what factors could impact on future budgets. On request, the promoter provided the committee with details of the budget between 2004 and 2016. The budget has varied from under £3,000 to over £30,000 in that period, with an average annual budget of £14,609. My colleague Mary Fee will talk more about the future budgets of the commission, and Alison Harris will set out views on the need for a right of appeal and on how prospective purchasers are made aware of the pow, but I will highlight a couple of other issues before I close.

The committee is satisfied that maintenance of the pow is required and that a body is needed to

manage that. It is clear that Perth and Kinross Council, SEPA and Scottish Water either have no interest in taking on that role or have no locus to do so. Therefore, the commission needs to continue and it is appropriate that its work is funded by those who benefit. However, the balance of power between the commission and heritors needs careful consideration. I will briefly give some examples.

There are currently six commissioners, two each for the lower, middle and upper sections, with no commissioner for the Balgowan section of the pow. The bill proposes changing that to allow a Balgowan area commissioner, and seven commissioners in total. However, as approximately 73 per cent of heritors live in the Balgowan section, it did not seem appropriate for them to be represented by one commissioner out of seven. As a result of our questioning, the promoters have agreed in principle to bring forward amendments to allow two Balgowan commissioners, leading to eight commissioners in total.

The commission also supported the committee’s preliminary suggestions to allow easier termination of a commissioner’s appointment, and to make it possible for a majority of heritors to dismiss a commissioner from their section. We also discussed whether the method set out in the bill for calculating annual assessments was fair and proportionate, particularly for heritors who may be asset rich but income poor and who may live in modest houses on larger land plots, for historical reasons.

Should the bill proceed, we will discuss those and other issues with the objectors and promoters with a view to lodging amendments to the bill if appropriate. Overall, we support the general principles of the bill and, although we have identified some issues that need to be resolved at consideration stage, we are confident that sensible compromises can be found.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Pow of Inchaffray Drainage Commission (Scotland) Bill and that the bill should proceed as a private bill.

14:37

The Minister for Business, Innovation and Energy (Paul Wheelhouse): I will speak briefly on behalf of the Scottish Government. Some private bills are straightforward. As the preliminary stage report shows, this is not a straightforward bill, and I congratulate the committee on its evident hard work in scrutinising it.

On rights of appeal, the committee’s report states:

“The Committee is concerned about the lack of a right of appeal in the Bill, especially given the issues identified regarding the potential for the annual budget to increase substantially and unchecked, and that the 1846 Act contains an appeals process for assessments to be appealed to the sheriff. If the Bill is to stand the test of time then it seems prudent for it to contain proportionate appeals and dispute resolution procedures for those it affects. The Committee also does not believe judicial review, which is a potentially expensive form of court action that has to be heard in the Court of Session in Edinburgh, will be a realistic option for most heritors.”

It goes on to say:

“Should the Bill proceed to Consideration Stage, the Committee will discuss this issue with the Promoters and objectors. It is the Committee’s preliminary view that the Bill may need to be amended to ensure appropriate and proportionate appeal and dispute resolution mechanisms are put in place.”

The Scottish Government agrees with the committee’s view that the bill may need to be amended to ensure appropriate and proportionate appeal and dispute resolution mechanisms are put in place, and we are happy to work further with the committee, as required, to ensure that appropriate amendments come forward to put that into effect.

14:38

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab): I thank the convener, Tom Arthur, for moving the motion. As we have heard, how the annual budget will be determined each year is key to our considerations, because that is how each heritor’s individual charge will be calculated.

The committee identified three factors that could have a significant impact on future budgets. The first is the fact that the cleaning and repair of the pow have been put on hold to focus on the bill, the second is the cost of the private bill itself, and the third is the fact that there are now beavers in the pow that may cause damage and so need to be managed. I will say a little more about each of those factors.

The promoters have confirmed that no work to clean or repair the pow has been undertaken since 2014, as funds have instead been set aside for the preparation and promotion of the bill. The committee has asked what implications there are for the pow due to lack of maintenance and repairs over the past two years. The committee heard that there would be a backlog and that there is already evidence that work is required in certain parts of the pow that could increase the risk of flooding if it is left unattended. That maintenance work would be a priority once the bill is passed, and the implication for heritors is another cost that will need to be recouped from them by the commission.

The bill states that any promotion costs of the bill that are not recovered under the 1846 act will

be added to future annual budgets and, therefore, will be paid for by all heritors. The bill states that those costs can be spread out over the next three years, so that is another potentially substantial increase to the budget in those years.

There is also the issue of the beavers. The committee heard that beavers were illegally released into the area some 10 years ago and that they have caused significant problems. As the convener has said, committee members undertook a fact-finding visit to the pow on 8 September, and I saw for myself the damage that beavers have caused to sections of the pow. The commission now faces having to manage the beavers in order to prevent, or minimise, further damage. We heard that the commission has been in discussions with Scottish Natural Heritage about a trial beaver exclusion area. The commissioners contacted a contractor who proposed a design for a barrier, but the cost was around £42,000. The commission was looking to SNH to fund the barriers in full. The committee has recently heard that, for reasons of cost and complexity, SNH will not pursue the proposed trial at this stage, which leaves the commissioners with the issue of how best to manage the beavers in the pow. Whatever steps the commission takes to do that, it is likely that there will be a resulting cost that will be added to the annual budget, perhaps over a number of years, and the heritors—including the commissioners—will have to pay for it in their annual contributions.

The committee notes that all those factors—the cost of promoting the bill, the backlog of cleaning and repairs and the potential costs of beaver protection—could increase considerably the annual budgets and, therefore, the heritors’ contributions. That is why we concluded that, in order to future proof the bill, added safeguards are required to protect heritors from excessive budget increases, such as appropriate and proportionate appeal and dispute resolution mechanisms. Should the bill pass to consideration stage, we will make sure that those issues are discussed further with the promoters and objectors.

Another issue that we examined was the non-payment of assessments by some heritors. We sought clarification on that and it was confirmed that unpaid contributions amounted to debts of £21,480, which date back to 2012. The promoters confirmed that, although the bill gives them the option of pursuing the debts, the commission decided at a meeting on 15 August, after considering the issue, that historical debts will be written off and not pursued. One reason that was given for that decision was that the potential costs of pursuing outstanding debts could be more than the amount owed. However, the promoters also confirmed that any future debts will be pursued by the commission through the courts.

It seems, therefore, that all the heritors under the bill, including the 20 new heritors, could face higher charges than would otherwise be the case as a result of some previous heritors not paying and that debt being written off. It is also clear that any heritors not paying from now on could face court action. Objections and written submissions have claimed that that is not fair and, should the bill proceed, we will pursue that issue further at consideration stage.

The committee will continue to closely monitor those areas of concern at consideration stage to ensure fairness to the heritors going forward.

The Presiding Officer: No one else has asked to speak in the debate, so I call Alison Harris to close.

14:44

Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con): I thank the convener, Tom Arthur, and Mary Fee for their speeches.

Currently, there is nothing in the bill to prevent the commission's budget, and therefore heritors' charges, from rising substantially. There is a right for heritors to make representations to a surveyor if changes are proposed to the values that are used to calculate annual assessments or to the land categories. However, that is not the same as a right of appeal. Under the 1846 act, heritors have the right to appeal to the commission and then to court if they are not satisfied with their assessments. However that right has not been carried forward in the bill, which also does not contain any right of appeal for heritors to challenge the budget.

The issue was raised in objections and written submissions, including by the Scottish Government, which stated that it would

"seem preferable to replicate existing appeal rights in the new Bill."

The promoters told the committee that a right of appeal was not included because the values that underpin the calculation of the annual assessments are set out in the bill; the only variable factor is the budget; there is less scope for challenge under the bill than there was under the 1846 act; the bill provides for a cost-effective proportionate system for all and the costs of appeals would have to be shared out among all heritors; and a judicial review remains an option of last resort. However the committee remained concerned about the lack of a right of appeal for heritors and asked the promoters to reflect further.

The promoters suggested amending the bill to ensure that, when heritors are given 21 days to make representations to the commissioners about the proposed budget, the commissioners would

have to take any comments into account when finalising the budget. When pushed further by the committee, the promoters made a further suggestion of providing a right of appeal to an independent expert, but only in circumstances where 10 or more heritors wished to appeal.

The promoters stressed that that was not their preferred option and cautioned that such a process could delay the setting of the annual budget and lead to the budget being set at higher levels and being less accurate. They also cautioned that any appeals, whether successful or not, could result in higher, rather than lower, individual assessments for heritors, as the legal costs of the appeal would need to be shared out among all heritors. The issue clearly needs further thought and, should the bill proceed to consideration stage, we will discuss it with the promoters and objectors. At this stage, it is the committee's view that the bill may need to be amended to ensure that an appeal mechanism is put in place.

Another issue that came to light during our scrutiny was that some prospective purchasers are not made aware of the pow and the obligation to make payments to the commission. The commission told us that, in its view, there are already satisfactory methods in place for notifying prospective purchasers, including the home report, the survey, the standard missives, the property inquiry certificate and Scotland's land information service, ScotLIS, which is a new online service that was recently launched by Registers of Scotland. However, should the bill be passed, we still think that more needs to be done to alert prospective purchasers to the pow's existence and purpose and the requirement to make annual payments to the commission.

We identified potential changes to the bill that could help, such as requiring the land plans and new register of heritors to be published. The promoters were sympathetic to those suggestions. Should the bill proceed to the next stage, we will consider those issues further with the promoters and objectors and bring forward amendments if necessary.

In addition, more may need to be done outwith the bill to help prospective purchasers. The promoters told the committee that companies that provide property inquiry certificates are prepared to make specific reference to the pow in them. In our report we ask the promoters to provide the committee with written confirmation of that. We recommend that the promoters liaise with Perth and Kinross Council to ensure that any certificates that it issues make reference to the pow. We also recommend that the promoters engage with Registers of Scotland to explore how and when relevant information can be included in ScotLIS.

The promoters told us that they intend to launch a website, which could include an easy online mechanism for owners to notify the commission of land and property sales. Such a website would not just help with that issue but improve communication all round.

As the convener has said, the committee supports the general principles of the bill and, after thorough scrutiny at the preliminary stage, we have a clear picture of the issues that need to be examined further with the objectors and the promoters at consideration stage, should the Parliament agree today that the bill should proceed.

Veterans and Armed Forces Community

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-08855, in the name of Keith Brown, on the Scottish Government's support for veterans and the armed forces community in Scotland.

14:50

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Jobs and Fair Work (Keith Brown): As a nation, we are very proud of our military history. It is particularly timely to reflect on that history now, as the period of remembrance has just drawn to a close. Many members and Scottish ministers have been proud to play our part in the commemorations, honouring the memory of those who have fallen. However, it is equally important to recognise the contribution of those who are still serving, and those who have left or are leaving the armed forces and settling in Scotland.

The Scottish Government remains fully committed to supporting all members of our armed forces community, whether serving or retired. We do so in the context of a changing military landscape in Scotland. Just over a year ago, the Ministry of Defence announced a series of devastating closures to military bases across Scotland, cutting the defence estate by almost 20 per cent. The MoD has still not confirmed the full detail of those changes, or what the impact will be on local communities. That is wholly unacceptable, particularly in light of continued speculation about the latest UK Government capability review, which is due to report later this year.

I will continue to press the UK Government to reverse the ill-thought-through basing changes. I have one example of why those changes are ill thought through—one will suffice. Glencorse barracks in Penicuik had £60 million spent on it as recently as a few years ago, and it is now scheduled for closure. We will also ask the UK Government to reveal the full impact of its plans.

Where it falls to our devolved responsibilities, the Scottish Government continues to work to ensure that no disadvantage is experienced as a result of military service. In 2016, we published "Renewing Our Commitments", which set out how we were supporting veterans in Scotland. Since then, we have continued to work collaboratively with our partners in the public, private and third sectors to deliver support where it is needed the most, and I have committed to update the Parliament annually on progress.

The Scottish Government has therefore today published "Scottish Government Support for

Veterans and the Armed Forces Community in Scotland”, which outlines the work in train across the Scottish Government, focusing on our priorities and our response to the work of the Scottish veterans commissioner, Eric Fraser.

I take this opportunity to commend Eric Fraser for his reports. Scotland continues to lead the way with the only veterans commissioner in the UK and, over the past three years, the commissioner’s work has continued to help drive our policy development. Where they are for us to take forward, the Scottish Government has responded positively to all recommendations across the commissioner’s reports on transition, housing, and employability, skills and learning.

On housing and transition, the commissioner highlighted the issues that are experienced by some veterans in accessing information. In response, the Scottish Government has launched a veterans portal to bring together information on housing, health, jobs, education and veterans support services as well as links to other key websites. The dedicated housing section clearly sets out options and advice. We have also written to ask all social landlords to share their practice on supporting service leavers and veterans with us. We will use that information to help promote good practice across the social housing sector, and that will help to inform our revision of the guidance on social housing allocations.

I have said in previous debates that too many of our armed forces personnel are unaware that, during their service, they can accumulate points towards council housing, for example.

The revised guidance for landlords and our housing guide for people leaving the armed forces and ex-services personnel will be re-launched in 2018. We continue to provide housing support through funding to organisations such as the Scottish Veterans Garden City Association, and by supporting priority access to schemes that encourage home ownership in members of the armed forces and veterans.

Employability and skills remain a key focus for us; we continue to work with our partners to support veterans into employment. Skills Development Scotland, Jobcentre Plus and the career transition partnership work hard to ensure that those leaving the armed forces know about the training and work placement opportunities that can help them to start the next chapter of their career.

For example, Skills Development Scotland’s my world of work website continues to be an excellent resource for all veterans and their families seeking information about future opportunities. Programmes such as community job Scotland give veterans the chance to experience civilian jobs

and we have worked with employers and partners to publish a best practice toolkit, “Capitalising on military talent”, to help employers to understand more about the skills that veterans have to offer. We have also expanded the Scottish veterans fund, in partnership with Standard Life Aberdeen, to include a specific strand on employment. That fund has given more than £1m since 2008 to support projects and organisations in Scotland.

A core recommendation from the veterans commissioner was the need for increased strategic direction, and I am pleased that a strategic group on veterans’ employability has been established, chaired by Mark Bibbey of Poppyscotland. That group has influenced real change in how our public sector agencies work together to support veterans in Scotland. It is also taking opportunities to talk to employers about how they can provide and promote further job opportunities for veterans.

All of that is good and positive, but we know that more can be done. We will use apprenticeship week to promote opportunities to veterans and those considering leaving the armed forces, not least through graduate level apprenticeships, which are fully funded and open to people of all ages. In partnership with Skills Development Scotland we will develop a welcome page for veterans on the previously mentioned my world of work website. That will link into other key web resources such as the veterans’ gateway and will simplify how people can access careers and employability information and advice.

I believe that, in addition to those measures, we should explore what other opportunities there are to support veterans and their families to access quality jobs; talking about families as well is extremely important. To that end, I have asked the strategic group on veterans’ employability to work with the Ministry of Defence, the career transition partnership, Skills Development Scotland and other delivery bodies in Scotland to make recommendations on what further support is needed to help veterans move into good quality sustainable jobs. That is very important to veterans and I look forward to engaging with the group over the next few months.

Alongside that focused support, since April this year we have committed £5 million to ensure that veterans in receipt of social care in Scotland receive the full value of their war pensions. That is a substantial investment in the welfare of veterans and provides them with equity. Going back to the point that I made previously, which we had agreed with veterans organisations, our aim should be to make sure that there is no disadvantage to people from having served in the military. The idea that their war pensions should be subsumed into

payments for social care is wrong, which is why we have introduced that measure.

Healthcare has remained a continuing priority through the work of the armed forces and veterans health joint group, and we continue to work with the MOD and other stakeholders on specific issues such as streamlining the transfer of military health records. That has become quite frustrating; I had hoped to have made more progress with the MOD by now. On mental health, we have highlighted Scottish Government support for veterans within our mental health strategy and have partnered with local national health service boards and integration joint boards to offer funding totalling £825,000 in 2017-18 to continue to support the veterans first point network.

Recognising the importance of supporting the whole family, we continue to work through the Scottish service children strategy group to guide and engage work to support the educational needs of children from armed forces families in Scotland. Members, especially those with military experience, will know of the particular stresses and strains that can be caused to military families and children by being moved on a regular basis.

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): With reference to the veterans first point centres, does the minister have any comment to make on the closure of the first point centre in Grampian because of a lack of available funding?

Keith Brown: I am not sure from the nature of the question whether Mike Rumbles is aware of how veterans first point was established. The Westminster Government provided money from the London interbank offered rate fines and it was assumed that the provision would become part of mainstream health services. That is happening in many areas; even if the original concept with the money provided by LIBOR has now been exhausted, the lessons from it have been learned.

We recognise the importance of supporting the whole family and we continue to work in that regard through the Scottish service children strategic working group, which I mentioned. We also seek to work in the justice system to support veterans who are in contact with the prison system or the police.

Across all of our responsibilities, we will continue to seek to improve our service provision for the armed forces community, especially the small but significant number who struggle to access those services. However, as I do whenever I talk about veterans, it is worth mentioning that, in the vast majority of cases, our veterans are a valuable asset to the civilian workplace and our communities. They have transferable skills and attributes that they have gained throughout their military careers, although they sometimes are not

particularly conscious of those or willing to promote them, which they should do. My ambition remains to make Scotland the destination of choice for service leavers through offering high living standards, access to housing, good-quality sustainable jobs and opportunities for skills development.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises and values the contribution of the armed forces and veterans community to Scotland; notes the work of the Scottish Veterans Commissioner as described in his reports on transition, housing and employability, skills and learning, and agrees that the Scottish Government should continue to work in partnership to ensure that the armed forces, veterans and their families receive the best possible support and access to opportunities across Scotland.

15:00

Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for introducing the debate. Particularly at this time of year, it is right that we pay tribute to the important part that the armed forces and veterans community plays in Scottish life. We in the Scottish Conservatives look forward to supporting the cabinet secretary's motion.

I am glad that the Government has rightly taken the chance to pay tribute to the sterling work of the Scottish veterans commissioner, Eric Fraser, and his team. On a personal note, as convener of the cross-party group on armed forces and veterans community, I thank Eric Fraser for his engagement with the group. His contribution to its work and the debate in it has been most welcome, and I hope that he, too, has gained something from those gatherings. The veterans commissioner's reports, which have been on transition, housing, and employability, skills and learning, have set many ambitious recommendations, produced useful information and given all those in the wider armed forces and veterans community plenty of food for thought, which has sparked productive and insightful debate.

In the commissioner's report on transition, he correctly identifies transition as a critical stage for those leaving the armed forces, and the chance to have a detailed look at the Scottish perspective on that is welcome. His recommendations on the need for more joined-up working between the UK Government, the Scottish Government and local authorities in supporting those leaving the armed forces hit the nail bang on the head. I think that all of us in the Parliament would agree that helping veterans is not a party-political issue or an issue on which conflict should arise between different levels of government. We need to come together on the issue and get it right for every veteran in Scotland.

In his report on housing, Eric Fraser correctly identified the need for better information for veterans and again highlighted the need for work between the Scottish Government and the UK Government

“to ensure that advice and MoD briefings reflect housing policy and provision in Scotland, so Service Leavers choosing to settle in Scotland are not disadvantaged”.

It is encouraging that Eric Fraser highlighted the importance of the armed forces covenant by advocating the need for local authorities to provide more guidance and information to their front-line staff on the principles of the covenant and on the council’s policy on housing support for veterans.

Eric Fraser’s third report covered the massively important area of employability, skills and learning, to which the cabinet secretary referred. Getting a veteran into a job or training can often be the best thing for helping to turn around their whole life. Thanks to Eric Fraser’s recommendation, we now have a veterans employability strategic working group under the leadership of Mark Bibbey. I would be interested to hear an update from the cabinet secretary on how that group’s work is progressing.

Eric Fraser’s recommendation on the need for better recognition of the qualifications and skills that veterans possess is very important. The work of Business in the Community in that area is a welcome step and, last year, I was glad to have the opportunity to host that charity in the Parliament as it launched its toolkit to support business.

That was not the only important veterans event that we have had in Parliament in the past year. Another one was my colleague Liam Kerr’s members’ business debate in February, on stolen valour. Sadly, a bill that was going through Westminster on that subject fell because of June’s general election and no replacement has come forward so far. The example of James Reilly of Fife, who lied and posed as an ex-Royal Marine and then stole £60,000 that was meant to support veterans, highlights the need for action in this area. I would be interested to hear from the Government whether any consideration has been given to introducing legislation on that.

I hope that my amendment will receive support from all sides of the chamber. It is vital that we recognise the importance of the many veterans charities that support our veterans in many ways, some in difficult circumstances. I am pleased that the cabinet secretary said that that would be looked at, which I welcome.

At least 320 armed forces charities operate in Scotland, providing a wide variety of services to the veterans community, such as health and wellbeing services and activities, education,

employment and careers services, and housing. The scale and nature of those charities differ massively. There are large nationally recognised organisations, such as Poppyscotland and Royal British Legion Scotland, and smaller organisations that do work that is just as valuable through the numerous veterans breakfast clubs, drop-in centres and community cafes that are run across the nation.

One example of the massive amount that such charities do is the Lothian Veterans Centre in Dalkeith. It delivers more than 200 hours of support sessions or activities a month to support veterans. It has welcomed more than 160 new clients in total so far this year, in addition to the many regulars and returnees, including a small but increasing number of partners and family members—the numbers are three to four times up on last year’s. The centre covers a wide range of the veterans community, from early service leavers to those who are retired. It supports veterans from all three services and from throughout the Lothian region. The type of work that the centre does is spread across just as large an area. It supports veterans with health and wellbeing advice, housing and benefit advice and help with employment and training, and it runs a drop-in centre.

The work of the drop-in centre, in particular, is valuable. I had the pleasure of attending one of the Friday bacon roll mornings at the centre. It was just as enjoyable as it sounds, but it had a serious side as well, providing a safe space for veterans to talk about their issues and concerns, and access to the support that they need.

Lothian Veterans Centre is just one example of a great locally run veterans charity. There are numerous other examples across Scotland that I could highlight. However, groups such as Lothian Veterans Centre struggle. The cost of their services is high, and accessing funds can be a struggle, due to the high barriers to entry for funding that are placed in front of them. We need to do more to support such groups. Without them, the cost to and impact on our local authorities would be great and the negative impact on veterans even greater.

I urge the cabinet secretary and ministers to look at how we can support smaller veterans charities and groups that are doing great work and want to do even more, but need a bit of support. I am sure that members from all parties are willing to support them in that great work.

When the minister sums up, I would be pleased to hear whether the Scottish Government will support my call for Scotland to host the Invictus games. I have made that call previously in this chamber, as I believe that the games would be a great success and would help to raise the profile

of the issues that face our disabled servicemen and women and veterans.

I move amendment S5M-08855.1, to insert, after “skills and learning”:

“; further notes the importance of third sector veterans’ charities in caring for the welfare of the armed forces and veterans community and of ensuring that such charities are able to survive and thrive into the future.”

15:08

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I very much welcome the opportunity to speak in a debate about armed forces veterans and the work of the Scottish veterans commissioner, and to talk about some of the vital support services and charities that operate in Scotland and throughout the United Kingdom.

I acknowledge, from the outset, the debt of gratitude that Scotland owes to those who have served in the defence of the freedoms that we enjoy, and I record the continued support of Labour members for our armed forces personnel and veterans. We are committed to continuing to work on a cross-party basis to ensure that our veterans and their families receive the support that they need and deserve. In particular, we recognise that our service personnel often need help with the transition to civilian life, and especially with finding housing and employment. We recognise that those who leave the services can bear physical and psychological scars for many years after their active service ends.

Being a member of the armed forces, particularly during times of conflict is immensely stressful—it is stressful beyond anything that we can imagine. However, that stressful situation creates among service personnel a level of commitment and an intense bond that are unique to our armed forces.

I could only listen and try to take it on board when I heard from a soldier who had served in Afghanistan what it was like to come under fire, and what the impact was on him and his battalion when they lost a member who was as close to them as any member of their own family.

Given the close bond with the comrades whom they fought with, and possibly lost, in combat, I can only imagine how isolated a person must feel when they are discharged into society from the armed forces alone, with no family support. They go from living in close quarters with people whom they have considered to be family—they eat, sleep, work and socialise with the same close group—to being discharged into a community of strangers who tend not to understand military life and the bond that it creates between people.

The majority of servicemen and servicewomen make a successful transition to civilian life. The veterans whom we have in Scotland are not a problem, but an asset to communities. As the cabinet secretary said, veterans have transferable skills that they may not realise they have, and those skills become assets to companies and communities.

It really is not hard to see why some veterans struggle to adapt and to reintegrate, which can put a massive strain on family life. It can also put a strain on those without family. Therefore, it is vital that advice and support services be in place to help former services personnel to adjust to living in mainstream society. We must support plans to co-ordinate and to deliver support and advice services from the public, private and voluntary sectors for former services personnel, their partners and their children.

There are too many fantastic organisations providing support and advice to former services personnel and their families for me to mention and do justice to them all, but I will mention some. We must continue to support the organisations that do that tremendous work in the community for former services personnel across Scotland, including Legion Scotland. The Legion provides practical care, advice and support to armed forces personnel, former servicemen and servicewomen of all ages and their families. It also runs the annual poppy appeal. Recent appeals have emphasised the increasing need to help the men and women who are serving today, as well as former servicepeople and their dependents. The Legion also assists any former serviceman or servicewoman in pursuing their entitlement to a war disablement pension. Every year, up to 200 former servicepeople in Scotland are represented at war pensions tribunals.

Just across the road from Parliament, we have Scottish Veterans Residences premises, which provide residential accommodation for more than 300 former servicepeople and their partners. It has helped thousands of veterans throughout Scotland since it was established.

The Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association Forces Help—SSAFA Forces Help—whose Lanarkshire branch covers my region, offers financial, practical and much-needed emotional support to current and previous members of the armed forces and their families through services such as forcesline. Forcesline is a key support service that is independent from the chain of command and to which serving members of the armed forces can go, confident that they will receive the support and advice that they need. SSAFA Forces Help also runs a forces additional needs disability support group and organises children’s holidays that are run by volunteers who

offer experiences and activities to which some of the children would not normally have access. Erskine Hospital, which I will mention when I close this debate on behalf of Labour, is the leading provider of care for veterans in the country and provides fantastic services in our communities.

There are things that individual members of the Scottish Parliament can do to assist armed forces veterans and their families: supporting those charities and the work of the Scottish veterans commissioner is just the start.

I close as I opened, by acknowledging the debt of gratitude that we owe to those who have served in our armed forces in defence of the freedoms that we take for granted.

We will support the Government's motion at decision time. As always, we are more than happy to work across parties to support veterans and armed forces personnel in Scotland.

15:15

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP): We are now in the 100th year since the first world war drew to its conclusion. Therefore, it is appropriate to take just a little time in this important debate on veterans to reflect on the contribution that Stirling made during that most hellish of wars.

Many members know that Stirling castle was a hub for recruitment during world war one. Stirling's central location and railway access made it the perfect spot for recruitment and transit of troops and other personnel. The young men who trained and gathered at Stirling castle would march down to the railway station at the beginning of a journey that would see many of them complete their life journeys in places of horror such as the killing fields and muddy hell that was Flanders.

When I attend the remembrance service at the Church of the Holy Rude, which is at the top of the city in Stirling, as I did on Sunday past, I cannot help but think that those men walked down past the church on their way to the railway station. In numbers too great to imagine, they made the ultimate sacrifice and, in the century that followed, others did the same. Countless numbers returned from the battlefields of the past and present with broken bodies and broken minds. For that reason, among others, the debate is important.

My family has its own proud connections with the military. One of my sons served in the Royal Air Force, my father was in the Royal Household Cavalry and my grandfather fought in the Scottish Horse during the first world war. My grandfather fought at Gallipoli and, like many men of his generation, would discuss some of the horrors that he had witnessed only very quietly after a few

drams at family gatherings. Those stories had a real impact on me as a young man.

I have no doubt that my grandfather was left damaged by what he had witnessed—especially in the battles with the armies of Turkey that he told us about. In all likelihood, he would today be recognised as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and would be able to access services and help from organisations such as PTSD Resolution or Combat Stress, which are charities that help veterans to re-engage with mainstream life. PTSD Resolution once said of veterans who are seeking help that

“They quite often find us because their partner has told them: ‘You have to get help because I can’t do anything more’.”

We can just see the utter desperation of families who have to deal with damaged men and women who have come back from areas of conflict. Such organisations do an amazing job trying to help them. The more support that we can give them, the better.

Although much of our discussion today will undoubtedly be about the importance of making support services accessible, the quotation that I used tells us that there is also an important role for families and loved ones to play in the recovery of some veterans. We do that a lot better today than we did for people like my grandfather in the past.

In the early days of the first Scottish National Party minority Government, not long after I was appointed as a minister the then First Minister asked me to take on the role of liaison between the Ministry of Defence and the Scottish Government. At a meeting with the tri-service heads soon after we came into government, Alex Salmond said powerfully that the armed forces, particularly our veterans, are among the vital threads that make up the tartan of Scotland. The then First Minister was pledging that we would strive to make veterans' services in Scotland the best that are available anywhere on these islands.

At First Minister's question time last week, the current First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, in response to my question, laid out how some of that pledge has been put into effect. The cabinet secretary referred to those matters today, as did Maurice Corry.

Since 2008, more than £1 million has been invested, through the Scottish veterans fund, to support more than 140 projects across Scotland. That funding has provided invaluable support in important devolved areas such as housing, health and employment support for veterans. An employability group has been established to lead work in that area, and £5 million has rightly been committed to ensuring that veterans who are in receipt of social care receive the full value of their

war pensions. The rationale for that was laid out well by the cabinet secretary.

That work is vital because it is a widely known fact that, for people who leave the armed forces, settling into mainstream life anywhere in the United Kingdom can be a real challenge. That is reflected in a report from the UK Ministry of Justice, earlier this year that showed that 2,500 former armed services personnel began serving prison sentences last year. That indicates that there is a real need to address how we can improve mental health and wellbeing in the veterans community. It is true that because of the skills that they have gained in the armed services and the values with which they come out of the services, the vast majority of veterans make remarkable contributions to our society and life in Scotland. However, there are still real challenges that we must continue to tackle and face head on, in order to ensure that we, as a society, offer our veterans the best possible support.

With that in mind, I pay tribute to the work that is being done by Stirling District Citizens Advice Bureau Ltd to provide advice and support to the armed services community and their families. Citizens Advice Scotland's armed services advice project works with a funding group that is fronted by Poppyscotland, which does an amazing job. The project offers support where it can to serving or former armed forces personnel—regular or reserve—and their dependants. The service is a lifeline for those who use it. It offers valuable advice and specialist help in a range of areas, including welfare entitlement, debt management, seeking employment, as well as relationships and housing. The support is free, confidential and impartial—which is exactly what many men and women who have close connections with the armed forces need to help them to deal with the stresses of everyday life.

I commend the Government for bringing this hugely important matter forward for debate, especially given that, as Maurice Corry said, we have just had the remembrance day services. I look forward to hearing other members' contributions.

15:23

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I, too, thank the Government for bringing forward this motion for debate. Like Keith Brown and Maurice Corry, I am a veteran, and my son is a serving soldier.

This important debate comes at the time of the year when the country comes together to remember the sacrifices that have been made in the defence of others not only by soldiers, sailors and airmen, but by civilians. All veterans regularly

remember the actions of friends and colleagues—not just on remembrance day but every day of the year.

On the recent remembrance Sunday, I remembered, as I always do, the tragic events of July 1982 in London, when my regiment and friends were targeted by the Irish Republican Army. I have mentioned that event before in the chamber, so I will not dwell on it. I also thought of those veterans who have put their lives on the line to defend the country and who are being hounded in their retirement and dragged through the courts to answer accusations that have already been investigated and the cases closed.

Dennis Hutchings is a former Life Guard, and one of many veterans who served in Northern Ireland during the troubles, who is facing legal action. I am mindful of what I say about this, but in June 1974, while on patrol in County Tyrone, Dennis came across an IRA unit of 10 men moving arms and ammunition. A firefight broke out, which resulted in four people being arrested and the remainder escaping. Just two days later, in the same area, his patrol encountered two men who ran off when they were challenged. One of the men who ran off was subsequently shot—it is with regard to that incident that Dennis has been charged, despite two investigations in which he was told that the matter was closed.

He tried to live a normal life in the same way that John Downey did post the bombing in Hyde Park of which he was accused. The difference is that Downey received a letter, which, admittedly, was sent in error, which said that he would not be charged with the bombing and that he is now free from prosecution.

I do not believe that it is right to judge the actions of armed forces in combat in the same way that we assess what is acceptable behaviour for people in normal society. As parliamentarians, we must fulfil our basic duty to our veterans by protecting them from such prosecutions.

A report by the UK Defence Committee stated:

“to subject former Service personnel to legal pursuit under the current arrangements is wholly oppressive and a denial of natural justice.”

I therefore welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to make the new legacy bodies “fair, balanced and proportionate” and I welcome the UK Government's announcement that the consultation document on the forthcoming draft Northern Ireland bill will include alternative ways forward, including a statute of limitations. Although I accept that it is a reserved matter, I hope that Scottish MPs of all parties will support that.

Although the issue of legacy investigations did not form part of Eric Fraser's report, it is an important issue that veterans who have served on

active duty have to face, which is why I mentioned it.

I commend the Scottish Government for all the action that it is taking to help veterans and I thank Eric Fraser for his report. It is difficult for anyone to dispute that we owe so much to those in uniform who, at our behest, have been prepared to put everything on the line. We need to stand beside them and with them and we need to have their back when the going gets tough, because we have no idea what they have faced or the stresses that they have to deal with.

I want to mention briefly the importance of regimental or unit charities that fundraise directly from the public. Those charities are so important not only for veterans, but for their families. The latter, who are often excluded from direct governmental support, benefit from the flexibility of charities. The Household Cavalry Foundation has already helped families and children of soldiers who have served in the Life Guards and the Blues and Royals, giving them help that they sadly cannot get from other sources. On average, the charity allocates £100,000 per year to helping soldiers and their families, which includes £30,000 to £40,000 paid directly to families and their children. That is but one charity, but the work that it undertakes for the Household Cavalry is replicated in nearly all units and regiments across the British Isles, as well as in the air force and the navy.

I urge the Scottish Government to help protect members of our armed services who have been cleared by military investigations from being prosecuted many years later for no apparent gain.

I commend the actions taken by the Scottish Government in its work with veterans and I urge the Government to continue to ensure that we repay our debt to our armed services without questioning the need to do so.

15:28

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): In contributing to previous debates on this subject I talked about my late grandfather, who stimulated my interest in the military and veterans from a young age. He served in the Gordon Highlanders. He lied about his age to join in 1921 and worked his way up through the ranks, returning to civilian life in 1945 with the rank of major. Along the way, Major James McIntosh was awarded the military cross for heroism in north Africa. Sadly, he died 45 years ago, as a result of which I was denied the opportunity to engage with him meaningfully about just what he and his comrades had experienced during world war two and how that impacted on him—a subject in which I have formed an interest in adult life.

Mind you, I am not sure about the extent to which he would have been willing to open up. Unlike Bruce Crawford's granddad, not even the taking of a dram or two would loosen his tongue. My grandfather founded the 5th and 7th old comrades association—a clear indication of the value that he and his old pals placed on the common bond that they had—but he rarely spoke in detail of what they had encountered during the battle of El Alamein or indeed in Italy.

He dismissed the action that won him the military cross as having emanated from him finding himself and his men halfway into a minefield before realising where they were and having the choice of either going forward or backwards. He said that they gave him a medal for making the decision that he made. I learned later that he was recognised in the way that he was for dealing with a machine gun nest or two in order to lead his men to safety.

In an all-too-rare moment of opening up, though, he did once explain that the 5th and 7th amalgamation had come about as a result of the losses that the individual battalions had suffered in conflict—a rather sobering scenario, especially for those who had witnessed the deaths of so many close friends.

I am now considerably older than I was when that conversation took place and, mindful of how our understanding of the mental scars left on our service personnel has developed, I wonder just how badly that generation was let down. That is not a criticism as such. It was a different time and PTSD had not been fully recognised then, but, oh, how we must have failed so many of our soldiers, sailors and airmen in returning them to civvy life and leaving them to cope however they could with the horrors that they had witnessed. We can multiply that tenfold when we consider our treatment of servicemen from the first world war.

We cannot change that, of course, but we can and we must ensure that all possible support is provided for personnel nowadays—not only for those who leave the services with mental or physical issues, but for all personnel.

On the redressing of past wrongs, in so far as we can do that, the decision in 2006 of Des Browne, the then Secretary of State for Defence, to pardon the 306 British soldiers who were executed for desertion or cowardice during world war one was a commendable step. We now know that it is likely that those men were suffering from PTSD. The family of Private Harry Farr had sought a judicial review following a previous decision not to grant a pardon. Harry Farr fought for two years without respite and was suffering from PTSD when he was shot for cowardice. After he was executed, his family received no military pension and his widow and his daughter were forced out of their

house and suffered financial hardship, stigma and shame.

Incidentally, the National Theatre of Scotland has begun to chart the story of those 306 soldiers and the effects on those who were left behind. I understand that the first two parts of its trilogy have been extremely powerful, and the third part is still to come.

In that context, and in relation to those who may be carrying with them a mental legacy from service, I pay tribute to the work that is done by Combat Stress. I had not realised until the weekend, when I took part in the remembrance service in Monifieth, that Combat Stress will celebrate its centenary in 2019, having been set up a year after the first world war ended. While the state may have been providing little in the way of meaningful care, the founders of Combat Stress recognised that thousands of servicemen were returning from the front line with severe mental health problems and were receiving little or no sympathy, let alone support.

The charity's founders believed that veterans could be helped to cope with their mental health problems through a rehabilitation programme. In 1919, Combat Stress started providing occupational therapy, which is still offered today at its treatment centres and via its community teams. In 2016-17, 10,000 calls were handled by Combat Stress's helpline; more than 2,000 referrals were received by Combat Stress from former servicemen and women who were struggling with their mental health; about 1,200 veterans completed their treatment programmes; and, positively, 93 per cent of those who undertook the PTSD intensive treatment programme completed it.

Over the past 12 months, 269 Scottish veterans have been referred to the charity for the first time, and it currently has 375 veterans in Scotland registered with it. Encouragingly, it seems that veterans are now coming forward for help much earlier. On average, veterans used to wait for 12 years after leaving the forces before seeking help. Combat Stress has seen Afghanistan veterans, on average, seeking help three years after leaving the service and Iraq war veterans seeking help after four years.

Combat Stress has a network of community teams across the country that provide clinical assessment and support to veterans in their communities. Each team is made up of a community psychiatric nurse and an occupational therapist. Poppyscotland pop-in centres are used for its community clinics. Combat Stress has three treatment centres, one of which is in Ayrshire, and it has taken steps to increase its capacity to support people across the UK since 2012. In 2013,

the charity was commissioned as the PTSD specialist provider for veterans in Scotland.

The Scottish Government continues to provide funding of £3.6 million over the three years to 2018 for the provision of specialist services in partnership with NHS Scotland for veterans who are resident at Hollybush house in Scotland. A full range of specialist mental health assessment, treatment, education, advice and support is offered to help recovery and to improve the quality of life for those veterans around Scotland who need assistance. It takes an important step by utilising peer support—who better to support veterans than others who have served in our forces and had similar experiences?

I am pleased to note that the Scottish Government is investing in mental health services for veterans, with £825,000 being provided this year to support the veterans first point services network, in which there are various centres across Scotland, including one that serves Tayside in Kings Cross hospital in Dundee. I understand that Combat Stress is building positive relationships with that network.

At the beginning of the year, I led a members' business debate on the Scottish veterans commissioner's report on employability and skills. In Eric Fraser's latest paper, on health and wellbeing, he seeks to correct the misconception that veterans' health is worse than that of the general population, although he notes that their needs can differ. The paper has been welcomed by Combat Stress. I look forward to reading the reports that will follow on from the commissioner's paper, and I look forward to the Scottish Government building on the targeted and significant support that it currently provides for our veterans.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani): I have a bit of time in hand, so I am happy to be generous with speeches and interventions.

15:36

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I echo the welcome for the debate from members around the chamber.

As I prepared for the debate, my thoughts turned to my grandfather, who died just over a year and a half ago. He served in the RAF and spent the majority of his service in Fort William working with mountain rescue. That was at a critical time when the mountain rescue service was at a point of transition from being an exclusively military function, which was founded in order to rescue downed airmen during the second world war, to becoming the civilian service that we recognise today.

It made me think that direct experience of conflict or of service in the military is becoming less common. Twenty, 30 or 40 years ago, most of us would have had a family member who had either seen action in the second world war or, at the very least, had gone through national service in one of our armed services. As the number of people with direct experience of service diminishes, we need to take greater care to change our thoughts and views about what remembrance means. Remembrance must always be first and foremost about remembering those who served, fought to secure our freedoms and liberty, and paid the ultimate price, but it is incumbent on us also to ensure that remembrance is about a wider understanding of what service and the armed services mean. Serving in the armed services is sometimes about paying the ultimate sacrifice, but it is also about the wider, richer experience that is gained from the broad range of functions, such as mountain rescue, that the armed forces carry out.

I will address that in my speech, as well as some of the points that other members have made about transition. I am mindful that we are very lucky that the debate is being led by people such as Keith Brown, Maurice Corry and Edward Mountain who have seen that transition in action. I can only imagine what it must be like, but they can speak about it from direct experience.

Coming out of the armed forces is a significant issue for those who do so. For anyone changing jobs, there are a huge number of considerations such as what skills will be needed and what the differences are between the old and new jobs. However, when someone comes out of the armed forces, it is not just their tasks or responsibilities that change, but their whole way of life. Mark Griffin put it very well when he described transition as coming out of a family and into, potentially, a community of strangers.

We are right to praise the work of the veterans commissioner, Eric Fraser, who has done excellent work in highlighting the many transition issues that our veterans face, particularly with regard to skills. Many of our servicemen and women have highly relevant skills in a broad range of areas. We often hear that there are skills gaps in areas of our economy, so I urge the Government to ensure that we maximise the use of the skills of those who leave the armed forces. In my previous career, I worked alongside a number of people who had come from the RAF with extremely good and highly useful digital and IT skills and who were using them successfully. We often think of people in the armed forces as primarily combatants, but they are also highly skilled technicians and engineers. We must ensure that we use their skills when they return to civilian life.

Recommendation 11 in the commissioner's report refers to a plan for early service leavers in particular. It is vital that we upskill those people and provide retraining possibilities for them. I very much welcome what Keith Brown said about apprenticeship week and the world of work website. However, the Scottish Government agreed to have a plan for early service leavers by May 2017, and I am not aware that such a plan has yet been produced. Can the minister clarify the status of that plan?

On a broader point, we need to ensure not only that people leaving the armed forces have information available to them but that, as far as possible, their transition is integrated and seamless. We must ensure that they start their skills journey before they leave the armed forces and that their learning experiences in the armed forces link directly to their opportunities afterwards. The issue is not necessarily just modern apprenticeships or the skills regime; we must also look at articulation and other education issues. The commissioner made that point. How people who are leaving the armed forces access different points in the education system and move between them is important. We need to ask how such educational matters are made relevant to people in the armed forces. Articulation and ensuring that people get credit for the skills and experience that they have from being in the armed forces is particularly important.

The provision of better information on housing to veterans and those who are about to leave the armed forces is welcome, but there are still issues. Certainly, I have dealt with casework involving people who are about to leave the armed forces and are looking for council housing. Often, the reality is that they have to move across the city where they live, which can rip up their family roots and present issues around schools and their families' ability generally to get on with their lives. That is an issue for people who are in MOD housing that is just beyond my consistency boundary, but it is also an issue generally.

The issues around transition do not always happen at the point when someone leaves the armed forces. Bruce Crawford made a very good point about the shocking statistics, which we often hear about, regarding the proportion of armed forces leavers who end up in prison. Issues that arise from transition from the armed forces do not always happen immediately; often they happen further down the line. It is important that we ensure that we maintain on-going relationships and communication with armed services leavers so that we can catch those problems. However, I am not sure that we are doing that at the moment.

On my recent visits through the armed forces parliamentary visit programme, I was very taken

by the rich variety of things that the armed forces do around health, emotional wellbeing and skills. This debate is about ensuring that we help people when they come out of the armed forces. However, with regard to co-operation and partnership, we can learn many things about our public policy from the armed forces because they do a great deal of work around such areas as health, emotional wellbeing and skills, and there are lessons for us to learn from that.

15:44

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): First, I associate myself with the cabinet secretary's remarks about the disgraceful proposal to close Glencorse barracks in my constituency. We have debated that issue in the chamber previously.

The Government's motion states that

"the Scottish Government should continue to work in partnership to ensure that the armed forces, veterans and their families receive the best possible support and access to opportunities across Scotland."

I want to focus my contribution in a completely different direction from that which other contributions have taken: on the opportunities that are or ought to be available to the spouses, partners and, indeed, children of serving personnel. I want to do that with particular reference to a programme that is run by Women's Enterprise Scotland, or WES. That is a business-creation project that is supported by the Scottish Government through its general funding to Women's Enterprise Scotland and the armed forces covenant to the tune of £20,000, which is not a lot of money. Its purpose is to unlock the business potential of military spouses and partners. There is a 10-week training course. A report on the project that was published in February this year said that 76 per cent of participants took steps to create a business during the course and that, by the end of the course, 100 per cent of participants reported that they had the confidence to set up a business.

The project, which both the cabinet secretary and I have visited, is based at Glencorse in my constituency. A 1.5 hour face-to-face workshop is held each week with online support, and a much-needed crèche is provided, although toddlers tend to invade the meetings. A group of wives came to the Parliament to explain their projects, which varied from massage to mask making—I have a picture to prove the latter. I thank colleagues who attended. I know that the wives and partners were very pleased to see colleagues there.

WES has successfully secured from the MOD covenant fund a further £20,000 and another 10-week course. I have been on a visit to see that.

There is a monster maker and special effects artist; a human resources consultancy; a virtual assistant; a retailer of slogan and personalised T-shirts—I have one of those on order, but it is not for me; it is my brother's Christmas present—and gifts; a bath bomb maker; a massage therapist; and a soft furnishings supplier. All those businesses have market opportunities, but they need support and business insights to enable them to transition from a possibility to a business reality and a career prospect.

However, there is more to the course than business, important though that is. We all know that military wives and partners find it nigh-on impossible to take on regular employment because of the peripatetic nature of military life. They are also often on their own with children for months on end and far removed from close family. Although they support one another, the project builds self-confidence, is very sociable and, in a way, gives them back a sense of independence. Given the nature of their partners' work in the armed forces, their ambitions often have to take second place, but the programme offers them something that they can achieve for themselves. I would even go so far as to say that it adds to the provision of a positive and stable home environment for their partners who are active in the armed forces on their return home, because it gives the wives and partners something that they achieve on their own terms for themselves. That is very important when a person gives up quite a bit of themselves to, quite rightly, support their husband or partner in the armed forces. Indeed, some business projects may very well grow into something more substantial. If the husband moves base or is posted abroad, the wife's work can travel with them, with internet sales and advertising through Facebook, for example. The business is not fixed; it is online.

The continuation of the project and, indeed, its extension elsewhere is, like most things in life, dependent on funding. I am therefore delighted that the funding has continued to give on-going support to women who start up in business, because there is more to it once they start up. They must be enabled to support the growing businesses, to integrate more with the local business community, and to grow the business links, contacts and networks that are critical for growth and sustainability. With more funding, another new group of women would be supported along the road—a 10-week course is running now—to start up a business. As they moved forward, there would be the ability to network with women in existing businesses who had preceded them. In that way, they would get peer support and access to mentoring. That would also help with sustainability.

I would be pleased to see the MOD backing more of those projects, because that project works so well. Members do not need to take my word for it; if they log on to startupwithwes.com, they can read for themselves the report from February and see how worth while the project is. I commend it to colleagues who have army barracks in their areas and have not had such a project set up.

As I said, I wanted to take a different tack, about supporting the wives and partners of active personnel, now and in the future, so that they can have an independent career and life for themselves. I thought that it was important to bring that issue to the chamber, among the other contributions.

15:50

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): I am pleased to speak in this debate on Scottish Government support for our veterans, and I am happy to follow Christine Grahame, who mentioned Glencorse barracks several times in her speech. I spent the first two of my 15 years in the Army at Glencorse barracks with the Scottish infantry, so I know it well.

I make it clear that the Liberal Democrats will fully support the Government's motion and the Conservatives' amendment. I hope that there is unanimous support for them—it is heartening to hear support for our veterans from right across the chamber.

However, I take this opportunity to raise a case where the Government's support has not been exactly fulsome. I refer, of course, to the network of veterans first point centres, which is a lifeline service that was first set up in Scotland with money gathered from UK banks in LIBOR fines. That funding has run out. The Scottish Government offered to continue funding the first point centres, but would guarantee only 50 per cent of the funding, with the other 50 per cent having to come out of health board budgets. The veterans first point service is a lifeline service, and six of the eight centres are still open because their health boards are stepping into the breach. Unfortunately, the Grampian and Highland centres are closed because, even with the 50 per cent funding from the Scottish Government, no health board funding could be found. That does not let the Scottish Government off the hook, because I lay the responsibility for those closures squarely at the feet of Scottish ministers collectively, but particularly health ministers. It is a pity that Maureen Watt, who has responsibility for the issue, is not here to hear that.

I do not doubt the sincerity of the minister who is on the front bench at the moment. Keith Brown has done a lot of work—

Bruce Crawford: I am glad that Mike Rumbles raised the issue of sincerity, because I understand why he has directed his attack at the Scottish Government. Surely there is also a role here for the UK Government. Why is he not addressing that as well, if this is a serious attempt to get real funding into that organisation? It is not just about the Scottish Government.

Mike Rumbles: I will pursue that issue, and I will show members why I blame the Scottish Government in a moment.

Let me focus on the service that was available in Grampian, because that is what I know best. Veterans first point Grampian completed its service to our veterans community on Friday 22 September. Its closure notice stated:

“Veterans in this area should contact their GP for health related issues and the Veterans First Point Scotland Team for their closest centre.”

The nearest centre available to veterans in Grampian is in the NHS Tayside area. That is what the Government and Grampian NHS board mean when they say that

“their needs will continue to be met through mainstream services.”

In other words, they are saying, “Go and visit your general practitioner.”

The reason why the Grampian service closed its doors on 22 September was simply that the cash-strapped health board could not afford to make a 50 per cent contribution. I can answer the question why NHS Grampian could not fund a service for its veterans when other boards could: it is all down to funding from the Scottish Government. Last week, the Parliament's independent information service informed us all that the Scottish Government has failed to meet its own funding target for NHS Grampian every year since 2009. It has short-changed NHS Grampian to the tune of £165.6 million over that period. So that no one misunderstands me, I reiterate that that is the Scottish Government's own target.

The Government already fails people in the Grampian area by giving it the lowest funding target of any health board anyway. Per head of population, NHS Grampian is targeted to receive only 90 per cent of the average funding per head of population. To take away another £165 million over that period has had a cumulative and devastating effect on patient care. No wonder there were 3,700 fewer planned operations last year. No wonder the waiting times are ever extending. No wonder that NHS Grampian does not have the funding to keep the first point service for veterans running. I hope that everyone in the chamber accepts that that is not an acceptable situation.

The Cabinet Secretary for the Economy, Jobs and Fair Work, Keith Brown, has come to the chamber to say how much the Scottish Government supports veterans. I believe that he is sincere. He has personally done a great deal of work, and so has the Scottish Government. However, it is not all good work. When health ministers preside over such a sorry state of affairs, it is not good enough.

Actions speak louder than words. We cannot sit in the chamber saying that life is rosy for our veterans when services are closing because they are underfunded. I would like the Government to take action—I hope that Keith Brown will take action, because I know that he is sincere about this—to restore that lifeline service to veterans who are resident in the north-east.

15:55

Tom Arthur (Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate and I thank Keith Brown and the Scottish Government for bringing the motion to Parliament. The debate gives each of us an opportunity to thank and show our support for our armed forces and veterans community for the valued contribution that they make to Scotland.

I welcome the tone and tenor of almost all the speeches. I was struck in particular by Daniel Johnson's speech, in which he referred to the situation 30 or 40 years ago, when perhaps every family across Scotland and the UK had a member who was serving, or had served, in the forces, and the power that that had to knit communities together. Bruce Crawford spoke of his grandfather who served, I think, in a mounted regiment in Gallipoli. My great-grandfather, Hugh McCabe, of the Ayrshire Yeomanry, also served at Gallipoli. Those century-old threads still bind us together.

On remembrance Sunday, I had the honour of laying wreaths in Kilbarchan, Lochwinnoch, Neilston and Barrhead in my constituency of Renfrewshire South. Laying a wreath is always a particularly poignant moment, but it was made more so when I met a constituent at the Barrhead service who had known my maternal grandfather, Arthur McGettigan. He died more than a decade before I was born, but I had heard many stories of him. I heard stories of his time as a student, when he was dux of St John's in Barrhead; of his employment, when he was the foreman of the pottery at the Shanks works; of his membership of the Knights of St Columba and his involvement in setting up the Columba club in Barrhead; and of his time as a former citizens advice volunteer who had even considered running for the local council.

In that chance meeting with my constituent last Sunday, I learned that my grandfather—or Big

Arthur, as he was known—was the person who people called on if they required help with just about anything. I also learned that he was, apparently, a fine dancer and great company. He was, in short, a pillar of the Barrhead community. Arthur McGettigan served not only his community but his country. As a sergeant in the Royal Artillery in the second world war, he saw action in Greece, north Africa and Italy. From that conflict, the lessons of which have perhaps never been more relevant, my grandfather carried not only the scars of shrapnel but a sense of leadership and duty that he took into his post-service life as a reservist and in the Barrhead community.

That my grandfather could be spoken of so fondly nearly 46 years after his death by the constituent whom I met on remembrance Sunday speaks to the profoundly positive impact that those who serve and have served in our armed forces are capable of having on our lives and our communities. It is important and proper that, in this Parliament and in the communities that we represent, we continue to recognise that contribution.

Such an opportunity was afforded to me earlier this year when I attended the Renfrewshire Provost's awards, at which 102 Field Squadron, 71 Engineer Regiment of the Army reserve, which is based in Paisley, was awarded the freedom of Renfrewshire. As well as serving recently in Iraq, Afghanistan and South Sudan, the squadron has helped with flooding in Renfrewshire and across the UK and has supported local charities and family days.

Renfrewshire's association with the armed forces and veterans community goes further. It is also home to Erskine, a name that has been associated with the care of veterans for more than a century. Also in Renfrewshire is Scottish War Blinded's newly opened Hawkhead centre, which is a state-of-the-art daytime activity centre for veterans with sight loss. I know that those services and the support that they offer are very much welcomed by our forces and veterans community right across the west of Scotland.

Next year will mark the centenary of the end of the first world war. The year will offer much opportunity for reflection on the contribution and sacrifices made by our armed forces and veterans. It will also afford us the opportunity to consider how we can strengthen our support for serving personnel, veterans and their families.

It is timely that next year will also mark 10 years since the creation of the Scottish veterans fund. Since then, over £1 million has been committed to more than 140 projects. I am pleased to see that the fund has been re-developed in partnership with Standard Life Aberdeen to provide dedicated additional funding that is focused on employability.

That will complement the Scottish Government's continuing work on employability, such as the veterans employability strategic group and the capitalising on military talent toolkit, which supports employers in understanding the skills that veterans have to offer. Along with developing support for early or young service leavers and exploring ways to highlight best practice in public service recruitment, it is clear that the Scottish Government is working hard to ensure that no veteran faces a disadvantage in securing employment as they transition to civilian life.

There are many other areas that I could cover, including housing, health and support for the children and families both of serving personnel and of veterans. However, in closing I would like to acknowledge the amendment in the name of Maurice Corry. It is true that our third sector makes an invaluable contribution to the care and welfare of our veterans and forces community. Equally, as I am sure that Maurice Corry and other members would agree, our veterans and forces community makes an important contribution to the running of veterans charities and the wider third sector.

It is an honour to represent the forces and veterans community of Renfrewshire South in our Scottish Parliament. It is the dedication, professionalism and courage of our armed forces that guarantees each of us, here and beyond, the privilege of living in a free and democratic society. I look forward to continuing to support our forces and veterans community and to supporting the Scottish Government's work to ensure that members of the armed forces, veterans and their families receive the best support and access to opportunities across Scotland.

16:02

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries)

(Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak on such an important issue and to commend our courageous veterans.

My family does not have a long history in the armed forces, although my great-uncle served at the Somme as a blacksmith looking after the now-famous war horses.

During the summer recess, colleagues across the chamber were fortunate to spend time with the armed forces at Lossiemouth and to hear first hand about some of the issues that members of the armed forces and their partners face in living and moving around the country, sometimes with very little notice. I think that I speak for everyone in Parliament today when I say that we are enormously grateful for their service to our country. At this time in particular, they are very much at the forefront of our thoughts.

That said, the service of those men and women to our country does not end when they finish their deployment, and neither should our support for them. After returning from combat, veterans are often left to face a harsh and unique transition back to ordinary life. It has been found that 33 per cent of former services personnel feel isolated or lonely due to mental or physical health issues. That is a deeply concerning statistic. Although it may not be representative of all veterans' experiences, it is imperative that we acknowledge and show our support for veterans as they readjust. I am pleased that both the Scottish and UK Governments are taking action to tackle the issue.

Third sector veterans charities play a vital role in helping with the complex transition. Last year, armed forces charities helped more than 22,000 individuals to find employment, and they helped more than 3,000 individuals to gain qualifications. Charities also helped veterans with other less-discussed hardships of readjustment, including by providing them with advice and housing services.

I will take this moment to highlight two charities in my Galloway and West Dumfries constituency. South West Scotland RNR provides activity holidays for injured servicemen who have returned from action, most recently from Afghanistan. Next January will mark the charity's ninth anniversary as a host for services personnel. Since it opened, it has hosted more than 400 returning servicemen in a house in the coastal village of Carsethorn on the Solway Firth, in what everyone in the chamber acknowledges is Scotland's most beautiful constituency, which will, I hope, be Scotland's third national park. Servicemen and bereaved families are provided with accommodation for a week-long holiday that is filled with outdoor activities and plenty of good local food. South West Scotland RNR allows ex-servicemen to take a real break in a friendly and comfortable location away from military rules. It provides a much-needed and deserved place of peace for our armed forces personnel, and I am incredibly grateful for the service that it provides right in the heart of my community.

Dumfries and Galloway is also home to a branch of SSAFA. The branch exists for veterans and veterans' families around Dumfries and Galloway and it helps them to find emotional, financial and practical support. As part of the national SSAFA charity, the branch is committed to serving our armed forces and their families in whatever way it can, with a network of trained volunteers in the community and on military bases.

It is important to acknowledge that the readjustment period is different for each veteran and their family. SSAFA's wide range of services, from housing support to mental-illness counselling,

allows it to help each serviceman however they need it most. The Dumfries and Galloway branch plays a vital role for veterans in their community, and its mission will work with continued support from me and other members from across the chamber. Veterans charities such as South West Scotland RNR and SSAFA play an invaluable role in supporting veterans and their families. It is our role to ensure that those charities continue to grow and provide aid.

I also take this opportunity to thank Eric Fraser, who is a Royal Navy veteran of 37 years' service. Mr Fraser has been Scotland's inaugural veterans commissioner since the office was created in 2014. I commend the Scottish Government's move to bring veterans' needs into consideration when Government ministers are looking at new legislation. The veterans commissioner says that Scotland's approach is

"largely encouraging but there is no room for complacency and I am convinced that more can and needs to be done. By no stretch of the imagination does the system need overhauled."

That is reassuring, but Mr Fraser also notes that local authorities, Government agencies and housing providers that give general information about housing options in Scotland often simply fail to reach veterans and services leavers because the information is poorly presented, managed and disseminated. The Government is making good progress in communicating with our veterans, but we should also be conscious of how we present and provide help to the community. The Government is within reach of securing that: once again, I commend the action that has been taken so far.

Veterans can and do play an essential role in our communities, not just because of the experience that they have gained through service, but because they actively provide their communities with invaluable attributes and skills that need to be passed on to others. Key stakeholders including the Government and charities should not treat them as helpless and lost, but as the most valuable and strong people whom we can have in our communities. They deserve to have our support whenever they need it.

16:08

Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP): Given that many of us were laying wreaths on Sunday to pay tribute to the fallen and to those who have served their country and defended its values, it is appropriate that we are having this debate, to which there have been many fine contributions from all parties around the chamber.

The cabinet secretary kicked off the debate by speaking about changing landscapes: I guess one changing landscape has been the political landscape in Scotland and how we support veterans in this country. We must not forget that, since devolution, and especially since the SNP Government's election in 2007, we have had the first veterans minister, the veterans fund and, of course, Scotland's first veterans commissioner in the form of Eric Fraser, who is in the gallery today. I join other members in paying tribute to his good work on the many issues that he has highlighted. I thank him for visiting Forres in my constituency a few months ago, where he met local people and discussed some of the issues that face veterans in the local community.

Another changing landscape is my constituency of Moray, which has played such a key role in defending the nation throughout the 20th and, now, 21st centuries. That has largely been through the presence of the RAF and the Royal Navy over those years. Even today there are many symbols of that presence to be seen in Moray, particularly from world war two. The beach defences, which are now under the care of the Forestry Commission Scotland, are still there and are a tourist attraction in their own right, and the many now-redundant airfields in the area can be seen by visitors and local people alike.

We still have RAF Lossiemouth, which is the only RAF base in Scotland today, and we have the Kinloss barracks, which was formerly the RAF Kinloss base. There is still a huge military presence in Moray; so many men and women are still playing their role defending the country and doing their good work. As a result of the presence over the past century or so, and today's presence in those two establishments, many veterans live in Moray. As I have said before, if we were to measure the number of veterans as a percentage of the population in Moray, we must be at or near the top of the league for the whole of Scotland.

Keith Brown: On the point that Richard Lochhead was making about the preponderance of veterans in his constituency, I add that they also tend to be extremely highly qualified veterans, which goes back to the point that Daniel Johnson made. Does Richard Lochhead think that it would be worth our while to talk to Moray Council to suggest that one way of encapsulating and keeping that huge reservoir of highly skilled individuals, some of whom have set up companies after leaving the RAF, would be for the council to incorporate in its growth deal a proposal to the Scottish and UK Governments that would maximise and retain those skills in the area?

Richard Lochhead: The cabinet secretary has made a very good point that I will certainly take away with me. It is clearly the case that our

veterans play a crucial in Moray's social life and, particularly, in its economic life. Many people in Moray society are veterans, including many of my friends. I will always remember a few years ago having a pint with a friend in the local pub when it dawned on me that he had just returned from military action a week or two previously, and there we were—just talking about life in general. That brought home to me the various backgrounds that people in the local community have, particularly in terms of the number of veterans in Moray.

Many people who have left the military, particularly with the closure of RAF Kinloss, have started up their own businesses in the area and are now supplying jobs and economic growth. How can I participate in the debate without mentioning the Windswept Brewing Co Ltd? It produces fantastic craft beers and is doing extremely well at the moment. The cabinet secretary had the pleasure of trying one of the beers at a recent reception in Parliament. Al Read and Nigel Tiddy, who started that now-growing business, are former RAF pilots. Not surprisingly—although my favourite of the beers that they produce is their Blonde pale ale—they have beers named after the Tornado and the Typhoon, to keep in with the theme of the RAF in Lossiemouth and Moray.

The voluntary sector in the area is also very dependent on veterans. I visited a local Scouts Scotland camp at Spynie recently, where I was taught map reading by one of the volunteers—a former pilot or navigator in the RAF who was teaching the kids. The local voluntary sector is very well supported by veterans.

The transition to civilian life from military life that many members have mentioned is sometimes seen as a battle in its own right, and it presents challenges for many people. Maurice Corry led a very good debate a few months ago on a report by Combat Stress, which highlighted many of the issues. It suggested that many veterans in Scotland are living in areas of deprivation and that many of them have to deal with mental health issues. That is why the Scottish Government's many initiatives that have been spoken about today play such a valuable role in supporting people through the transition, by helping them to settle back into civilian life and to deal with many of the challenges that they face.

I will make a couple more quick points before I finish. First, there are so many organisations out there helping—I think that Maurice Corry said that there are about 320 charities helping veterans in Scotland—that it is sometimes quite difficult to navigate through and understand what each one delivers, while raising awareness of them so that the many thousands of veterans in members' communities can take advantage of the services

that are on offer. Mike Rumbles raised an issue about the veterans first point service in Grampian. I have had constituents from Forres contact me to lament the decline of that particular service, but I take on board the cabinet secretary's view of the situation. That reinforces the case for marshalling the services that are provided by the 320 charities, so that they are available and so that veterans are aware of them.

Given the number of veterans in my constituency and the rest of Scotland who have served in the RAF, next year's centenary of the RAF provides an ideal opportunity for the Scottish Government, Parliament and others in society to celebrate the role of the RAF and the many veterans who have served in it throughout its history. That would be an ideal opportunity to revisit some of the issues that we have discussed today.

16:15

Mark Griffin: I start this closing speech by restating the point that I made in my opening speech about our continued support for our armed forces personnel and veterans. We owe a great debt of gratitude to members of the armed forces and veterans. As we approach 100 years since the end of the first world war, some of us will be thinking particularly about family members who served in it. In my family, that was my great-great-uncle. My family history is based around Kilsyth, Croy and the old village of Auchinstarry, so I would have expected him, along with a great many people from Bruce Crawford's constituency, to deploy through that route from Stirling that Bruce Crawford mentioned. However, my gran gave me his soldier's bible from the first world war, so I know that it was gifted to him as he deployed by the provost of Rutherglen. I am not sure how he ended up deploying from Rutherglen, as I would have expected him to deploy from Stirling with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. Maybe I will get to the bottom of that element of my family history if anybody can help me out with that in the centenary year.

Those serving in our armed forces are asked to make massive personal sacrifices of their human rights and, ultimately, some give up their right to life in the service of our country. In return, it is only right that Governments and we as a nation value, respect and support our armed forces, and that culminates in the annual commemoration of armistice day, when we stop to remember those who have given their lives in action so that we can enjoy the freedom that we experience today.

Some members might know that I spent time in the Territorial Army. I have to say that I have not had the same experience in any other situation in life. I went through all the training that a reservist

can do—although for a number of reasons I did not deploy—but even with the level of experience that I had, I still cannot begin to imagine the level of intensity and commitment to their fellow soldiers of those who have served on the front line.

As I said in my opening speech, when hearing from a young soldier who had served in Afghanistan, I could only listen and try to comprehend what it was like to come under fire and lose a fellow soldier from his battalion. To him, that loss was as great as losing a member of his family. I can also only imagine how isolated someone must feel if they are discharged from the armed forces into society, alone and perhaps with no family, after having had such a close bond with the comrades they fought with and possibly lost in combat.

It is therefore vital that advice and support services are in place to help former service personnel to adjust to living in mainstream society and that Governments continue to plan, co-ordinate and deliver support and advice services from the public, private and voluntary sectors for ex-service personnel and their families and children. I welcome the fact that most local authorities have appointed veterans champions and that they are starting to deliver real positive changes in those areas.

The cabinet secretary mentioned in his opening speech the issue of social housing and landlords. I often give the example of North Lanarkshire Council, which has amended its housing policy to recognise the priority needs of ex-service personnel who have just been discharged from duty, and their families. They are given extra points under its housing application system.

Together with the actions that are taken by our local authorities and the Government, we should continue to support the work that is done by many charities across Scotland. We have heard many local examples in the debate. Graeme Dey mentioned Combat Stress. I had the privilege of visiting Hollybush house in Ayrshire during the previous parliamentary session and speaking to some veterans there. The big issue that kept coming up was access to the concessionary travel card and work is under way on that. Disabled or injured veterans qualify for the national entitlement card, which is a positive step.

Erskine, which Tom Arthur mentioned, is the leading provider of care for veterans in the country. It provides a wide range of care from respite and short breaks, residential and nursing care, dementia care, and palliative care to physiotherapy, speech and language therapy and rehabilitation services. Erskine is working in partnership with the Royal British Legion to create 40 jobs in a new manufacturing centre. It was announced earlier today that a manufacturing

centre staffed by Scottish veterans will open next year, offering a lifeline to many ex-service personnel. Scotland's Bravest Manufacturing Company will produce rail and road signs, recycle wooden products and provide print and mail services. That is another fantastic example of the work that is being done by charities, which we should do all we can to support.

We are committed to continuing to work on a cross-party basis to ensure that our veterans and their families receive the support that they need and deserve. In particular, we recognise that our service personnel often need help with their transition to civilian life, and particularly with finding housing and employment. We recognise that those who leave the service can bear physical and psychological scars for many years after their service ends.

This has been another good, consensual debate about the need to support our armed forces and veterans community in Scotland. I close by again acknowledging the debt of gratitude that Scotland owes to those who have served in our armed forces in defence of freedom. We will support the Government motion and the Conservative amendment at decision time, and we are willing, as always, to work on a cross-party basis to support veterans in Scotland.

16:23

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I am pleased to close the debate for the Scottish Conservatives. For the avoidance of doubt—if there was any—I confirm my party's support for the Government motion.

I thank Keith Brown for bringing the debate to the Parliament. As members pointed out throughout it, it is important that we pay tribute to our armed forces and veterans community and that we recognise the immense contribution that service personnel have made to Scottish society.

What is that contribution? Many people, including me, can only imagine. Daniel Johnson made an important point when he said that people like us have perhaps no idea of the stresses that service personnel have to deal with. I suspect that he is right and that the likes of Keith Brown, Maurice Corry, Edward Mountain and others in the chamber know much more than they let on. Bruce Crawford spoke very movingly about his grandfather, in a personal capacity that made his words very real.

That is why debates such as this one are so important. Above all, we must acknowledge that, as Edward Mountain said, service personnel are prepared—at our request—to put everything on the line: their health, their sanity, their families and their very future.

The motion also flags up the excellent work of the Scottish veterans commissioner, Eric Fraser, and his team. As my colleague Maurice Corry has rightly pointed out, all the commissioner's reports recommend ambitious plans for the Scottish Government, which have allowed today's debate to be productive and insightful.

Various areas have been explored, both by the commissioner in his reports and by members in this debate. A vital area for veterans and their families is housing. It must be a priority to ensure that appropriate housing is available to every veteran and their family. As Maurice Corry said about the commissioner's housing report, veterans need better information from the Scottish Government and the MOD. In addition, local authorities must train their front-line staff to deliver that information in an appropriate and accessible way.

Daniel Johnson was right to call for better information. He was also right to speak about the families of those leaving the services and their situation. The transition from military to civilian life is one of the most crucial periods in determining what challenges and opportunities will present themselves to a veteran following their service.

The motion's point about the Scottish Government continuing

"to work in partnership to ensure that the armed forces, veterans and their families receive the best possible support and access to opportunities"

was picked up well, especially by Bruce Crawford, who talked about the CAB in Stirling.

I also want to flag up Christine Grahame's speech, in which she ran with Daniel Johnson's point on spouses, partners and children. I agree that we must not forget those individuals.

I really enjoyed learning about the contribution of Women's Enterprise Scotland in unlocking business potential. There is clearly something in its work that could be developed, so I am pleased that further funding has been secured. Like Christine Grahame, I certainly encourage other members to investigate www.startupwithwes.com after this debate.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): As the convener of the cross-party group on women in enterprise, I invite the member to come along and hear from WES about its other work.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: There is an offer that you cannot refuse.

Liam Kerr: And I do not intend to refuse it. I would be delighted to come along.

A number of members referred to employment and education, as did Mr Eric Fraser's third report. In particular, Mr Fraser mentioned the need for

better recognition of qualifications and skills. Members picked up that issue throughout the afternoon. The people who we are talking about have skill sets, disciplines and experiences that will be of huge value if we can only recognise and tap into them.

We look forward to supporting the Government's motion. I also commend the Scottish Conservative amendment, which seeks explicitly to recognise the importance of the many veterans charities. Before I speak about that, I want to flag up the cabinet secretary's point about transferable skills being a valuable resource. The Royal British Legion made the point—as did Mark Griffin—that there is a risk of a misconception that veterans are "mad, bad and sad". The legion's statistics suggest that that is not the case and that in many respects, veterans are no different from the population at large.

In his "Transition in Scotland" report, Mr Eric Fraser says:

"this may be the time for a more fundamental shift in the way we perceive and treat veterans in Scotland, reversing a narrative that tends to view them through the prism of need and obligation, and encouraging society to recognise them far more for their strengths and qualities."

However, some veterans need more help. Maurice Corry pointed out that we have at least 320 armed forces charities in operation, providing a wide variety of services for the veterans community.

One charity, Wings for Warriors, works with wounded and medically discharged ex-service personnel to provide them with the skills to achieve an exciting, rewarding and sustainable future as professional pilots. Wings for Warriors has big plans to create the world's first disabled veterans' flying school, which I hope will be based on the eastern perimeter of Aberdeen airport. The charity has recently been awarded two small grants from Aberdeen City Council. Of course, that council remains the lowest funded in the country, so I hope that the cabinet secretary will familiarise himself with Wings for Warriors and respond positively to its approaches in the future.

An incredibly significant charity in the north-east is HorseBack UK. It was co-founded by ex-marine Jock Hutchison, who uses horsemanship to inspire recovery in the wounded, injured and sick of the military community, to enable them to regain self-esteem and to provide them with a sense of purpose and community.

Graeme Dey spoke movingly of his granddad who, even with a dram in him, found it difficult to talk of the horrors that he had witnessed. That is what HorseBack UK is mainly about. Learning to work with a horse is one of the most intricate and challenging things that anyone can do. The charity

has empirical data that shows the mental and physical benefits that result.

In the summer, I went to see for myself how it works and the bond between horse and man. Going into the yard, Jock brought out a huge animal—it was the size of a horse.

Christine Grahame: It was a horse.

Liam Kerr: Yes, that was the joke. It was a horse. I am glad to see that Christine Grahame is listening.

Demonstrating what not to do, Jock instructed the horse to move, but it refused. He then stood respectfully next to the beast. He spoke to it and I could see him gently gesticulating about what he would like the horse to do. Then he stood still next to the horse. The horse was still. He looked in its eye, smiled and raised his hand. And then—

Jock will tell members exactly what happened next when he comes to the reception for my members' business debate on 7 February. [*Laughter.*] I look forward to seeing everyone there.

Maurice Corry alluded to my member's business debate in February, the motion for which said:

"almost two thirds of members of the forces' community had personally come across people wearing medals or insignia awarded to someone else".

He also noted that the Awards for Valour (Protection) Bill, which would have made the false wearing of medals with the intention to deceive a criminal offence throughout the United Kingdom, had fallen due to the general election. Given the fact that, in my debate, there was cross-party support for that bill, I ask that, in his closing speech, the cabinet secretary consider that matter and perhaps give a detailed response on the next stage and whether there is anything that we should be doing.

We have had a consensual and productive debate. It is encouraging to see such cross-party consensus on this significant subject. I urge us to send a signal from the chamber that we hold the work, commitment and devotion of veterans, their families and their children in the highest regard, and that we pledge to forever honour and support our servicemen and women, their families and our veterans.

16:32

Keith Brown: I thank those members who have spoken for an interesting and stimulating debate on what, by consensus, seems to be regarded as an extremely important issue. It is obviously of close personal interest to many of us.

We have had a number of thoughtful contributions—and, of course, we have also had

Mike Rumbles. I will try to respond to some of the contributions, including Mike Rumbles's, because I want to come back on the issues that he raised.

Bruce Crawford mentioned a number of ex-service personnel who have ended up in prison. For the first time, I had the chance this year to go to the remembrance service at my local prison. If there is a service in their local prison and if they can go to it, I encourage members to do so as well as going to the other remembrance services that they attend. That is one way in which we can make contact, as I did, with ex-service personnel who are in prison. It is one way of joining in with the respect of that day and making some connections.

We all have a role to play—not least through remembrance, but more strategically as MSPs in our constituencies—in ensuring that people in the armed forces community who require assistance receive the best advice and services available. The fact that we show our awareness of, and empathy with, the roles that they play is important, so I am pleased about the armed forces parliamentary visit programme, which is in the early stages. I make it clear to members that there is a visit next week to my old unit, 45 Commando, where we will see all the things that marines get up to. I am trying to see whether I can clear my diary to go along. I am sure that anyone who does come along will have an enjoyable day at RM Condor in Arbroath.

Today was the first opportunity that I have had to update the Parliament on our work to take forward the veterans commissioner's recommendations. In such debates, I have never declared an interest. Perhaps I should have done so but I should perhaps also have declared an interest when appointing Eric Fraser because, like me, he was in the Royal Navy—although I, of course, was in the best part of the Royal Navy, having been in the Royal Marines.

I agree with members who pointed out the quality of Eric Fraser's work, which has been tremendously innovative. We have been very lucky to have Eric Fraser as our first veterans commissioner. The best testament to Eric's work will be to maintain momentum and transparency on the important issues that he has raised, and I commit to looking for time for an annual debate like this.

The Scottish Government and our partners have taken forward a wide portfolio of work aimed at better supporting our armed services community. However, to go back to a point made by a number of members, there is great deal more that we can do.

There were some interesting contributions to the debate. Liam Kerr referred to three veterans—

Maurice Corry, Edward Mountain and me—and talked about “mad, bad and sad”. I do not know which of us is which, but I am grateful to Liam Kerr for pointing that out.

Finlay Carson said that he had been to the most beautiful constituency in Scotland. Clackmannanshire and Dunblane says that he can come back any time he likes; he will be more than welcome.

Bruce Crawford and others recollected family members, some of whom go back into the mists of time, to be honest. It is always very welcome to hear such recollections—as Daniel Johnson reminded us, it helps us to maintain an important connection.

In opening and closing for Labour, Mark Griffin gave two very good speeches, particularly when he talked about remembering the sacrifice given by many veterans.

There were contributions from Tom Arthur and Christine Grahame. Christine talked about Women’s Enterprise Scotland and I think that she will agree with me about the change in women who are involved in the organisation. Women can be isolated and sometimes alienated, and can feel diminished if their main role is to support somebody else. WES has had an astonishing effect on the women I met, who are, by and large, supporting male partners in the armed forces.

Maurice Corry: Christine Grahame’s point about Women’s Enterprise Scotland was very interesting. There is also Recruit for Spouses. I wonder whether there might be some sort of get-together of those two organisations, which are trying to achieve the same aims. Talented partners and wives are coming up to Scotland, particularly to Faslane. The other day, I attended the opening of the fantastic Scottish submarine centre. There were lots of people there who could offer skills, and we have already taken one up who did the final design of the centre’s digital motifs and so on. I commend that.

Keith Brown: I would be happy to look into that. As the member says, there is symmetry between Recruit for Spouses and Women’s Enterprise Scotland. There are also the two third sector organisations mentioned by Liam Kerr. I had a very good visit to HorseBack UK, which the Scottish Government is supporting to the tune of £7,500. I think that, as well as being an ex-Royal Marine, Jock Hutchison is from Dollar, where I come from.

I took one positive thing—if it was possible to do so—from Mike Rumbles’s contribution, which belonged to a different debate entirely. He mentioned that we are not here just to slap each other on the back and be consensual; we should be willing to embrace controversy and difficult

issues, because that is the only way that we can continually improve services.

I do not want to be controversial for the sake of it but, as members have talked about remembrance, I should mention that the badge that I am wearing commemorates the first world war. It is important to remember that it is almost the 100th anniversary of armistice day. We can think about what the people in that conflict went through, by and large in soaked, freezing and rat-infested trenches, in which they often walked on the remains of their colleagues and were constantly bombarded. Members talked about PTSD, which used to be called shellshock. I can only imagine somebody who experienced the trenches of the first world war being absolutely appalled by the debate about what kind of jacket somebody wore to a remembrance service at the weekend. That was a bizarre discussion to have and was not at all respectful of the people who went through that experience.

Generally, the contributions were very positive. For our part, the Government is very willing to listen to Eric Fraser, and to members, about where we might be able to improve things.

We have taken forward a number of issues. As Daniel Johnson said, whether we are talking about housing, health or education, plans for people leaving the armed forces should start being made on the day that they join. I have made that point repeatedly to the UK Government. The MoD could do something at the very start. People could immediately subscribe to get housing points from the day that they join the armed forces. The MoD could get health records right away; it could oblige people to tell it which general practitioner they will go to when they leave the armed forces. There is a lot that we can do if we get in at that stage. We have tried to convince the UK Government of that and we will continue to do so.

There are three pillars. Getting a job is extremely important, as others have said, but veterans must also be able to rely on having a decent house and having access to the right health services. Even if we just wanted to be selfish about it, we know that if we can get those three things right we will save the state an awful lot of money. More important, however, we know that by doing so we will provide a proper future for our veterans.

I said that we would introduce guidance and promote best practice on housing—we have an obligation there, too. We will continue to work through the Scottish service children strategic working group to meet the educational needs of service children in Scotland.

I think that Christine Grahame mentioned the peripatetic nature of the armed forces. Continually

moving units around the country cannot be good for the children—one unit is about to go through its fourth education system. In future moves and revisions of the defence configuration in the UK, let us think about the members of the armed forces who have families and children. I repeat the point that I made earlier about how expensive it can be when we get it wrong. If we want to avoid that expense and provide the best possible experience for children in the armed forces, we should take them into account when we move people around the chessboard.

We will also take forward our engagement on employability through the veterans employability strategic working group. I say in response to the point that Maurice Corry made about the group that, having had a long chat with Mark Bibbey, I am really impressed—to an extent that I did not expect to be—by the work that is being done on that. I suggest that Maurice Corry discusses that further with Mark Bibbey if he gets the chance and if he has not done so already, as that will repay him.

Some really important issues are coming out of that, such as how best to get veterans not just into work but into the type of work that they deserve to get into, given their qualifications, experience and abilities. The group will continue to look at the commissioner's recommendations as its work progresses, including considering work placements, accreditation and mapping military skills in the civilian workplace. It has also set out a plan for additional qualitative research to identify barriers. That will help shape thinking on the feasibility of a pilot approach.

I turn to the point that was made about the articulation of skills, experience and qualifications gained during service in the armed forces, on which we have done some work through Skills Development Scotland. I was in Canada recently where I spoke to its deputy minister for veterans. Canada seems to take a much more comprehensive approach to that, which covers both sides of the equation—the armed forces and veterans. We can learn a lot from that, which will help us make things as easy as possible.

I agree with the fundamental point that some of the skills that our veterans have are so valuable—especially given what is happening now with Brexit and pressure on the labour market—that we have to ensure that we make the most of them. We have to let the veterans themselves know that they have those abilities and that what they did in the armed forces is really important to civilian employers.

Many members concentrated quite rightly on the protections afforded to us by those who have served, given how they have defended our freedom and way of life. It is right that we continue

to make Scotland a society that recognises the full value of our armed forces community and that we aspire to make Scotland the destination of choice for personnel leaving the armed forces, wherever they are in the UK or elsewhere. It is important that we make Scotland the place where they want to spend the rest of their lives after having served.

Business Motions

16:44

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of business motions S5M-08863 and S5M-08864, on timetables for two bills at stage 2.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill at stage 2 be completed by 8 December 2017.

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Wild Animals in Travelling Circuses (Scotland) Bill at stage 2 be completed by 1 December 2017.—[*Joe FitzPatrick*]

Motions agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

16:44

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motions S5M-08865, on approval of a Scottish statutory instrument; S5M-08866, on designation of a lead committee; and S5M-08961, on committee membership.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Budget (Scotland) Act 2017 Amendment Regulations 2017 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Equalities and Human Rights Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Historical Sexual Offences (Pardons and Disregards) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

That the Parliament agrees that the following changes to committee membership apply from close of business on Thursday 16 November 2017—

Colin Beattie be appointed to replace Gil Paterson as a member of the Economy Jobs and Fair Work Committee;

Tom Arthur be appointed to replace Ash Denham as a member of the Economy Jobs and Fair Work Committee;

Emma Harper be appointed to replace Maree Todd as a member of the Health and Sport Committee;

Sandra White be appointed to replace Tom Arthur as a member of the Health and Sport Committee;

Ash Denham be appointed to replace Clare Haughey as a member of the Health and Sport Committee;

Stewart Stevenson be appointed to replace Emma Harper as a member of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee;

Richard Lochhead be appointed to replace Clare Haughey as a member of the Education and Skills Committee;

George Adam be appointed to replace Colin Beattie as a member of the Education and Skills Committee;

Clare Haughey be appointed to replace Clare Adamson as a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee; and

Clare Adamson be appointed to replace Sandra White as a member of the Social Security Committee.—[*Joe FitzPatrick*]

Motions agreed to.

Motion without Notice

16:45

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): I am minded to take a motion without notice to bring forward decision time.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4, Decision Time be brought forward to 4.45 pm.—[Joe FitzPatrick]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:45

The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S5M-08649, in the name of Tom Arthur, on the Pow of Inchaffray Drainage Commission (Scotland) Bill, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees to the general principles of the Pow of Inchaffray Drainage Commission (Scotland) Bill and that the bill should proceed as a private bill.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S5M-08855.1, in the name of Maurice Corry, which seeks to amend motion S5M-08855, in the name of Keith Brown, on Scottish Government support for veterans and the armed forces community in Scotland, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S5M-08855, in the name of Keith Brown, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises and values the contribution of the armed forces and veterans community to Scotland; notes the work of the Scottish Veterans Commissioner as described in his reports on transition, housing and employability, skills and learning; further notes the importance of third sector veterans' charities in caring for the welfare of the armed forces and veterans community and of ensuring that such charities are able to survive and thrive into the future, and agrees that the Scottish Government should continue to work in partnership to ensure that the armed forces, veterans and their families receive the best possible support and access to opportunities across Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that Parliamentary Bureau motions S5M-08865, S5M-08866 and S5M-08961, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Budget (Scotland) Act 2017 Amendment Regulations 2017 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Equalities and Human Rights Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the Historical Sexual Offences (Pardons and Disregards) (Scotland) Bill at stage 1.

That the Parliament agrees that the following changes to committee membership apply from close of business on Thursday 16 November 2017—

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Ash Denham be appointed to replace Clare Haughey as a member of the Health and Sport Committee;

Stewart Stevenson be appointed to replace Emma Harper as a member of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee;

Richard Lochhead be appointed to replace Clare Haughey as a member of the Education and Skills Committee;

George Adam be appointed to replace Colin Beattie as a member of the Education and Skills Committee;

Clare Haughey be appointed to replace Clare Adamson as a member of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee; and

Clare Adamson be appointed to replace Sandra White as a member of the Social Security Committee.

Meeting closed at 16:46.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* for this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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