

MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENT

Thursday 13 January 2000

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 13 January 2000

[THE PRESIDING OFFICER *opened the meeting at 09:31*]

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): Good morning. The business today is an important debate on housing, which is why the whole day has been allotted to it. An exceptionally large number of members wish to speak in the debate. We have done some calculations and it ought to be possible to call everybody, provided that the opening speakers are brief and that everyone sticks to the four-minute limit.

I hope that members will accept my apologies for not being in the chair later this morning—I wish to attend the funeral of Nigel Tranter, who was with us only a month ago in the distinguished visitors gallery. Through his novels, he brought the history of Scotland to life for many thousands of people. He was an expert on Scottish towers and castles and, more important, he was a great campaigner for the Scottish Parliament long before any of us in the chamber were. It is right that I should pay our respects to his memory.

I am ready to start the debate, but we do not yet have a minister. A helpful point of order from Mr Sheridan?

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): It is perhaps not a deliberately helpful point of order, Presiding Officer. [*Laughter.*] It is worth noting that the minister has managed to arrive.

Points of order should be about proceedings and I seek your guidance. Why has the amendment that I timeously submitted, which made two significant and specific points in response to each of the other amendments that were selected for today, not been accepted for today's debate?

The Presiding Officer: That is a genuine point of order. It is not the practice of the chair to give reasons for the selection or non-selection of amendments. I do not always select the amendments submitted by the major parties either. Perhaps it would be helpful to the chamber to know that, as a general rule, I do not accept more than two amendments in any one debate, simply because it makes the debate so unwieldy. However, I recognise the points that Mr Sheridan was seeking to make in his amendment and I note that it is intended that he should be called early in the debate so that he can make them. Additionally, there will be a full bill, so he will have the chance to press those points during the passage of that legislation.

Housing

09:34

The Minister for Communities (Ms Wendy Alexander): Last month, I announced to the chamber our plans for a radical new start for Scottish housing. I promised then that there would be an opportunity for a full debate; today's debate is the longest so far scheduled in the Parliament. The bonus is that members will hear from all of us the longest opening speeches yet.

An all-day debate reflects the fundamental importance of housing in Scotland, the interest among members in the chamber and the radicalism of our plans. Good housing and strong communities lie at the heart of delivering social justice and economic competitiveness.

I will set out the Executive's core vision for housing in Scotland. I will not shirk our more controversial proposals, nor shall I treat lightly any critical contributions—the Parliament has not only a real interest in housing issues, but real expertise.

Today matters. This is a serious debate on housing and presents an opportunity for us all, as Scotland's elected representatives, to discuss, listen, reflect and influence the draft bill that is to be published later in the year.

I want to begin with the legacy that is so familiar to many members: 500,000 damp homes and 350,000 Scottish children growing up in damp houses. Shelter estimates that it would require £10 billion to repair and improve our housing stock. There are rising homelessness applications, alongside vacant dwellings.

Change is needed. The old ways have failed. The Parliament confronts real problems and challenges and today we can embrace real solutions. This is our chance to say to the people of Scotland that the partnership Administration, Labour and Liberal colleagues together, is getting to grips with the people's priorities in housing.

We have decisively broken with the past. We have raised £300 million extra investment to be committed to housing and regeneration in Scotland. The partnership promises that, by next year, public sector expenditure on housing in Scotland will be 40 per cent higher than in the plans we inherited.

We will confront homelessness. People sleeping on our streets was the enduring symbol of so much that was wrong about the social and economic priorities of the Tory years. Young people curled up in sleeping bags gave the lie to trickle-down economics. The partnership promises

that no one should have to sleep rough in Scotland by 2003.

For too long, dampness has been the scourge of Scottish housing. The partnership is delivering the warm deal, which is unique to Scotland and offers those without work new jobs insulating the homes of those without warmth. It is the biggest grant scheme of its kind ever offered in Scotland.

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): The minister may be aware that there is a great deal of concern about the future of the warm deal; I have lodged a motion on the subject. Following comments yesterday evening by Frank McAveety, when he implied that the insulation company that was referred to was a one-off, I must tell the minister that I received an e-mail this morning from another installer saying that six Scottish installers are about to go bust or pull out of the warm deal because they cannot find the work. Does the minister agree that we need an urgent review of the warm deal and its operation, however much we support the need for increased investment in insulation?

Ms Alexander: As the member will know, we always keep all our policies under review. The criticism last night blamed the Government for two things. First, we were blamed for going where the problem was worst, yet that is a principle that should command support from the whole Parliament. Secondly, we were blamed for training unemployed young people. One of the wonderful aspects of the warm deal is that it says that we do not just want jobs for people in work—we want them also for people without work.

Fiona Hyslop: There is a problem with the warm deal and the new deal. The flagship new deal policy was not just about giving people six months' job experience; it was about placing people in employment afterwards. Many members went to people's homes during warm homes week. I met new deal trainees who were enjoying the experience, but were grossly disappointed that they were not getting employment at the end of it. It is an expensive mistake. We must direct the new deal more efficiently and we must not confuse the two issues.

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): Order. Interventions must be brief, particularly if a member is to be called later.

Ms Alexander: It is the most gross hypocrisy for the SNP to defend the new deal—a policy that it did not support because it was funded by the windfall tax, which it also did not support.

The important and substantive point is that 70 per cent of the people who participate with many of the installers in the warm deal programme get the opportunity of full-time work. They are getting a traineeship in construction. We expect that, if our

plans for Glasgow go ahead, there will be up to 4,000 construction jobs in the city, giving those people, and many more, full-time jobs.

Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP): Does the minister agree that the figures for warm deal and new deal together show that only 25 per cent of the trainees who have worked through those programmes have successfully found a job at the end and that 75 per cent of the trainees have found themselves unemployed after 6 months?

Ms Alexander: No, I do not accept Lloyd's figures, and I would like to move on.

We have a warm deal package that is the largest of its kind ever in Scotland. I say to Opposition members that instead of criticising and saying that perhaps not enough old people are taking up the scheme, they should go to their local elderly forum, take the leaflet with them, and urge people to apply—because the substance of the Scottish National party's criticism last night was that not enough people have the chance to take up the scheme.

Mr Quinan: Our criticism?

Fiona Hyslop: It is the minister's problem.

Ms Alexander: Opposition members should play their part—and, no, it is not my problem, Fiona; it is a problem for all of us to ensure that people know what their rights are.

Last night, we touched on the issue of debt in Glasgow. Under the Tories, housing debt kept on rising and access to new private investment was only for the chosen few. We now have a partnership that is promising that—when tenants are in the driving seat—we will help to lift the debt burden. We will do that by supporting community ownership, by bringing in new investment, by putting people first and by giving tenants the right to choose their destiny.

The dividing lines between the old world and the new world are clear. The old world was about debt, dampness and scant democracy. As we start to deliver, all that is giving way. However, we will not do the people of Scotland justice if today we simply trade rhetoric about what has been achieved in the first six months.

I want to come to the heart of the matter, and talk about what is too often thought but too rarely said: for those with eyes to see, it is clear that the old ways of doing things will not work. We cannot prosper through the McLetchie economics of markets and incomes that fail households. Nor can we take refuge in the ideological purity so characteristic of the Siberian or Sheridan world view, so chilling in its disregard for the individual.

I invite every member of this chamber, at the

start of the new century, to have the courage to admit that this is the time to create change, rather than to fear it, and to harness the strengths of everyone to deliver policies that can work. Let us try to have a shared understanding of the problems. Let us reflect today not on the successes of Scottish housing, but on how we can address the failures. Those failures have been remarkably consistent, not just over 10 or 20 years, but over 100 years. Too often, massive commitments have produced poor outcomes. We have had decades of high spending—by European standards—on housing; we have been long on ideology and shorter on practical ideas. The common thread running through it all is one of hopes that—generation after generation—were never quite realised. Those hopes should echo through this debate.

We have seen the destruction of neighbourhoods and the destabilisation of local economies. There are cries that echo from the beginning of the previous century to the letters page of *The Herald* this week. We have seen the decay, first of the tenement, and then of too much council housing—houses linked by their scale, their monotony and their poor condition. We have seen the insensitivity of too much housing management and a bureaucracy, whether private or public, that leaves tenants confused, frustrated and disempowered.

Finally, we have seen quantity triumphing time and time again over quality. Despite the efforts of many committed people, our responsibility is to address that legacy of dashed hopes, bad design and disempowerment.

This is not, however, a story without hope, vision or possibilities. People in the communities of Scotland have demonstrated the solutions and know what works. Over the past 20 years, there has been community involvement in housing associations, decentralised housing management and different tenures, each of which has a part to play and all of which are united by a common philosophy of putting people first. No party has a monopoly on putting people first. What works comes from the experience of thousands of people across Scotland who have taken control in their communities and of their own homes.

The future starts with people, which means offering Scotland's social tenants the best ever tenants' rights package. There should be no second-class tenants in the new Scotland. We want new rights to succession so that carers who give up their homes to look after others then secure the tenancy themselves. We want new rights that compel landlords to consult tenants about future plans for their homes. We want the right to buy not just for some, but for all council and housing association tenants outwith the

charitable sector.

Mr Quinan: In light of the minister's remarks about consultation and the fact that people in Scotland and housing associations know what is best for housing in Scotland, does she agree with the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations? In a paper that has been given to most MSPs, it says:

"The inclusion of an extended Right to Buy in a single statutory tenancy is neither necessary nor practicable."

And:

"An extended Right to Buy would make achievement of the Government's objectives less rather than more likely."

And:

"The Executive's proposals run counter to a strategic approach to housing provision."

Ms Alexander: During my speech, I will deal extensively with the views of professional housing lobbyists.

I know that there are concerns about the right to buy. Our starting point is that more than four out of five Scots want to own their own homes, but two out of five are still in the social rented sector. We, their elected representatives, have a choice: to accept that aspiration, or to deny it. If we accept that aspiration—as I believe we should—it is also our responsibility to do so in a way that does not disadvantage people who want to rent. That is not just some rhetorical flourish; there should be both the right to buy and high-quality homes for those who want to rent.

That goes to the heart of the difference between our proposals and what has gone before.

Mr Quinan rose—

Ms Alexander: Let me finish my argument, Lloyd.

Delivering the right to buy is the easy part of our commitment; the real challenge is delivering high-quality rented houses. For too many years, when public housing was starved of new investment, it sometimes seemed that the only way to keep good rented housing was to choke off the right to buy. Instead, we are promising to protect all new investment in new rented housing for at least 10 years after it is built.

The issue is that people who benefit from substantial new investment should pick up the tab when they buy; however, if there has been no new investment or modernisation in their homes, they should pay nothing more. That means that the basic discount system is left unchanged. What matters is how much new investment has been put into someone's home. That is the fair way; it protects the public purse and recognises that, after 30 years of faithfully paying rent in an unimproved

house, it is right that tenants should qualify for a full discount. Furthermore, where there are clear cases of abuse, offer us practical suggestions about how to close loopholes, but do not invite us to punish everyone for the misdemeanours of the few.

If some houses are bought, what happens to the rest? The challenge is to use public and private investment together to create more higher-quality rented houses.

We will not make Scotland a better country by denying low-income families the right to buy in a vain attempt to protect the very poorest people. The solution for those who simply want a better house is not for them to stop their neighbours buying—or for us, on their behalf, to stop their neighbours buying—but to get new investment into homes. That is why the Executive's top priority is to create 7,000 new and improved homes—1,000 more than we promised just last autumn.

That is where we and the Siberian tendency—the Sheridans and perhaps even the Scottish National party—part company. They say that we should wait to invest—that we should wait for the ideologically pure investment—and that tenants can benefit from public investment only, so they must get in the queue behind the national health service, schools and social work services. Children in damp houses do not want members to hang around for ideologically pure investment; they want the problem dealt with.

Fiona Hyslop: Is the minister aware of the SNP's position? I will put it on the record. We acknowledge that private finance is needed in housing, but we believe that there must be public finance to back it up. Our proposed public service trust would allow us to do that. There are mechanisms that the Government could use to invest now. It is the minister's policies that will take four or five years to secure investment in housing in Glasgow, Edinburgh and the rural areas of Scotland. Her policies are delaying investment in housing.

Ms Alexander: Far from it, but I am glad that we share common ground on the need for public and private investment.

The other point on which we differ is debt. Seven authorities are actively considering community ownership and another 21 are looking at the opportunity. In each case, the Government is willing to lift the historic debt burden and spread some of it across the whole of Scotland—to all taxpayers—so that not just tenants contribute to a new start. That is what putting social justice at the heart of our agenda means.

There are different challenges in different parts of Scotland. In rural Scotland, the challenge is to ensure that it gets its fair share of the 6,000 new

homes that we will build every year. If rural Scotland got the lion's share of those houses, it would take only three years to ensure that one in four homes in Scotland's eight most rural authorities was available for rent. We therefore do not need to stop tenants of 30 years having the right to buy their own homes to create a real mix in rural or urban Scotland.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): Is the minister aware that the view of Highland Council and of the housing associations that are visiting the Parliament today is that the policies that the minister proposes will not increase the availability of affordable rented accommodation, but reduce it substantially? Is the minister right and it is they who are wrong? Does the minister resemble Mrs Thatcher, who was always right and everyone else was always wrong?

Ms Alexander: That is a serious point. Based on the modelling that we have done, the details of which nobody has disputed, we calculate that 850 additional sales will be generated by the extension, of which about 120 will be in rural areas—120 houses against the total uplift in the number of new houses that will be built every year. None of the people who have spoken to us has suggested that the figures will deviate substantially from those reached on the basis of the modelling. Shelter asked us to project retrospectively, which we have done. That may take the figure to under 1,000, but it will not lead to any substantial change in the current position.

It is important to ensure that we have a vibrant rental market so that the future is not just about those who cannot buy, but about those who choose to rent. Increasingly, young people who move from job to job want to rent, and not to put down roots just yet. We should help such people to rent.

Some elderly people want to move into sheltered accommodation and to have the security of a landlord to look after them in their old age. We will use the right to buy to protect sheltered housing so that that is possible.

Some people say that there is a better way to approach the right to buy; I say that there is not. Either the single tenancy, to which every party represented in this chamber is committed, includes the right to buy, or we deny it. If we shirk that choice, we are telling the people of Scotland that although they fought long and hard to have this Parliament, we, the first generation of its politicians, are not prepared to let them continue to have the rights that they currently have. That would be wrong. Who would make the decision: the local councillor, the local housing official, or some local committee? We cannot be part of taking away a right that people have and want to

have.

Too often, the old Scotland was about professional prejudices rather than about people. On the subject of professionals, I know that many people have an ideological objection to the right to buy. Too much of the lobby briefing is about opinion, not about fact. We have not received one refutation of the figures in the consultation paper. More important, we have not heard from tenants objecting to the proposal.

I will read briefly from one letter of support that I have received.

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): Will the minister give way?

Ms Alexander: Let me continue. The letter says:

"Dear Ms Alexander,

I am just writing to let you know how ecstatic my wife and I felt upon hearing the news that assured tenants of housing associations would at last have the right to buy . . . Could I also add that, as expected, I see by a report in an evening newspaper that the SFHA are vehemently opposed to your proposals. I trust you will resist by all means at your disposal their attempts to get you to reconsider as in my opinion they are trotting out the same tired arguments that they have always done in order to protect their own fiefdoms. I thought the point you made about ending second class citizens was a most salient one. I apologise for taking up your time as I know how busy you must be." [Laughter.]

There are thousands of people across Scotland who say that they would like a home. This is about tenants writing in and saying, "We want the rights that our neighbours have."

Mr Quinan: Will the minister give way?

Tommy Sheridan: Will the minister give way?

Ms Alexander: Can I turn to Mr Sheridan: let me—

Tommy Sheridan: Will the minister give way? I wouldnae mind getting a wee mention.

Ms Alexander: Okay, Mr Sheridan.

Tommy Sheridan: Is the minister telling us that her policy is based on the strength of one letter that she has received—

Ms Alexander *rose*—

Tommy Sheridan: Sorry—I have not finished my question.

Is the minister basing policy on one letter from a housing association tenant? If so, does that not mean that she is ignoring the wishes expressed through housing associations across the country, for example Calvay Housing Association, which has stated that it is against the extension of the right to buy?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): I remind the minister before she answers that she has had 25 minutes.

Ms Alexander: I am interested in supporting the punters, not the professionals and, on that point, let us take Mr Sheridan's ward of Dormanside in Pollok. The housing association in that ward wrote to me last week. Its letter did not say, "Please don't take away our right to buy," it said, "Wendy, you are being too hard on people who want the right to buy; we would like the right to buy to be made easier." That is what the punters think in Mr Sheridan's ward and elsewhere.

Tommy Sheridan: Was the letter from a tenant or from a professional?

Ms Alexander: It was written by a professional on behalf of housing association tenants in Mr Sheridan's ward.

Tommy Sheridan: Exactly.

Ms Alexander: Tenants in Mr Sheridan's ward are saying that they want the right to buy.

The choice is clear. As politicians we either stand with the people or we let the professional lobbyists resist the right to buy, family by family.

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP) *rose*—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The minister is winding up.

Ms Alexander: I will conclude with one new proposal. We will include in the housing bill provisions to target improvement and repair grants on owner-occupiers who are least able to pay. It is in accord with principles of social justice that the resources available to owner-occupiers through improvement and repair grants should be handed out on the basis of ability to pay.

This year's Booker prize shortlist included the novel by Scots writer Andrew O'Hagan, "Our Fathers". It deals with Scottish housing in a very human way: the messiness of people's lives; domestic violence and alcohol abuse; good intentions and hopes crushed; the loss of faith. It offers an insight for us today. It talks of the vision that inspired women at the start of the 20th century to strike for fair rents and of their sons who built skyscrapers to escape the smog of tenements and breathe clean air. It also charts the disillusionment of their grandchildren. It pleads with us not to crucify earlier generations for their mistakes. I hope that we can bring that humanity to our first full-length housing debate.

At the end of the 20th century, we know what works in Scottish housing: trusting the people. That is what lies at the heart of the bill. We can meet the challenges ahead not simply by talking about social justice, but by delivering it. If we put the interests of the people first, we will succeed.

I move,

That the Parliament acknowledges the need for action to provide good quality and accessible housing and strong and secure communities; welcomes the Executive's proposals to achieve this through a range of measures including the introduction of a single social tenancy, the development of a single regulatory framework for social housing, the promotion of a stronger strategic role in housing for local authorities, and a new role and status for Scottish Homes, and notes that the Executive will bring forward a Housing Bill to deliver these objectives.

10:02

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): The Minister for Communities closed with the comment that we need humanity in housing. I remind her that there are women and families in Scotland who want to pay a fair rent but are denied the possibility of doing so because of record levels of homelessness under this Government and the prospect of policies that could make the situation worse. I sympathise and agree with her that we must ensure that people have fair rents and fair homes, but that is not what is being promised or has been delivered by the Executive.

Listening to her this morning reminds me of one of the reasons why the Parliament has powers to provide checks and balances and to hold the Executive to account. The greatest check the Executive requires is a reality check. What we see from the Lib-Lab coalition is a mess in housing policy: record levels of homelessness that they cannot deny; a crisis in housing investment that they have acknowledged; faltering stock transfer proposals with serious concerns raised by lenders; and a misguided, wrong-headed flagship policy on the extension of right to buy. Even on simple issues where cross-party agreement exists, such as the reform of mortgage repossession law, we are left hanging for months.

Today the Minister for Communities told us about the new proposals in the housing bill. Although we welcome the prospect of a housing bill, we are deeply disappointed that it will not be published until the second year of the Administration with the act not approved until the third year. The hustle and bustle of activity and announcement by the minister has more to do with being seen to do something than with delivering on housing.

The Minister for Communities acknowledged that she inherited a green paper with most of the work and thinking done. There has been cross-party agreement on issues such as the single secure tenancy, the single regulatory framework, the abolition of the quango board of Scottish Homes, and, according to the last announcement, the establishment of a community fund to help with common repairs. The fault line exists on the issue of housing policy—on the big issues of

homelessness, stock transfer and housing finance—where the disagreement is fundamental.

The Minister for Communities tells us that the Executive has a radical housing policy. If a discredited Tory agenda is a radical policy, the minister is welcome to it.

Ms Alexander: I would be grateful if Fiona Hyslop could clarify for me the SNP's position on the right to buy. Her party is committed to a single social tenancy. Is the right to buy within that single social tenancy? Would 700,000 tenants lose the rights that they have under the SNP's proposals? Where does the SNP stand?

Fiona Hyslop: The SNP has made its position quite clear: the right to buy should be preserved. We are not talking about taking rights away from people. A single social tenancy can have variations. The minister has already said that she wants to exempt charities and special housing. She acknowledges that different systems for the right to buy can exist within a single social tenancy. She knows that, I know that, and people outside know that.

On consulting the voluntary sector on the right to buy, the Executive is renegeing on the compact agreement with the voluntary sector. What consultation took place with the tenants who volunteered in housing association movements? I do not think that any did. I think that the Executive has renegeed on the compact with the voluntary sector.

Like the Tories, the current Administration is obsessed with the idea that home ownership is best at any cost. Although the SNP supports people who want to own their homes, that right should not be granted at the expense of those who want to rent. The Administration's housing policy is shot through with the notion that renting is second class, and that affordable rented accommodation in this country should be further reduced.

The key difference between the SNP and Labour is that we believe that, in a single social tenancy environment, the right to rent is imperative, not just for existing tenants but for those of the future. We have a responsibility to provide quality affordable housing for everyone. We need vision and policy, but we also need to deliver investment to address the real housing agenda, which concerns quality and standards.

The minister says that the Executive will divert to rural areas the proposed 18,000 houses to receive development funding from Scottish Homes. If the Executive does that, what will happen to the urban areas? There will be no new development money for sheltered accommodation, for wheelchair users or for a community care environment. The Executive's target is 18,000 new houses—6,000 a year. In West Lothian alone, there are 9,500

people on a waiting list. Do we believe that 6,000 houses a year is ambitious?

Ms Alexander: There will be no change in urban areas only if the SNP's policy to oppose community ownership of housing stock is adopted in places such as Glasgow—community ownership that would bring £1,000 million of new investment into that city, at an average of £17,000 per tenant.

Fiona Hyslop: If the minister will allow me, I shall address that point later. The SNP supports community ownership, and where stock transfer proposals are small and community led there is no problem. The problem lies with the finances and accountability of the Executive's proposed wholesale stock transfer.

The Executive cannot escape from the fact that public housing is unattractive in this country for the same reason that homelessness is on the increase: a lack of investment and vision represent two sides of the same coin. We must not be duped into thinking that the housing bill will be a panacea for Scotland's housing crisis. It will move the legislative framework on, but the key issues of homelessness and the appalling condition of housing in Scotland will be dealt with only following changes in investment strategy and policy. The continuation of wrong-headed policies such as wholesale stock transfer, coupled with the continuing starvation of public support for council housing, will not relieve homelessness: it will increase it.

David Mundell (South of Scotland) (Con): Can Fiona Hyslop explain why SNP councillors on Dumfries and Galloway Council, who are, rather strangely, in coalition with Labour—sometimes circumstances take precedence over principles—are supporting a transfer of 11,000 houses to one provider?

Fiona Hyslop: I will make the position in Dumfries and Galloway clear. SNP councillors have agreed to propose a feasibility study; they have not agreed to support a wholesale stock transfer.

The problem that councils face is that they are being forced to consider stock transfer proposals because there is no other game in town. There can be small-scale stock transfers, but there are other means and mechanisms. Scottish Homes gave evidence to the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee to the effect that there are other ways to get the private finance that Wendy Alexander wants into public sector housing.

The Deputy Minister for Local Government (Mr Frank McAveety) rose—

Fiona Hyslop: I would like to move on to

homelessness, if Frank does not mind.

If ever there was concrete evidence that new Labour and its Liberal partners are failing, it is the record—and rising—level of homelessness. A key test of the success of a nation's housing policy is the level of homelessness. This Government has failed, and continues to fail that test. We can also see that the key policies that the Government has announced have started to make the situation worse.

When the minister implies that homelessness is not necessarily a housing issue and tries to redefine the homelessness problem, she betrays the analysis of an Executive that thinks that it can solve the problem by redefining it. While the SNP welcomes the setting up of the homelessness task force, we are disappointed by the experiences of those who work with the homeless and the homeless themselves.

The Deputy Minister for Communities (Jackie Baillie) rose—

Fiona Hyslop: I must move on.

The Executive's rhetoric meets what is happening on the ground with a sharp and uncompromising bump.

Jackie Baillie: Will Fiona Hyslop give way?

Fiona Hyslop: I will take Jackie Baillie's intervention.

Jackie Baillie: Fiona Hyslop made a point about the homelessness task force, which has consulted professionals and homeless people directly. I hope that Fiona welcomes that. Let me remind her, however, that it is not just the Executive's assertion that homelessness has to do with more than just housing; that assertion comes from academic studies. People tell us that underlying homelessness are the problems of domestic violence, substance abuse and alcohol addiction. We must address those to find a comprehensive solution. Does Fiona Hyslop agree?

Fiona Hyslop: Why was a Young Women's Christian Association hostel in Edinburgh converted into self-contained flats? That hostel provided support for people with alcohol, mental health and drugs problems. The people who used that hostel do not now have the accommodation they need. The hostel nearest to the minister's plush offices at Victoria Quay—Beth-Haven hostel on Parliament Street, which was managed by the haven housing association and the Bethany Christian mission—was closed just before Christmas because the trust could not get a written guarantee that future funding would be forthcoming. That means that there has been a loss to the homeless of direct access provision.

In Glasgow the Young Men's Christian

Association's Downtown project does invaluable work but it faces closure. Its initial funding is complete but there is no sign of new money. Some agencies are changing their remits in order to meet rough sleepers initiative funding requirements. Bid and challenge funding for RSI is causing problems. People are facing difficulties that the Government is not addressing.

I will move on to what the SNP would do.

Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab) rose—

Fiona Hyslop: I must move on. My time is limited.

We must address the situation that results from 18 years of Tory decline. We must acknowledge that the homelessness task force will bring forward good proposals to tackle homelessness, but the proposals must be backed up by legislation and the minister will shortly, no doubt, make a statement about that to the chamber. Proposals must also be backed up by the abandonment of wrong-headed and divisive policies such as stock transfer. The current investment strategy must be reversed and new resources must be released to replenish public housing. At the moment city hostels need to apply for RSI money because councils are cutting their grants and the councils are doing that because the Executive is cutting funding to them.

To tackle homelessness there must be quality affordable housing and achieving that requires investment, but public investment is in very bad shape following 18 years of Tory decline followed by three years of Labour and now Labour and Liberal Democrat dithering.

Bristow Muldoon rose—

Fiona Hyslop: If Bristow does not mind, I would like to move on.

As Bristow well knows, the collapse in income from capital receipts and ever-tightening borrowing consent have left local authorities with a housing investment crisis, the like of which has not been seen in modern times. Squeezed by clawback on one side and by an ever-tightening fiscal regime on the other, it is no wonder that councils are being forced to give up the ghost and to examine wholesale stock transfer.

There has been a 60 per cent drop in the housing capital programme that is matched by a 59 per cent increase in homeless figures in the 1990s. I do not think that that is a coincidence. We now face the consequences of chronic under-investment that stretches over decades—talk about chickens coming home to roost. While Rome burns, new Labour fiddles. Millions of pounds of taxpayers' money is being spent on expensive consultants' reports so that the Executive can get the answers that it wants to

hear. That money should be used to build homes for the homeless, but it is being spent on laptops and flip charts. Not one brick will be bought, not one builder put to work, not one roof erected, with the £26 million being spent on feasibility studies and endless financial projections and scenarios.

Even in a best-case scenario, the Scottish Executive will make no substantial investment in housing until after the stock transfers have taken place. On an optimistic timetable, as the minister said in answer to a parliamentary question, that will not happen for another 24 months. If tenants reject the new landlord in the ballot, what then? On the promise of jam tomorrow, Scotland's public sector will have faced four years of new Labour neglect in addition to the 18 years of decline administered by the Tories.

Ms Alexander: Does Fiona Hyslop acknowledge that the new housing partnership programme has been under way for some time? We expect hundreds of homes to be started in Scotland this year. The difference between the SNP and the Executive is that we will leave it for authorities to decide whether to move to a new future for their housing stock. That will provide an opportunity for the debt problem to be dealt with, rather than the cherry-picked solutions that she appears to be suggesting.

Fiona Hyslop: Cherry-picking is different from the Labour Executive's one-size-fits-all policy. I think that the minister will acknowledge that we must have local solutions to local problems. We must make financial options available, but this Executive is not doing that.

To return to housing finance, I do not deny that, using the minister's figures, the Executive is investing more money in housing. However, the difficulty is that, in its first three years, the Labour Government carried out the cuts begun by the Tories and therefore started from a low base in the first place. That is why we have seen a 60 per cent cut in housing investment during the 1990s.

The status quo is unacceptable. I will move on to what the SNP would do, as I believe that we must have a constructive role to play. Today—not in two years or four years—we would ask Scotland's local authorities to propose revised business plans and to identify the capital resources required to bring their stock up to date. There would be no blank cheques or meaningless spending commitments. We would say to local authorities, "Make a case for investment, prove that you can bring your stock up to standard and you will be allowed to borrow the money you need, based on a sound business plan." The capacity exists within the system to allow an increase in borrowing.

New Labour may say, "But the Treasury won't let us." Let me quote from a speech made by the

leader of the Labour party, Tony Blair, at the 1999 Labour party conference. There's a thing—Fiona Hyslop quoting Tony Blair.

"If there are Treasury rules or antiquated concepts of public borrowing that hold us back, change them. That is what intelligent Government is for."

Well, Tony, you were right on that point. That is what we would do in an independent Scotland—an independent, intelligent Government would change the rules to allow local authorities to borrow the resources that they need. We are confident that they would be able to do so.

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): Given that we do not have an independent Scotland, how does the SNP propose to fund these proposals?

Fiona Hyslop: I thank Robert Brown for his intervention. He is on cue.

Without independence, without changing the public spending borrowing requirement rules—even under the present rules—Gordon Brown could allow councils to borrow what they require without breaching the Maastricht criteria. Has the minister asked him to consider borrowing consent for local authorities? I am not sure that she has.

What about the debt? We could use exactly the same mechanisms that the minister proposes to manage the worst cases of debt, except that we would not force stock transfer on the authorities concerned. For example, Glasgow spends almost the same amount in debt charges that the new landlord would have to spend on refurbishment. Take the debt away and allow the council to use its own resources, without extra borrowing, to solve its own problems.

To answer Robert Brown's point about devolution, what if the Treasury will not allow that? We could use the homes and communities public service trust to bring in private finance. We could consider the other options proposed by Scottish Homes.

Mr McAveety: Will the member give way?

Fiona Hyslop: I want to get on with my speech.

Where would we get the money to help with the seed-corn finance? The SNP would commit an extra £175 million on top of the money being provided by the Executive to help to generate investment and to ensure that we could crank up the public service trust to get the £1 billion that is needed in housing, which could be achieved without wholesale stock transfer. Scotland is a rich nation and, under independence, we would have greater resources. Under devolution, the SNP has already said that it would reject the Chancellor's penny tax bribe.

Unlike new Labour, we do not promise jam tomorrow. However, we would like to act now to

turn around the oil tanker of neglect. Unlike new Labour, we do not have a policy of one size fits all. We are a Scottish Parliament that should take into account all parts of this nation. When people such as the deputation last night come to us from the Highlands and Islands, we must be struck by what they say and take that into account. We want a Scottish national housing policy, not a housing policy just for Glasgow and just for the minister's career. We do not promise that everything can be done straight away; it will take time to repair the neglect. However, it would happen and it could start today. We have shown how we can take things forward.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): As a Glasgow MSP, I say that if we solve Glasgow's problems, we will solve a major problem for Scotland. It is about time that this Parliament took ownership of Glasgow's problems. Glasgow paid a heavy price on behalf of Scotland for generations, and if this Government does nothing else than address Glasgow's housing problems, that will be a major benefit for the whole of Scotland.

Fiona Hyslop: Is it not about time that the Labour party faced up to its responsibilities in Glasgow and acknowledged that it has failed and failed again?

Mr McAveety *rose*—

Fiona Hyslop: Sorry, I will not take an intervention from the person who was the biggest slum landlord in western Europe. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Fiona Hyslop: Okay, I will give way to Frank McAveety.

Mr McAveety: Having understood Glasgow far more intimately than Fiona Hyslop ever could imagine or aspire to, I want to highlight two fundamental issues. First, if the local authority took the approach that the SNP is arguing for today, it would take 20-plus years to implement. The attraction of the option of stock transfer for people in Glasgow is that it can be implemented within a meaningful time scale. The people on the ground in Glasgow have made that decision. That is local accountability and it reflects local concern.

Secondly, today Fiona Hyslop has made great play at the dispatch box about policy. I quote from an SNP document produced for the election. It said:

"There are not funds in the Scottish Block for a proper solution."

Fiona Hyslop's whole argument this morning is that there are funds in the present Scottish block for a proper solution. The SNP was either wrong in May or wrong now.

Fiona Hyslop: In May we said that a public

service trust, invested with £175 million, could generate the same type of investments that Labour is proposing in Glasgow. It is absolutely true that we need to address the Glasgow housing situation, but let us not do that at the expense of other areas. Let us do it so that it happens now and let us ensure that the tenants are involved. That is why the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee of this Parliament is considering the Glasgow stock transfer proposals and others.

We do not promise that the problems of housing in Scotland can be dealt with straight away—it will take some time to repair the neglect. However, the SNP could do it. This Executive could also do it, if it put its mind to it, and could start today. What we need is intelligent government, drive and political will. However, under new Labour we are stuck with reviews, feasibility studies and management consultants' dream city.

There are families living in cold, damp homes. There are homeless people desperate for a home of their own and looking for leadership and intelligent government. Everyone knows that Scotland's housing crisis has to be a main priority, but we are stuck with drift, dither and desperate measures. The Scottish people deserve and expect more from this Government when it comes to improving Scotland's housing. Unfortunately, they are unlikely to get it from the Executive's proposals.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: For the record, I ask the member to move her amendment formally.

Fiona Hyslop: I move amendment S1M-408.2, to leave out from "welcomes" to end and insert:

"notes the Executive's proposals to achieve this through a range of measures, including the introduction of a single social tenancy, the development of a single regulatory framework for social housing, the promotion of a stronger strategic role in housing for local authorities, and a new role and status for Scottish Homes, but believes that these measures alone will not improve the position of Scotland's 80000 homeless people and that the Executive must give greater priority to dealing with chronic under investment in Scotland's public and voluntary housing including the reversal of their policy of wholesale stock transfer."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Keith Harding to speak to and move amendment SM1-408.1. He has up to 18 minutes.

10:23

Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I welcome the minister's statement and the opportunity to debate housing. I am particularly pleased that a housing bill is to be brought forward at a later date, as both we and the SNP criticised the Executive for the absence of such a proposal in its legislative programme. I hope that that is evidence of a listening Administration.

Much of what is proposed is inherited or extended Conservative policies. I do not think, therefore, that those policies were a total failure over the past 18 years, as Fiona Hyslop keeps suggesting. It is a pity that Labour in opposition was not as enlightened as Labour in government. If it had been, we would already be a long way down the road of stock transfers.

Under the Scottish Conservatives, home ownership in Scotland increased from 35 per cent in 1979 to more than 60 per cent now. We are committed to continuing the extension of home ownership, as there are still many people in Scotland who would like the opportunity to own their own home. That is a clear aspiration for the vast majority of Scots—83 per cent when the question was most recently surveyed.

Ms Alexander: Will Keith Harding comment on the fact that it was his colleague Lord James Douglas-Hamilton who removed the right to buy from housing association tenants in 1989? We are now seeking to restore that right. It is wrong to imply that anyone has a monopoly of wisdom in this area.

Mr Harding: Lord James Douglas-Hamilton will deal with that later himself. I do not think that his conversion was as great as that of Labour members, who were totally against the right to buy. It is a pity that the minister intervened when she did, because she would have been quite pleased with my next sentence.

Because so many Scots want to own their own home, we support the Executive's commitment to extend the right to buy to housing association tenants. However, we accept that the extension of home ownership is not the solution to all Scotland's housing problems. To improve the standard of housing for everyone in Scotland, control of housing should be devolved from councils to local housing associations, housing co-operatives or companies, or a range of other providers. The devolution of power to tenants would give them a far greater say in the management of their homes and would bring in private sector investment to assist in necessary repair and renovation projects. To achieve that, we would support a system of stock transfer running in tandem with debt reduction.

The real devolution of control over housing needs to be accompanied by further efforts to revitalise the private rented sector in Scotland. The standard and availability of private rented accommodation in Scotland needs to be improved, as the flexibility that it offers is necessary for many people, particularly for younger tenants. That is especially true in a modern economy in which young people move around to improve their employment prospects.

There are areas of housing policy that need specific attention. One of the biggest problems that is faced by council tenants is anti-social and disruptive tenants. Sadly, too many councils have abdicated their responsibility to their tenants in that area. Local housing providers would better reflect the wishes of their communities, and would control and, if necessary, evict anti-social tenants.

Greater attention should be given to housing for those with special needs. Local housing providers should be encouraged to adapt houses for elderly and disabled people. That could be done through grants and a requirement to provide a minimum percentage of sheltered houses in any new development. A proper mix within a neighbourhood is essential, and such a requirement would help to ensure that elderly and disabled people were included in mainstream housing.

As Fiona Hyslop said, we must address homelessness, which is at an all-time high. We look forward to reading and debating the report from the task force on homelessness at an early date.

Local authority expenditure for improving housing conditions in the private sector has suffered substantial cuts since 1995. Before 1995, funds that were allocated to councils by Government for housing were ring-fenced. As a result of the change, capital spending on private sector housing plummeted from £118 million in 1995-96 to only £45.3 million in 1998-99. Nearly £200 million that would previously have been spent on improving housing conditions for elderly and low-income home owners has been spent on other local government services. Both groups are growing, and their need for support increases year on year; therefore, I welcome the minister's statement. We ask the minister to consider the reintroduction of ring-fenced moneys for improving the housing conditions of those groups.

The principles of extending ownership of housing to individuals and communities and of devolving control to local communities offer the best hope of solving many of Scotland's housing problems. There is now enough common ground in this chamber on these issues to justify the hope that the new Parliament can improve the standard of housing for everyone in Scotland.

I have not taken up much time. I thought that I would have more interventions, as Fiona Hyslop had.

I move amendment S1M-408.1, to leave out from "welcomes" to end and insert:

"notes the Executive's proposals to achieve this and notes that the Executive will bring forward a Housing Bill; calls upon the Executive to include within this Bill measures to deal with the alarming problem of homelessness which

has increased dramatically since May 1997; welcomes the Executive's commitment to extend the Right to Buy to Housing Association tenants, but emphasises that measures may be necessary to safeguard individual Associations where the take-up of this right could prejudice the operation, viability or success of these Associations."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Robert Brown for the Liberal Democrats. He has up to 18 minutes.

10:29

Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD): I must confess, Presiding Officer, that I was caught slightly short by the brevity of Mr Harding's contribution. Nevertheless, his comments are welcome in a number of respects.

Nothing is more significant to the quality of life of the individual and to the strength of local communities than the houses that people live in. Houses are not just buildings, they are homes, providing places for shelter, recreation and study, and for the shared life of families of all types. All too often, they are also the arena for domestic violence, financial pressures and inadequate heating.

Housing is a major economic sector, creating construction jobs and repair and maintenance jobs. It makes a major call on national public expenditure and contributes to individual wealth or poverty. It is probably true to say that housing policy in Scotland has been bedevilled by more failed political theories and more disastrous programmes that have not achieved their objectives, and has been the subject of more political bribes masquerading as policy strategies, than any other subject area.

It is therefore appropriate to begin with some humility and caution in making claims about housing. People are not interested in the most radical housing strategy ever, the biggest ever investment in housing or the world-shattering nature of Government pronouncements or of Opposition castigations. They have heard it all before. More important, they have lived through its failures before.

Nevertheless, there is much to be welcomed in the Scottish Executive's actions on housing. The commitment that no one should have to sleep rough by 2003 is important and challenging. It must be achieved if the blight of rooflessness that so often affects young people is to be removed from Scotland. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the reputation of the minister and of the Executive depends on it. The Executive is tackling the matter in a targeted way through the homelessness task force and with the involvement of the voluntary sector and other housing professionals. The detailed examination of the situation in Glasgow, where the biggest problems

are, gives hope that workable, locally sensitive and accessible programmes will be put in place.

My second cautionary note is that legislation is not the be-all and end-all. Legislation can sometimes provide the framework and remove obstacles, but the success of the housing association movement shows that it is people and communities that win the battles and build success.

Perhaps because of the overemphasis on the right to buy, I consider the minister's statement on the proposed contents of the housing bill something of a mixed bag. There are good things about it, such as the reform of Scottish Homes, which was foreshadowed in the Liberal Democrat manifesto and in the partnership agreement. She is right to recognise the difference between the funding and strategic roles of Scottish Homes and its regulatory role. The fact that Scottish Homes will be no longer an unelected quango but a Scottish Executive agency that is accountable to the minister and to Parliament gives the Executive a strategic housing agency and reverses the peculiarly damaging Conservative obsession with removing democratic control from state policy.

Fiona Hyslop: Robert Brown makes some important points about housing legislation. Does he agree that it is disappointing that the Executive did not take the opportunity to introduce a housing bill in the first year of the Scottish Parliament? The minister's proposals may be a mixed bag, but Mr Brown outlined a number of points that were included in the SNP manifesto and that, although not included in the Labour manifesto, have belatedly become Executive policy. Does he agree that, because there is consensus on the legislative elements of the proposed bill, we could be moving much more quickly to create the right legislative framework?

Robert Brown: I do not accept that. My view, as Fiona Hyslop is aware, is that a number of the points in my proposed member's bill could be legislated on now without too much difficulty. However, it is right that time be taken over the major issues that Wendy Alexander has put before the chamber today and over the policy papers. This matter involves complicated legislative and administrative issues, which we must get right, as anyone who has examined the existing legislation—the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 and the Housing (Scotland) Act 1988—would immediately recognise.

We give a qualified welcome to the announcement that councils are to have a greater role in determining funding priorities for housing. Keith Harding referred to the way in which the abolition of the separate, non-housing revenue capital account has led to a diminution of resources being allocated specifically to that

sector. The minister could consider whether there are ways in which the housing association part of investment funding can be safeguarded in the new strategic role that she is giving to councils.

The move towards councils is long overdue. It cannot be right that local representatives have only a partial role in this crucial area, but the qualification is that local representatives must be fairly and accountably elected. The Liberal Democrat insistence on proportional representation, particularly in local government, is not a quaint foible; it is a categorical demand, based on the unanswerable principle that people should get the councils that they vote for and that councils should have the democratic legitimacy that can come only from a proper electoral mandate.

Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Robert Brown: Not at the moment.

Let me say to those Labour MSPs who allegedly are preparing to go back on their party's commitment on PR that they undermine the future and credibility of local government by their support for a bad and undemocratic electoral system.

The other qualification that I have on these reforms is a plea that the proper role of different institutions be recognised. It is right that the Government enforces minimum standards, but it must allow a variety of patterns suitable to local needs. It is right that councils set local priorities, but they must let housing associations and co-operatives be sovereign in their particular spheres.

Brian Adam: Will the member give way now?

Robert Brown: No.

I touched on the Scottish Executive's proposals for a single social tenancy before because of the welter of different arrangements that apply to different regimes, which is the very negation of justice. Only about half a dozen people in Scotland understand the system properly, and they assuredly do not include most of the people affected by the 1987 and 1988 housing acts. The complicated legislation on the creation of tenancies, evictions, rates of repair and compensation and rights against anti-social tenants is long overdue for reform.

In principle, therefore, the single social tenancy is to be welcomed. It was a commitment of the Liberal Democrat manifesto and the partnership agreement, which we are extremely pleased to see being implemented. We await with interest the details, but I urge the minister to look carefully at the right to repair. The model secure tenancy agreement may be the basis for that right, but a clear statement of workable rights and remedies is needed, as is legislation.

I want to re-empower local councils, but I am aware that administrative talent is variable across councils and between different departments. I am also aware that political considerations and municipal empire building can sometimes override common sense and equity, and lead to exaggerated support for the structures of direct labour organisations and housing management departments.

Fergus Ewing: On municipal authorities, is the Liberal Democrats' position the same as that of the SNP, which is that we are concerned that in the Highlands and in rural Scotland the effect of the proposals will be to reduce an already inadequate stock of affordable housing? Is that the Liberal Democrats' position, or will they support the Labour proposals that will further diminish the stock of affordable rented rural housing?

Robert Brown: I will deal with that matter in considerable detail shortly but, before doing so, I wish to say that the mechanism for a proper relationship between central Government and local government should be a reinvigorated housing plan, drawn up by councils under guidelines and subject to discussion and approval by the Scottish Executive.

It is too soon to assess the effects of the new measures on anti-social tenants introduced under the Crime and Disorder Act 1998. However, the provision of effective noise insulation in houses, particularly in tenements, is likely to go a lot further towards cutting the number of anti-social complaints than is a raft of new laws. I am well aware that, if I lived in a council tenement, the noise from my teenage son's discordant compact discs and other sources of noise in my house would lead to a volume of neighbour complaints, which currently are prevented only by the thickness of the stone walls between my neighbour and me. I welcome the proposal to collect central statistics on eviction actions, because I was astonished to discover in an answer to a parliamentary question that I lodged that those statistics are not kept. It is a considerable move forward that they will now be kept.

The proposal to build on the success of such schemes as the Dundee families project is also important. However, we should keep a proper concept of individual rights in relation to anti-social neighbour situations. It would not be the first time that officialdom had got the wrong end of the stick and blamed the wrong tenant or family for problems. I hope that the statement on page 20 of the paper on housing and anti-social behaviour that the role of the courts in repossession cases is

"to be satisfied that suitable alternative accommodation is available"

is a slip of the pen. The role of the courts is to be satisfied that justice is being done and that the anti-social behaviour exists. We would not welcome a return to the days when councils could legally evict tenants on 28 days' notice without cause.

I must say to the minister that the right to buy is not a housing strategy. There are a variety of reasons to support it, ranging from populism to fears of social engineering and dislike of socially rented housing. Right to buy involves a transfer of assets—provided by public investment—from the public to a smaller group of individuals at the expense of the community at large.

Ms Alexander: Will Robert Brown clarify the nature of the single social tenancy that he proposes? Will it have two rights on the right to buy or infinite rights on the right to buy, depending on a local decision by an unnamed person that would remove an existing right from 700,000 people? The Executive's position is one right, I think that the SNP's position is two rights and I think that the Liberal Democrats' position is infinite rights, but I look forward to clarification.

Robert Brown: Negotiation between Ms Alexander and me may produce the answer in the course of time.

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): Will Robert Brown give way?

Robert Brown: No. If Alex Neil listens to what I say, he will find out what the Liberal Democrat position is on this matter.

The case for the right to buy is that people who have been tenants in their house for a long time have a moral right to an equity stake in that property. That is the minister's view. She must concede that it is less compelling when the rent is being paid by housing benefit, it is less compelling again when the discount is artificially high and it is not compelling at all when the effect is to distort the availability of houses in rural areas or to damage the financial and planning viability of urban housing associations.

I welcome the establishment of sinking funds or factoring schemes to deal with contributions by purchasers to repairs and maintenance and I welcome the minister's announcement that that will be targeted. We must be cautious, however, as the worst feature of the right to buy is that it threatens to recreate in common ownership property, such as tenements, the inadequacy of investment that has bedevilled many older private tenements. We must ensure that the investment is adequate.

The Chartered Institute of Housing has stated:

"These reforms should be based on decisions made at local level in light of local housing needs and markets."

The unanimous view of the housing bodies—professionals in this field—is that the right to buy should not be further extended. Why does the minister, who is so commendably keen to take the advice of Shelter, the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations, the Scottish Council for Single Homeless and the Chartered Institute of Housing on other matters, feel able to disregard such unanimity of view on this matter? Even the Tories express some concern about the extent to which the right to buy should be extended.

The minister has stated that, in rural Scotland, there will be 100 to 120 additional sales a year, which will be offset by Scottish Homes building or improving about 1,300 houses each year. Rural areas apparently include Dumfries, Inverness and Kilmarnock as well as Shetland and Aberdeenshire, which somewhat erodes the persuasiveness of the case. Our primary concern must be the dozen or so social tenancy houses that may be sold off to be holiday homes in a small village or town where there is often a dearth of land to build replacement housing for local people. Building new houses in a bigger rural town 20 or 30 miles away does not help that situation.

I do not think that the minister's figures are backed by outside analysis. Mike Rumbles will deal with that in more detail. Like Fiona Hyslop and Peter Peacock, I went to last night's meeting with a deputation from Highland Council.

Ms Alexander: Will Robert Brown give way?

Robert Brown: No, I will continue. We heard from Lochaber Housing Association that 37 per cent of council housing in Lochaber had been sold off under the existing right to buy. Much of that housing is in remote rural areas. Very little of it was replaced; much of it ended up contributing to the problem of second or holiday homes in the area. We heard that the association's main lender was likely to reassess its position and apply an extra premium if the minister's proposals came into effect.

The rate of sale is based on average figures from historic trends and should be treated with caution. In Glasgow, sales are nominal in hard-to-let areas and high in good terraced or semi-detached areas such as Mossbank or Knightswood. The average level of house sales is useless as a prediction tool for the rate of sale of housing association stock in a localised area of the city. The notion that the city council will be reflecting the low availability of rented stock in the west end of Glasgow by making appropriate investment decisions is far from reality; I would have thought that the last thing that the heavily congested west end needs is more houses of any kind.

The right to buy produces a residualisation effect

on council stock. The public sector is left with the worst properties in the most deprived areas—the houses that nobody wants to buy and that need the most investment. The right to buy does not create a modern rented sector but discredits the idea of rented stock as an option. That is in stark contrast to the situation in Europe, where good rented housing is a popular option. The right to buy distorts housing in many areas. There can be problems in meeting statutory housing duties and there is often a lack of houses of a certain type.

There is no evidence of a problem to be solved. The minister quoted a letter but I would be surprised if she has had scores of letters from housing association tenants—

Ms Alexander: The problem to be solved is this: four out of five Scots want to own their own homes. At the moment, two out of five Scots live in rented accommodation, yet Mr Brown is suggesting that the Parliament remove a statutory right to buy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have one minute left, Mr Brown.

Robert Brown: I think that some account should be taken of the fact that I have taken many interventions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am taking account of that.

Robert Brown: Not according to the clock.

Housing associations have successfully tapped voluntary effort in the community. People who believe in social housing have given their time and have been empowered. The statistics do not work out in the way that the minister suggests. We are not talking about taking away the right to buy; we are questioning whether it should be extended further.

We must deal with the complicated question of the viability and finances of particular housing associations. A survey done by the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations produced widespread concern. Partick Housing Association in Glasgow reports that it can accept only 10 per cent of applicants on to its list. There is a chronic shortage of large flats, but the housing association has sold off several much-needed three-bedroom flats and has no prospect of replacing them. Meadowside and Thornhill Housing Association says that it represents a small island of socially rented housing in a sea of owner-occupation. That will not be the case for much longer if the right to buy is extended.

Liberal Democrats do not take a dogmatic view on questions of the ownership of housing. We believe that no sort of tenure has an innate superiority over another. There is value in having mixed tenure and there is value in not having one-

class estates. It is widely recognised that there is value in increasing housing ownership in Scotland. It makes no sense to restore strategic control of housing to local authorities while imposing on them a requirement to sell even if that does not suit local conditions. I urge the minister to consult fully with professionals, tenants and other parties and to respond to the advice that she is given.

I have not had time to touch on housing stock transfer. The Parliament and the Executive have the potential to do a good job for Scottish housing after years of neglect and misdirected strategies. We have an able and enthusiastic minister who is more than capable of delivering the goods. There are a few things to rethink but we should not distort housing policy by overemphasising the Tory shibboleth of the right to buy. We need to sort the policies out and move forward together on this exciting housing project. I support the motion but express the reservations that members of my party feel.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Speeches are now open to the floor and, to allow as many speakers as possible, should last no longer than four minutes.

10:50

Ms Margaret Curran (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab): I welcome the debate, because it concerns an appropriately vigorous area of Government intervention.

We have already seen many significant achievements in housing. The Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee, of which I am convener, intends to be closely engaged in that process. I am sure that we will scrutinise with vigour the Executive's work, as much from a shared commitment to developing housing policy as from anything else. The committee is undertaking an investigation into housing stock transfers and, while we are in the midst of that investigation, it would be wrong of me to pre-empt our findings, but I can make—as others have done—a few preliminary remarks.

The situation in Glasgow is very important. I appreciate that we must not let that situation be the entire focus of our discussions on housing and I understand the issues that affect rural areas, but as a Glasgow MSP I must acknowledge the Executive's commitment to tackling fundamentally the crippling debt problem that Glasgow faces and to creating real opportunities to get much-needed investment into housing in Glasgow. Anyone who has had any involvement in housing in Glasgow, as I have over many years, knows that the status quo is not an option. Tenants in Glasgow know that real and fundamental change is required. If we are to deliver new and transparent policies, we

must be realistic about the options for the tenants in Glasgow.

In my constituency, I have seen the significant achievements of community-based housing associations. I have also seen real examples of collective organisation addressing housing need. I have never doubted the ability of ordinary people, with the proper support and resources, to develop services and provision that are appropriate to their needs.

However, we must be careful. The history of community organisation shows that it works best as a grass-roots movement, responding to local needs. Community ownership does not come cheaply, however; it needs to be supported and facilitated, resourced and encouraged.

The Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee is hearing some evidence that the tenants of Glasgow need to be more fully informed about the process that is taking place. We have still to hear evidence from Glasgow City Council, but we hope that the minister will give an assurance today that the tenants of Glasgow will be able to participate in a meaningful and constructive consultation process. I understand that proposals have to go to tenants through a ballot, and I support that, but we would argue for a fuller dialogue. That would deliver more effective community organisation in the long run, which is terribly important.

The right to buy, on which the committee will hear evidence, has become an issue of discussion this morning and it is important to focus on that. There are many perspectives on right to buy. Undoubtedly, there is widespread support for it—I do not question that. I understand the resentment of those who have invested much in their housing over the years but have little sense of ownership and control. It is not the job of the Parliament to frustrate the legitimate aspirations of those who wish to own their own homes; indeed, we must attempt to facilitate that wish effectively.

It has to be acknowledged, however—as it has been by the minister—that the socially rented sector can meet the needs of different parts of the population at different stages in their lives. I support the choice and quality that the private sector provides, but if we support choice and quality in that sector, we must also create the means to support choice and quality in the socially rented sector.

We must recognise that some housing organisations have flagged up difficulties. I have listened to the debate this morning around those difficulties, and I appreciate that some people are against the extension of the right to buy. Some people understand the Executive's points on the need to extend the right to buy, but are asking the

Executive to consider the qualifications for that extension. I ask that we examine thoroughly the debate on the right to buy.

As Robert Brown said, the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations is against the extension and has raised some questions about the Executive's figures. The federation says that the current proposals to bring significant new investment into rented housing will increase the demand for purchase. It states that, over the past 20 years, there has been a 30 per cent reduction in rented stock and that, with the extension of right to buy and an improvement in the quality of the stock, a further 300,000 rented homes could be lost over the next 20 years.

Shelter has a slightly different position; it says that we need to deliver a truly strategic right to buy, which must have elements of local discretion to adapt to local markets and needs. The intention is not to give an overweening power to certain professionals over individual properties, but to reassure organisations such as Women's Aid that we can address appropriately the needs of women who are fleeing domestic violence.

It is important that we do not let the whole debate get lost in the right to buy, as there are many constructive elements to this subject. I argue that there has been a significant shift in the style and content of housing policy in Scotland. There have been radical commitments on homelessness that can genuinely create a seismic shift in the nature of that problem. We could be on the brink of delivering a package of measures for social progress, regeneration and the genuine empowerment of individuals and communities.

Let us be determined not to repeat the mistakes of the past. We must ensure that the socially rented sector does not become residual housing for a new underclass. New models are not a global panacea for all the housing issues—challenges that face all of us in the chamber. We must move from a culture in which we think that every solution that is presented becomes a new set of problems. We must move from a culture of opposition to one of partnership.

We have big issues to address about the housing of the black and ethnic minority communities. Women's organisations have substantial points to make about the nature of housing across the board—we must listen to what they have to say.

Housing has at last been given its proper place in the context of social policy, but unless we fundamentally address some of the issues relating to the socially rented sector, we will never deliver on our policies on social inclusion. I hope that the Executive can pay proper attention to some of the housing organisations.

10:56

Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP): Ten years ago, the country was shocked when homelessness reached 29,000 applications a year. Unfortunately, we have reached the record level of 45,000 applications a year. For those in the chamber who are unaware of this, another deeply depressing fact is that five rough sleepers died on the streets of Edinburgh during the Christmas and new year period, including Steven Mack, who was one of the authors of "A Charter for Rough Sleepers", which we all received from the Edinburgh Streetwork Project.

I would think on that: five people have died on the streets of Edinburgh, despite the fact that this country is richer now than it has ever been. As Gordon Brown keeps reminding us, the economy is stronger than ever. Unfortunately, neither the political will nor the political priority exist to eradicate the national disgrace that forces the young, the vulnerable and the victims of circumstance to a nomadic life on the pavements and in the doorways of not only our major cities, but towns from Lerwick to Langholm.

We are right to condemn that disgrace. It is welcome that new Labour at least acknowledge the national shame. The minister is to be commended for her commitment that by 2003 no one should have to sleep rough. The Executive has acknowledged that improvements must be seen, but there is a substantial difference between improvements being seen and improvements being made. Numerous press releases have told us of the Executive's commitment to the rough sleepers initiative, which, although welcome, must not be seen as a panacea for homelessness. As Shelter has pointed out, it is a first step. It may take people off the streets, but it does not provide permanent accommodation. I, for one, accept—and I am sure that many others in the chamber will agree—that a place in a hostel is not a home.

No amount of good news press releases can mask the fact that, after three years of new Labour in new Britain, homelessness in Scotland has increased by 11 per cent to a record level of 45,000 applications. Would it not have been better to prevent the homelessness occurring than to clear up the mess afterwards? The new thinking is exemplified by our colleagues in new Labour, and indeed, by Ms Wendy Alexander, the member for Paisley North, who repeats the mantra that homelessness

"is not a problem about bricks and mortar".

Unfortunately, homelessness is a direct consequence of the lack of availability of affordable housing.

Ms Alexander: Will the member give way?

Mr Quinan: No, Wendy.

No amount of RSI money will provide that housing, and as long as the RSI has to continue, we admit that, as a nation—

Mr McAveety *rose*—

Jackie Baillie *rose*—

Ms Alexander *rose*—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Is the member giving way?

Mr Quinan: Eenie, meenie, minie, mo.

Ms Alexander: Does Mr Quinan agree that the problem is that the total number of applications from the homeless in Scotland who are assessed as priority need is less than the number of empty and void houses? The problem of homelessness is not just about housing. That list of 47,000 applications includes many people who have applied many times because of substance and alcohol abuse problems—many of those people have had a tenancy that has failed. We have more empty houses in Scotland than the number of people who apply with priority need. That is part of the complexity of the problem—Lloyd Quinan should not over-simplify it for cheap political point scoring.

Mr Quinan: I do not think that I need to reply to that speech.

We have spoken about the need to see improvements. The new shiny Labour council in West Dunbartonshire, where I live, has taken that to heart. In West Dunbartonshire, the number of people applying as homeless appears to have bucked the national trend—it has fallen by a third in the past three years, in contrast to the spiralling national figures. The Parliament may be tempted to congratulate West Dunbartonshire Council on its rather stunning success. Indeed, so impressed was the Deputy Minister for Communities that the chief executive of the authority was appointed to the rough sleepers initiative national advisory committee.

However, there is a difference between statistics and reality. The Dunbartonshire RSI action research project examined the reality behind the statistics. What innovations had been applied to achieve the dramatic change against the national trend? What radical solution had the council toiled to find? What had generated this great success that could surely be applied across the country? At last—a solution that does not involve bricks and mortar.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The member must please wind up.

Mr Quinan: The reality is simple. The council did the minimum possible. It did not house the

homeless and it did not count the homeless. The RSI project has come across evidence of people presenting themselves as homeless in West Dunbartonshire who have not had their homeless application filed.

Jackie Baillie: Will the member give way?

Mr Quinan: No, I have been asked to wind up.

It is a statutory duty for all local authorities to complete an HL1 return no matter what—

Jackie Baillie *rose*—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order. The member is not giving way.

Mr Quinan: If the HL1 form is not completed, homelessness is not recorded. The figures have fallen remarkably because snap judgments about priority status are being made at initial interviews. In West Dunbartonshire, people are being deemed non-priority or intentionally homeless and are being turned away without an HL1 having been completed, just as was reported in yesterday's *Clydebank Post*.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Tommy Sheridan, to be followed by Mike Watson. For the reasons given by Sir David at the beginning of the debate, I am calling Mr Sheridan early and will be a little relaxed about the amount of time that he has to speak.

11:02

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): Thank you, Presiding Officer.

Any commitment to the improvement of the quality and standard of housing across Scotland is mere rhetoric unless the funding that is required backs it up. The difficulty with Labour's record so far is that it is nothing short of a disgrace in relation to the lack of funding. Its record is also shocking in relation to the lack of urgency. The other day, James Douglas-Hamilton wrote that he was glad to see that Labour had adopted Tory housing policy. Sadly, James Douglas-Hamilton was correct.

I do not have time to develop all the points in the amendment that was not selected. Should the right to buy be extended? No, it should be abolished. That would allow us a single social tenancy. Let us introduce incentives to keep people in the rented sector. Let us introduce incentives that allow a 15-year continuous tenancy to be rewarded by a rent-free existence for the rest of that tenancy. On the one hand, that rewards tenants and, on the other, it retains stock in the public sector.

Let us relax home improvement rules. Let us ensure that we do not encourage greater housing

ownership by selling off public stock. If we really want to encourage greater home ownership, why do we not introduce a national loan scheme, administered by the Parliament? Why do we not allow the transfer of public sector discounts to the private sector, under that national loan scheme? Why do we not introduce more reforms in relation to house-selling regulations, to protect house buyers? Do not sell off public assets to encourage greater housing ownership. Such measures must be discussed with tenants and housing workers.

Let us look at the reality of Labour in government. We have heard fine rhetoric from Wendy Alexander on expenditure, yet over the past three years, we have had a continuation of the fine Tory tradition of not only the reduction in support for housing expenditure, but the introduction of a damaging competitive process for the reduced funds available.

Ms Alexander rose—

Tommy Sheridan: I will give the figures, then I will take an intervention.

Across all Scotland's councils, the housing revenue account investment for the previous financial year was £350.7 million; the housing revenue account investment for this financial year has been reduced to £313.2 million.

Glasgow—my dear city, the city of many of the Labour MSPs in this chamber, and the city that Labour promised would be a special case—has, of course, been neglected by Labour. Glasgow, the city that spent £108.7 million on housing investment in 1993-94, is now allowed to spend only £59 million in 1999-2000. New Labour is not only guilty of neglecting Glasgow; new Labour is guilty of theft—*theft from the city of Glasgow.*

In July 1997, the then Scottish housing minister announced that the debt on properties that were transferred to housing associations and demolished, or on properties that had been demolished by the council, could be transferred to the general account. Doing that would release £20 million extra for the city of Glasgow to spend on its neglected housing stock, a figure that was accounted for in our most recent housing revenue account budget. But what did the new Labour Government do? It announced that it was reducing our capital borrowing consent by an amount that was equivalent to the amount that was transferred in debt. It stole £20 million from the city of Glasgow.

Ms Alexander rose—

Tommy Sheridan: Here is fact No 2 for Wendy. We talk about urgency. "Let's not wait," she tells us. Well, let us not wait for the change in the capital receipt set-aside rules. What are the facts? The facts are—all right, I will take an intervention.

Ms Alexander: The facts are that this Government was elected on a programme that would deal with the mismanaged economic situation that we inherited, to improve things as we could. The consequence of that improvement is that an extra £300 million is going into Scottish housing. That will make the net public spending on Scottish housing 40 per cent higher by the end of this session of the Parliament than the level that we inherited from Conservative plans. That is a track record of which we are proud.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You have just over a minute, Mr Sheridan.

Tommy Sheridan: Sadly, as in so many other cases, Wendy's rhetoric does not match the reality. In opposition, Labour had a commitment to change the capital receipt set-aside rules. If Labour had kept to that in government, this year Glasgow City Council would have had an extra £18 million to spend. Does she know what that means? It means that this year 8,000 families in Glasgow would have had full central heating installed in their houses. Her Government is refusing them access to that.

Ms Alexander rose—

Tommy Sheridan: No, I am sorry, I have only a minute left. I did not get as much time as the minister.

Changing the capital receipt set-aside rules across Scotland would not require legislation—it would require only a letter from the minister. If she is so concerned about children living in cold, damp homes, she should send a letter to the local authorities in Scotland, changing the capital receipt set-aside rules. If she did that, she would release, this year, £138 million more for investment in council housing. That is the equivalent of 69,000 homes with full central heating. How many more children would then be warmer; how many more jobs would then be created; how many more construction workers would then have jobs; and how many more council workers would then have security?

The problem with what new Labour has done in office is that it has adopted Tory housing policies hook, line and sinker, and it has turned its back on the social housing rented sector. As for the stock transfer proposals for Glasgow, new Labour has neglected—

Ms Curran: Does Tommy Sheridan oppose community ownership?

Tommy Sheridan: I do not oppose community ownership.

Ms Curran: He opposes it every single time that it is mentioned.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Order.

Tommy Sheridan: I took Margaret Curran's intervention and I am answering it honestly, which is something that we do not often get from the Labour benches.

I do not oppose community ownership if it is locally negotiated and agreed, but I oppose it if it is imposed from on high without any consultation with Glasgow tenants. Margaret herself has had to admit this morning that the only people who have not been involved in more than a year's discussions about Glasgow City Council housing stock are the tenants themselves.

The Presiding Officer has been very kind with the time limit, and I will finish on this point. The investment programme promised by the new housing trust is £1.2 billion over 10 years. I should tell Margaret Curran that if her party in office were to do what it demanded when in opposition and transferred the capital housing debt, the same investment programme could be carried out by Glasgow City Council with the retention of council jobs and the security of council tenure in 11 years instead of 10. That is the reality, and new Labour should be ashamed of its record to date.

11:11

Mike Watson (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab): I was not going to talk about the Glasgow housing stock transfer issue, as it is only a part of the whole programme, but I have to respond to a couple of Tommy Sheridan's comments. It is simply not true to say that Glasgow tenants will not be involved in discussions; they will have the final say. There will be full consultation and ballots; that has not happened yet, because we are only part of the way through the process. Like the other Labour MSPs who represent Glasgow, I am committed to making sure that Glasgow tenants have the final say in the proposals, and I am convinced that it is only a matter of time before that happens.

We have to focus more broadly on the issue. There is much to be welcomed in many of the initiatives that the minister outlined today. Of course, some issues have to be refined, and I would be entirely wrong—and it would not reflect my constituents' views—to say that I was 100 per cent in agreement with every proposal. However, we are still in the consultation process.

No one who has examined the present state of Scottish housing would deny that radical changes need to be made. Several initiatives that have been announced, such as the £300 million for housing and regeneration, will begin to turn round the massive ship that many of us would agree is seriously off course.

I challenge anyone to deny that today's commitment to build 18,000 new homes—7,000 in the first year alone—will have a real impact. We

have to start somewhere. There are other welcome initiatives, such as the rough sleepers initiative and the reform of Scottish Homes. The warm deal, which has been much criticised by the Scottish National party and is still in its early stages, will prove a major success and make a major contribution. There is also the tenants' rights package, which is an important part of any housing strategy. Many problems concerning anti-social tenants, who can make people's lives a misery, have been raised with me.

Furthermore, the single social tenancy has been widely welcomed in principle, although not in detail, particularly on the right to buy, which is a controversial issue and should be the subject of consultation with tenants organisations and housing professionals. Giving people the right to buy must not happen at the expense of people who choose, for many legitimate reasons, to rent their homes. That choice must be protected and one way to do that is through the house-building programme. In areas where there are more than the estimated 850 sales of homes under the right to buy—and I accept that many housing associations and other organisations think that that figure is an underestimate—the house-building programme can be focused to make sure that the figure is made up. However, there are serious problems with the right to buy and the issue will be the subject of further debate.

In the short amount of time available today, I will deal with two issues that have been only briefly touched on and which follow on from Lloyd Quinan's points about record levels of homelessness. Although I do not suppose that homelessness will ever be completely eradicated, homeless figures need to be reduced and kept at the lowest possible level. That means that all kinds of landlords—housing associations, local authorities or private landlords—must have a statutory responsibility for providing accommodation for homeless families.

Within that, policies relating to homelessness must recognise the unique position of women and children who have experienced domestic abuse and must ensure that appropriate action is taken to help people in that position who present themselves to local authorities. Scottish Women's Aid pointed out in its response to the green paper that it regretted that domestic abuse, as a key safety issue in the home, was not mentioned. That issue must be addressed during the on-going consultation. Women who become homeless, for whatever reason, must be able to make choices for themselves and their families, which is not the case at the moment.

Ms White: The member mentions homelessness and refers to the minister's remarks about the 18,000 homes that will be built over

three years—6,000 homes a year. A report by the University of Paisley refers to the demolition of 17,000 homes in Glasgow. Where will all those people be put if only 6,000 houses a year are to be built? What is the answer to that?

Mike Watson: There are already more homes that are unoccupied—for whatever reason—available throughout Scotland than there are homeless families. It is a question of improving stock. That will not be done overnight—no one is suggesting that it will. The answer is not just building houses, but improving stock that is unfit for habitation or in which people are not willing to live for other reasons.

My final point is on equality issues, which Margaret Curran mentioned briefly. That does not mean just women. I want to highlight ethnic minorities. Scotland's housing must serve the needs of our increasingly multiracial society. Policy makers and agencies, such as Scottish Homes, must ensure that, throughout their funding and monitoring functions, the social housing needs and concerns of black and ethnic minority communities are visible and are heard. The Glasgow organisation Positive Action in Housing has highlighted the fact that racial harassment remains a problem in many areas of Scotland's housing stock, which has resulted in visible minorities being deterred from taking up available housing that has been offered to them because they fear doing so.

The minister will need to take into account all the issues raised in the debate and the many other varied contributions to the proposals when she frames the housing bill.

I will finish where I started. Glasgow's problems are well known. I echo fully Johann Lamont's comments that Glasgow must be a priority. I make no apologies for saying that. Success in Glasgow will be the cornerstone of the success of the Executive's housing policy, which I believe will have begun to turn round the serious problems in Glasgow and will have provided a radical improvement in Scotland's housing and in the choices for Scotland's people by the end of this parliamentary session.

11:18

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): It is increasingly clear that the Executive has no coherent housing policy and is merely extending the Tories' policy further than even the Tories ever did or would have dared to do. The Executive's arrogance is evident, especially in the minister's reaction to critics of extending the right to buy. Far from being the listening minister, she is the lecturing, hectoring minister.

The list of those who, in the minister's opinion,

have got it wrong goes on and on. She says that housing professionals are out of touch with their tenants, so their views are dismissed. She says that housing association committees are interested only in the survival of their organisations, so their views are dismissed. She says that the Council of Mortgage Lenders does not understand housing finance, so its views are dismissed. My working experience, however, tells me something different. On the issue of extending the right to buy, it is the minister who has got it wrong and whose views should be dismissed.

The minister uses as her excuse for that policy the adoption of a single social tenancy to equalise tenants' rights. Three parties in the chamber campaigned on such a policy. None of them included the right to purchase as a necessary part of such a tenancy, and certainly not at a discount.

Perhaps the Executive can expand on its commitment to the equalisation of rights. What about tenants in tied housing and tenants of private landlords? Do not they merit equal rights? What about the rights of those who aspire to be tenants of decent, affordable social housing? Were the homeless consulted about the extension of the right to buy? I think not.

The minister rejects the notion that the current right-to-buy arrangements have had an adverse effect on communities. We are told that only 2 per cent of the stock will be sold anyway and that the Executive will easily find the money to replace the lost stock. That is a thoroughly dishonest presentation of the situation, and it demonstrates how far the minister is from understanding Scotland's communities.

The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations has demonstrated that the rate of sale of housing association properties can vary a hundredfold, depending on the stock's location. There will be further sales in areas already dominated by owner-occupation, leaving other areas with enforced concentrations of people with no option but to rent. That is moving Scotland further towards American-style welfare housing.

It appears that the minister has now been forced to recognise the special difficulties that face some rural areas. Properties are seldom sold on in the local housing market, but are, in some cases, kept or sold as holiday homes. I encourage the minister to pursue the issues further and to recognise that there are also urban areas in which there is a desperate need to retain housing for rent.

In the 1980s, the new towns competed aggressively in the house sales stakes. The result is that East Kilbride now exports homeless people to Glasgow because it has so little social rented accommodation to offer. Properties in East Kilbride, bought over the years under the right to

buy, now form the basis of a growing private rented sector. The rents in that sector are too high for the local authority to use the houses for homeless people, because housing benefit levels are lower than the rents.

People are making money out of the right to buy, and the minister is encouraging that further.

Ms Curran: Is Linda Fabiani opposed to the principle of right to buy?

Linda Fabiani: I am opposed to the principle of taking away tenants' rights. I understand that tenants with the right to buy have to retain it. What I am opposed to is the extension of the right to buy, which will erode further our rented stock, which is needed by the people of Scotland.

All the evidence shows that extending the right to buy is a recipe for social exclusion, and I urge all members to put pressure on the Executive to lecture less, listen more and act in the interest of Scotland's fragile communities.

11:22

Alex Johnstone (North-East Scotland) (Con): It is a privilege to be allowed to take part in the debate, and I take this opportunity to welcome much of what the minister said. One of my duties as a rural affairs spokesman is to ensure that every policy discussed in the chamber has its rural affairs aspect addressed as much as possible.

It was a pleasure to hear the minister address some of the issues surrounding housing in rural Scotland. However, I point out to her that there are differences in housing in rural Scotland that require different methods of address. Housing is of course very important in rural Scotland, yet statistics show that certain differences require to be highlighted.

The proportion of housing considered to be substandard has risen to 7 per cent in rural Scotland, compared with 4 per cent, according to figures that we have been given. Because housing is poorer in quality, other requirements have to be taken into account. I particularly welcome the minister's statement that she will target improvement grants at owner-occupiers who are least able to pay. Given the statistics, that would indicate that a higher proportion of that money will find its way to rural Scotland. I should be interested to hear what resources are likely to be available for that over the course of this parliamentary session.

I was also impressed by the minister saying that no party has a monopoly on putting people first. I remind her that the Conservatives have a record worthy of defence. As Lord James Douglas-Hamilton pointed out in his article earlier this week—and he was supported by Tommy Sheridan

today—the policy that the minister presented is very much a Conservative policy, redeveloped to suit the purposes of the Executive today.

The one aspect of rural housing that the minister has not addressed—and I suggest that she consider addressing it—is the private rented sector in rural Scotland. Robert Brown raised the question of what constitutes rural housing. There are a number of definitions and, as he said, the definition being used would include Dumfries and Inverness. Housing in the genuinely rural parts of Scotland must be considered.

Figures given in the briefing by the Scottish Landowners Federation suggest that for housing that it defines as truly rural—

“that is on farms and estates distant from concentrated centres of population”—

as much of 57 per cent of rented housing stock is in the private sector. Given that much of that possible rented housing is empty, the Executive could make more investment available to develop that sector, to ensure that as many houses as possible are available for rent in rural Scotland. There are problems associated with competition in rents, which mean that many rural houses are unfit for human habitation because they would not realise a rent on the open market that would justify the investment to bring them up to the standard required. For that reason, housing in the genuinely rural parts of Scotland should be made available at a limited cost, with appropriate local support.

I feel a little guilty about reminding the Minister for Communities about rural housing in Scotland as she raised the issue herself, but I emphasise that aspects of rural housing need further consideration and could produce significant results from a relatively limited investment.

11:27

Mr John McAllion (Dundee East) (Lab): I very much welcome the debate. A four-hour debate on Scottish housing is a luxury that would not have been afforded at Westminster. That it is taking place at all is due to the existence of this Parliament, and that should be put on record.

How we debate the important issue of housing will reflect the value of the Parliament. If we all retreat behind our party political barriers and decry the other party's policies, claiming that only our policy meets the needs of the people, we could have had that debate at Westminster. Any housing debate there was like that. I hope that this Parliament will have an open, honest and constructive debate about Scottish housing, where members are allowed to say what they think and do not rule out ideas about housing that they did not start with. I hope that the Parliament shows that we can debate housing in a mature way,

which was not possible at Westminster.

In that spirit, I agree with the Minister for Communities that we should put people first. I do not think that anyone would be here if they had said that they were opposed to putting people first—we all put people first. I remind the minister that housing professionals are people, too. Any suggestion that they are not of the people but paid bureaucrats, out of touch with tenants and only out for themselves, is a travesty of the truth. In my experience, housing professionals have made some of the best contributions to the housing debate in Scotland over the past 20 to 25 years.

People such as David Orr, David Alexander and Chris Cunningham at the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations pioneered community-based housing associations long before it became fashionable for any politician of any party to espouse that cause. Would anyone here deny the massive contribution that Shelter has made to putting homelessness on the political map? The Chartered Institute of Housing in Scotland is a dedicated group of housing workers who for two decades defended the idea of public sector housing against the madcap neo-liberal theories of Michael Forsyth and the No Turning Back group of Tory MPs who set out to destroy it.

I suggest that all those professionals should unite to tell the Executive that it might, at least in part, have got it wrong by extending the right to buy. Rather than turning the guns against them, it might be useful for us to listen to the constructive arguments that they are putting forward.

I do not believe that the right to buy is an absolute right that is available to all Scotland's 700,000 tenants. For example, it is not available to those who are on benefit, or those who are on low incomes and cannot access mortgages even for houses that are sold at a discount. It is not available to those who are trapped in damp tenements or multi-storey flats, who would not be in their right minds if they wanted to buy that kind of council or housing association accommodation. By definition, it is not available to the homeless or those who are on the waiting list. In fact, it could be argued that the right to buy acts against the interests of all those groups, by taking out of the social stock the very houses that they aspire to move into in the first place.

I welcome the idea of introducing new rights for tenants, but I believe passionately that those rights should include the right to rent. I ask the minister at least to consider the possibility that the right to rent could be compromised or threatened by an indiscriminate extension of the right to buy. The provision of high-quality rented accommodation in particular areas throughout Scotland requires a strategic approach. It is arguable that a strategic approach cannot be established when the matter

is left at the mercy of the indiscriminate decisions of individuals who exercise the right to buy.

Ms Alexander: John McAllion will agree that a third of housing association tenants already have the right to buy, and that we are simply extending that right to a further third. The critical factor in preserving the right to rent is our proposal that no new public investment that is made in housing over the next 10 years should be affected by our proposals for extending the right to buy. That marks a clear departure from previous policies.

Mr McAllion: Time does not allow me to respond at length. However, I ask the minister to consider the detailed proposals that are put forward by all the housing professionals in response to her arguments. When the housing bill is under discussion in this Parliament, we should listen constructively to what those people are saying. If sensible proposals are made to amend the Government's plans to extend the right to buy, let us, in the spirit of a Scottish Parliament, listen to those proposals, vote for them and enact them. This is the beginning, not the end, of the housing debate that should dominate Scottish politics for the next two years.

I hope that I get a wee bit longer than four minutes, the next time that I am allowed to speak.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Patricia Ferguson): You got slightly longer than four minutes, John, but we will pass over that.

11:32

Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): I welcome most of the proposals that have been set out by the minister in today's debate. As the rural affairs spokesman for the Scottish Liberal Democrats, I want to focus on a specific element of her proposals as they affect rural Scotland.

The Minister for Communities will be aware of the issue that I am about to outline, as I have raised these concerns and reservations with her previously. The subject was also touched on earlier, by Robert Brown, and in Fergus Ewing's intervention. I refer to the proposal to provide a common right to buy for all tenants who are covered by the single social tenancy. That proposal will cause real difficulties in rural areas trying to achieve the aims that are set out in the motion—providing good-quality, accessible housing in strong and secure communities.

The minister said that Scottish Homes will be asked to increase the resources that are allocated for investment in rural areas, to address the lack of socially rented housing, and that building will be directed to ensure that no area is disadvantaged by the extension of the right to buy. That sounds

good, but the minister stated that the estimated number of people in rural areas who will benefit from the right to buy will be—incredibly—just 100 to 120 throughout the country. She also stated that 6,000 homes—I thought the figure was 4,000—will be built or improved in rural Scotland over the next three years. I wonder how many of those 6,000 will be new homes.

I am alarmed by the minister's presentation of those figures. Is she aware that in its 1997 report "Scotland's Rural Housing", Shelter estimated that 35 per cent of rural council houses had been sold, compared with 25 per cent of urban council houses?

Shelter also estimated that, throughout rural Scotland, for every three housing association homes built for rental, 10 council homes have been sold. In other words, the amount of social housing available for rent in rural areas has diminished rapidly. Estimating that only 100 to 120 houses will be lost in rural Scotland as a result of the right-to-buy proposal is simply ignoring history. I know that Conservative members are often content to ignore history, but let us not import that trait to Liberal Democrat and Labour members.

The Tories' ideological commitment to thoughtless extension of the right to buy throughout our rural areas is one reason why they were so comprehensively rejected by every rural constituency in Scotland. I heard Alex Johnstone's contribution to the debate; I could not believe it—it contained nothing of substance and he did not stand up for rural communities. The Liberal Democrats' policies focus on the interests of rural Scotland.

Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con): Is Mr Rumbles advising the chamber that the policy of the Liberal Democrat party is to withdraw the right to buy where it exists in rural Scotland?

Mr Rumbles: Absolutely not. If Mr Tosh listens to my speech, I will make our policy perfectly clear in a few moments.

I return to the point that the minister made—that, apparently, no area will be disadvantaged by extension of the right to buy. I would like to give the chamber an example from my constituency to illustrate how impractical that claim is. Royal Deeside comprises one third of my constituency. It is easy to foresee many of the current housing association homes there being snapped up. That in itself is not a problem, but can members really see planning permission—that is the important thing—being granted for replacement homes on Deeside? I think not.

Where is the commitment to provide good-quality and accessible housing in strong and secure communities that the motion before us suggests? It is all very well to say that we could

build more houses in rural areas but, as my example illustrates, they will not be built where they are needed, such as Deeside. The Liberal Democrat group wishes to highlight the practical difficulties that we see in the extension of the right to buy. The minister must address those difficulties.

I do not want only to be negative, however. I would like to bring to the minister's attention an option that has been highlighted by the Hjaltland Housing Association in Shetland. It has suggested a portable discount scheme, in which tenants are given a sum of money—£10,000, perhaps—to help them to buy another house and give up their rented house. The association is conducting a survey of tenants to ascertain their views on that idea; the Executive also should examine it.

In closing, I will confirm that the Liberal Democrats are happy with the motion. I hope that I have highlighted the concerns and reservations of the Liberal Democrat group about the effects on rural Scotland of the proposals for a common right to buy for all tenants who are covered by the proposed single social tenancy. Our aim—within the partnership—of providing good-quality and accessible housing in strong and secure communities will be put at serious risk if the proposals are accepted as they stand. I urge the Executive to re-examine this issue for our rural communities.

11:39

Alex Neil (Central Scotland) (SNP): I want to deal with two or three specific points because it is difficult to do otherwise in four minutes.

I will deal first with what is for many people the immediate issue of the warm deal. For punters and professionals alike, the warm deal has already become an ordeal and it has become an ordeal for three reasons. First, the implementation arrangements have been utterly shambolic. I call on the minister to do something about that and to do it urgently. Secondly, it is linked to another failed programme—the new deal. As Frank McAveety admitted on "Newsnight Scotland" last night, the new deal has failed to achieve its objectives in Scotland.

Mr McAveety: If Alex has the time and energy to watch a video tape of that interview, it will be revealed to him that that was an accusation that was put by the questioner, but which I did not accept.

Alex Neil: I watched the programme and I think that Frank McAveety did accept that point.

Mr McAveety: I invite Alex Neil to watch the video with me.

Alex Neil: I have only four minutes and will

move on to the third reason why the warm deal is a failure: it is the poor cousin of the home energy efficiency scheme, which is a similar programme down south. Instead of a maximum grant of £700, people are entitled to up to £2,000, including provision for assistance with the installation of central heating. Given the different weather conditions in Scotland, something more akin to that scheme would be more appropriate than the ordeal of the warm deal.

Housing benefit reform, which has not been mentioned at all during this debate, is the second major issue that I wish to highlight, although I cannot go into it in detail in four minutes. Unfortunately, it is a reserved matter. I would like it to be transferred to the Scottish Parliament as part of our responsibility for housing. I do not see how it is possible to have a comprehensive and effective national housing strategy without also having control over the housing benefit regime and the budget that goes with it.

Housing benefit accounts for two thirds of all public spending on housing in Scotland and some of the reforms that are being proposed will do much to undermine the initiatives on homelessness, stock transfer and other aspects of the housing policy announced this morning.

For example, in 1996, the Tory Government introduced new rules for under-25s living in single rooms, the effect of which was to force young people under 25 on to the streets of our towns and cities. As part of the homelessness initiative, I would like a reversal of that amendment to the housing benefit regime, as it would go a long way towards dealing with the problem of homelessness among certain categories of under-25s. Similarly, it is proposed that less than 100 per cent of rental costs will be met from housing benefit, which will have the effect of throwing more people on to the streets. The taper on housing benefit is a marginal tax rate of up to 65 per cent on the poorer sections of our community.

Three or four months ago, when the Minister for Communities appeared before the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee, she said that she had no policy on housing benefit reform and would not submit representations on behalf of the Executive or the Parliament to the Secretary of State for Social Security. If the minister really wants to tackle homelessness seriously and to achieve the policy objectives she announced in her statement this morning, she must submit a major piece of evidence to the secretary of state to ensure that housing benefit reform complements those objectives, rather than undermines them, and that this Parliament is given control over housing benefit budgets and legislation.

11:43

Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): As a member of the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee, I am particularly pleased to speak today.

The housing measures proposed by the Scottish Executive are comprehensive and co-ordinated. The Executive is committed to dealing with social problems in a strategic and meaningful way, delivering measures that will address the problems of homelessness and the issues of housing regeneration and community development.

I wish to examine the problem of anti-social behaviour—an issue that is of concern to the people of Scotland. It is certainly of great concern to many of my constituents. Indeed, according to a recent Scottish Office study, one in five public sector tenants had experienced such problems in the previous year, which means that many of us in the chamber and in the public gallery will have experienced some of the despair of living next to an anti-social neighbour. Anyone who has attended a community conference will know that the problem of anti-social neighbours is high on the list of local concerns.

Many of my constituents—local authority tenants and owner-occupiers alike—are sick and tired of their lives being made a misery by a small number of people who have little or no regard for the feelings of anyone other than themselves. The worst of those nasty neighbours can cause misery to an entire neighbourhood. I am pleased that the Executive's proposals will begin to address that problem seriously.

Of course, the term anti-social behaviour can cover a wide range of activity, from nuisance behaviour, through neighbourhood disputes, to deliberate intimidation and incidents of violence. Less serious problems can often be dealt with through mediation, and I am pleased that Safeguarding Communities Reducing Offending has received funding of more than £186,000 to develop community mediation throughout Scotland.

The Scottish Executive recognises the need to expedite the most serious cases and has proposed a number of measures to ensure that that happens. The evaluation of fast-tracking partnership arrangements between Glasgow City Council, the police and the procurator fiscal in Barmulloch and West Drumoyne may indicate that similar arrangements would be beneficial throughout Scotland. The loophole that allowed those facing eviction to stall proceedings by taking advantage of the right to buy will be closed.

Moving anti-social tenants is not a long-term solution, and I believe that the use of probationary tenancies, along with innovative projects such as

the Dundee families project, will provide the way forward. Unlike those in England and Wales, Scottish probationary tenancies will apply only to people who were previously subject to conviction proceedings for anti-social behaviour, not to all new tenants.

Closed-circuit television can also play a role in monitoring the activities of tenants who are suspected of anti-social behaviour. The evidence provided by neighbourhood cameras was instrumental in securing the eviction of thugs who were recently found guilty of a brutal assault in my constituency.

The single social tenancy will ensure that all tenants have the high level of rights and security of tenure currently enjoyed by council tenants. It will also clarify the responsibility of the tenant in relation to reasonable behaviour.

Anti-social and disruptive neighbours are the cause of much misery in neighbourhoods throughout Scotland. My constituents in Craigneuk, Whinhall, Shotts and Newmains will welcome the Scottish Executive's commitment to dealing with this problem. They will wonder in bemusement at the nationalists' obsession with denying them the chance to buy their own homes, rather than with improving their rights, building new homes and protecting their communities. Those are real issues, faced by real people.

Once again, unfortunately, the nationalists' fixation with political point scoring, rather than any real concern with building a better Scotland, is driving their agenda. I urge Parliament to support the Executive's motion.

11:48

Shona Robison (North-East Scotland) (SNP):

I say to Karen Whitefield that our concern is to protect the rights of tenants in Scotland.

I sometimes have to pinch myself when I hear speeches in this chamber. Are these the same people who threw up their hands in horror when the Tories slashed housing support grant? Are they the same people who threw up their hands in horror when the Tories introduced clawback at 25 per cent and became full of rage when that was increased to 75 per cent? Are they the same people who threw up their hands in horror and fired salvo after salvo at the Tories for slashing borrowing consents? As we see today, the same people will throw up their hands in adulation, or be required to grit their teeth and follow the new Labour line.

It is almost impossible to believe that in Scotland today housing conditions in many areas are not merely poor, but a national disgrace. There are areas where tenants' homes are in such poor

condition that up to 30 per cent of their income goes on trying to keep their houses warm; where damp mould grows on walls, even in the summer months; where wind and rain drive through rotten windows that badly need replaced. Time after time, those windows are patched up with a blob of silicone, as a temporary repair. The conditions that I have described endure because of a lack of investment—a lack of investment that was well recognised by Executive members and members of the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties when they were in opposition. However, since they have become a partnership Administration, they have chosen to wear the Tory clothes.

Do not take my word for that. Lord James Douglas-Hamilton recently congratulated the Minister for Communities, saying:

“Wendy Alexander is to be congratulated for adopting Scottish Conservative and Unionist policies on housing”.

Strange bedfellows indeed.

In 1979, housing support grant was £564 million at today's prices. This year the grant level has been slashed to only £11 million. Again, members should not take my word for it. The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities estimates that, because of reductions in housing support grant since 1979, housing departments have lost £2.4 billion in revenue.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Tories masked the growing crisis by allowing local authorities to recycle 100 per cent of the capital receipts from right-to-buy sales. The severity of the crisis became visible only when the Tories decided to use the receipts to meet the cost of the capital debt. Under that policy, which has been endorsed by new Labour and now the Executive, right-to-buy receipts are clawed back and do not go into the vital modernisation and upgrading of tenants' homes.

Again, members should not take my word for it. COSLA estimates that the clawback has meant that 30,000 tenants' homes have not been modernised; that 5,500 window replacements have been cancelled; and that almost 10,000 heating systems have not been installed. The irony is that the people who are paying for this folly are those who can least afford it.

Furthermore, borrowing consents to local authorities have been decimated. The value of consents fell from £620 million in 1979 to £225 million in 1990, and has nose-dived to only £155 million in this financial year. The reduction in housing support grant and borrowing consents, as well as the 75 per cent clawback rule, has hit council tenants, who are some of Scotland's poorest people, with a triple whammy.

The Tories started the war to kill off local

authority housing in Scotland but, worse, new Labour and its Lib Dem partners in the Executive are attempting to outdo the Tories by finishing off the job through death by a thousand cuts. We have heard members from all parts of the chamber express concern about that. I hope that people will have the guts to stand up to the Executive and support some of Scotland's poorest people.

11:52

Paul Martin (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab): I welcome the statement by the Minister for Communities. It is important to acknowledge that if we do not deliver on housing we will have great difficulty delivering our programme in areas such as health, education and social inclusion.

This Parliament should put on record the value and commitment of the tenants movement until now and in the future. The unpaid local heroes in the housing association and tenants association movements should be recognised. Many tenants' representatives spend at least 30 or 40 hours a week, unpaid, helping to manage local housing stock.

A great deal is expected of the tenants movement. For example, in Glasgow, there are letting initiatives and estate action groups, in which local people have an input into managing local stock. I sometimes wonder whether the members of quangos who are paid large sums of money for attending eight to 10 meetings a year have the same commitment as many tenants' representatives have towards their local communities.

We have to reward the tenants movement for its commitment. It is screaming out for investment proposals. That is why I support the proposal for the new housing partnership in Glasgow. I stress the word "proposal" because the local people in Glasgow will have the final say.

Tommy Sheridan: Paul Martin laid great and welcome stress on the contribution of tenants, who are volunteers. Can he tell me what tenants groups have been involved in working up the proposal?

Paul Martin: I have been involved in many of the neighbourhood forum meetings in my constituency, and will be happy to provide Tommy Sheridan with a record of those meetings.

Representation on Glasgow City Council housing department's citywide forum has been identified as an important issue. It is quite clear that the new housing partnership proposal for Glasgow will not be a success unless local people are involved, and I hope that the minister—

Tommy Sheridan: They are not involved yet.

Paul Martin: Tommy Sheridan takes that point out of context. It is important to emphasise the fact that local people have been involved in the proposal until now and will continue to be involved.

Fiona Hyslop: Glasgow tenants are concerned by the news freeze on what is happening with the proposal and by the fact that there is no tenant representative on the steering group. There is not even a tenant representative on the national steering group for the new housing partnership. We have all said that community ownership is a good thing because it involves people, but if there is no tenant involvement now, how do we know that there will be tenant involvement when the stock transfer proposal has been implemented?

Paul Martin: Fiona Hyslop is being somewhat premature. She must accept that independent advisers have still to be appointed in Glasgow. That process will take more than a year's consultation. After that, local people will have the opportunity to scrutinise the proposal through the independent advisers. Fiona Hyslop must consider whether she opposes the new housing partnership in Glasgow. In his closing remarks, perhaps Kenny Gibson can pick up on that point.

Brian Adam: It might be of interest to look beyond Glasgow. There is a tenants forum in Aberdeen, and its members have been participating in the feasibility study. According to the forum's minutes,

"the Forum after due consideration were of the view that the favoured option for the Council's housing stock is for the tenants to remain with the Council but with an enhanced standard of service".

Since that statement was made a little under a year ago, Aberdeen City Council has continued to pursue the feasibility study, but it does not appear that tenants' views are being taken into account, despite their having been given the opportunity to participate.

Paul Martin: I am sure that Mr Adam's views on the situation in Aberdeen are noted. Perhaps Frank McAveety will mention that point in closing. Tenants have been involved in the Glasgow proposal and will continue to be involved in a more prominent role.

Ms White: Will Mr Martin accept an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I must ask the member to close now.

Paul Martin: I shall close by saying that Cathy Jamieson made an excellent point yesterday. She said that it is not good enough to set aside housing for young people without providing proper support mechanisms. That is lacking in the present proposals. Young people must have the support they need when they take on tenancies,

and the Hamish Allan model provides an excellent example of how that can be achieved.

I support the minister's proposals.

11:58

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): Paul Martin referred to the importance of delivering in housing. I whole-heartedly agree with him. Good housing is vital for the health and well-being of the nation. He also mentioned the unpaid local heroes in the housing association movement.

There are two great success stories in Scottish housing, one of which is the housing association movement. When I became involved with housing as a minister in 1987, I learned that half of all housing association expenditure had been in the inner city of Glasgow. Although I had no objection to that, I felt that it was essential that the movement's spending should be allocated not for historical reasons but based on need throughout Scotland, in peripheral housing schemes and in rural areas. I am pleased that the policy to increase priority spending in rural areas is gathering momentum; that is a good sign.

The second great housing success story was, I believe, the right to buy. When the Tenants' Rights etc (Scotland) Act 1980 was introduced—in the face of opposition—right to buy started more slowly in Scotland than it did south of the border. Over the years, however, it gathered momentum. By the mid-1990s, Scotland had overtaken England in the percentage of public sector stock sold to sitting tenants. This morning, Wendy Alexander said that 80 per cent of households in Scotland aspire to own their own homes and that the right to buy should be reformed to make it right for the next century. The Conservatives have no difficulty supporting that policy, but I would like to say one or two quick words about it.

This morning, the Minister for Communities asked me why a restriction was placed on the right of housing association tenants to buy. The restriction was placed on new housing associations and new housing association tenants. At the time, we would not have got the housing investment from the private sector that we believed was necessary to make public sector funds go further. That is why the right to buy was restricted.

John McAllion, who followed housing matters with great enthusiasm and was critical of many of its aspects, did not criticise that restriction at the time. I mention that because we regarded him as a leading light on housing matters, and he was extremely conscientious in appearing on every occasion that I did.

The test of a good housing policy is whether the

Administration is seeking to match supply to demand in accordance with the aspirations of the Scottish people. There will be a need for more housing for the disabled, sheltered housing, housing for rent and low-cost home ownership. I say to the Deputy Minister for Local Government that we support right to buy if the figures stack up. He will be aware of the criticisms that have been made.

In his winding-up speech, Mr Bill Aitken will state the various ways in which the right to buy can be advanced without damaging the interests of housing associations. I will merely mention that if the Administration wishes to go ahead with its policy, a scheme should be put in place that compensates housing associations should they be left with outstanding debt following right-to-buy sales.

I recall a particular difficulty that I experienced as a minister when I wished to progress a rent-to-mortgage scheme. I was opposed not so much by politicians as by the Whitehall Treasury. Its view was that receipts were used to enhance local authority spending. Local authorities kept housing receipts and the Treasury believed that receipts from rent to mortgage would be less than from right to buy, prejudicing expenditure on public sector stock.

As it turned out, the Treasury's fears were misplaced and rent to mortgage resulted in a boost to right to buy, which tenants saw as a better deal, and receipts increased. At that time, I had to prove to the Treasury that the figures stacked up. While ministers are now free of Treasury control, they will need to convince housing associations that the aspirations for home ownership can and will be reconciled with the needs of housing associations.

The increase in homelessness applications has reached worrying proportions. The time scale of 2003 is far too leisurely. There is a need for more medium-term supported accommodation to end the vicious cycle of homelessness. We need local solutions for local problems, accompanied by a comprehensive national strategy. The priority that is placed on that subject must be increased in view of the growing severity of the problem. Only then will we have a modern housing policy that will stand the test of time and be worthy of Scotland.

12:03

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): As one former housing minister following another former housing minister, I congratulate the present housing minister on raising the profile of Scottish housing as a key policy priority, and also on the many initiatives that she has started with her deputy, Jackie Baillie.

We are concentrating on the controversial areas of stock transfers and right to buy, but we should acknowledge the many housing policies that command widespread support across this chamber and across Scotland. First are the initiatives concerning anti-social behaviour by tenants. Everyone welcomes the new developments that have taken place on that issue. Secondly, with regard to the warm deal— notwithstanding some of the issues that were raised last night which I have not studied—we all acknowledge that the Executive is placing a new priority on dealing with the scourge of dampness, which was referred to in the opening speech. Thirdly, there is widespread support for the new money that was put into the rough sleepers initiative, which we had a debate about in November.

I think that we all agree that those initiatives address the key policies and priorities in Scottish housing, which are to increase the quality and the quantity of affordable rented housing and to support people, as was recently flagged up in the evaluation of the rough sleepers initiative. The two controversial issues should be dealt with in relation to those priorities. The key question is, do those controversial initiatives make the achievement of our objectives more likely? We should consider stock transfers and right to buy in that context.

I am not instinctively in favour of large-scale stock transfers, although I have for a long time supported smaller stock transfers. However, we must examine all the stock transfers, including the Glasgow ones, in terms of whether they will help to improve the quality of housing and eliminate cold, damp housing. The financial facts suggest that that is the case. There is no time to go into those in detail, but we must consider the borrowing consent and the fact that the amount of money that Glasgow was able to spend, on average, over the past two or three years was £30 million. Under the new arrangements, it will be £130 million a year, which is balanced out just by the public expenditure on the breakage costs of the debt and servicing the debt. There will be a lot more investment for the same amount of public money. We must face that fact. Members have made points about Treasury rules, but we have no control over those in this chamber.

We must remember that there is a right to buy, but there is also a right to rent. There are rights for individuals, but there are also rights for communities. The housing green paper made that point. It stated:

“The aim would be to strike a better balance between the aspirations of those tenants who would like to buy and the need to protect the interests of the community as a whole.”

At the very least, we should consider the issue of

local flexibility, so that local communities can make decisions about what is the correct balance.

Fiona Hyslop: Malcolm Chisholm is right to identify that a key issue is whether right to buy and stock transfer will address homelessness and the need for housing provision. Does he agree that a problem is that the proposals on extending the right to buy in the context of stock transfer will mean that lenders face larger risk because of the right to buy, so they will increase rents and that will put the stock transfer proposals in jeopardy? Right to buy and stock transfer must be considered together.

Malcolm Chisholm: There is a lot of controversy about what the consequences of this will be. Many members have seen the paper from the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations. It makes similar points to those made by Fiona Hyslop and questions the Executive's estimate of the present net value. There is a massive gap between their estimate and that of the Executive. This Parliament should not jump to conclusions on those issues and should take evidence to consider the conflicting arguments. The Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee is doing that at the moment in relation to stock transfer. I hope that that committee, and other members, will do so in relation to right to buy as well.

I will repeat the point that I made in the equalities debate on 2 December, which is that one of the issues that last year's housing green paper failed to address was race equality and housing. It was widely said to be colour-blind. I hope that the Executive will address that issue. There is more harassment, more overcrowding and more homelessness among the black and ethnic minority community. I hope that the Executive will restore ring-fenced funding for those groups through Scottish Homes, will instruct Scottish Homes to set up the first black and ethnic minority-led housing association in Scotland and will put a representative from Positive Action in Housing on the new housing advisory forum.

12:08

Mr John Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD): This debate rightly puts housing at the top of the political agenda. It was mentioned earlier that we are giving this issue a high profile as this debate is one of the longest that we have had.

Much in this document merits the support of the chamber. I welcome the proposal to improve our housing stock. That is a laudable aim that most members will support. We should provide warm, comfortable, damp-free housing and make it available to all who wish to avail themselves of socially rented housing. However, like other

members, I have reservations. The extension of the right to buy must be carefully considered and we must have a wider debate with housing associations, community trusts and local authorities. Those organisations have serious concerns over the blanket extension of the right to buy.

I have a document from the Chartered Institute of Housing. It suggests that it is important that the right to buy is reformed to achieve a better balance between renters and owners in different communities and a better balance between those who aspire to home ownership and the needs of communities to provide affordable rented housing to people who have no home. It says that the reforms should be based on decisions made at a local level, in the light of local housing needs and markets, and that local authorities should be able to exclude certain areas, particularly small rural communities that have no or very little rented housing available for the community.

The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has also expressed concerns. It says:

"It is vital that councils' responsibility to provide housing for those in greatest need is not threatened by the Right to Buy. That is why we have consistently argued for changes in the right to buy to protect housing in the areas where it is in short supply. That concern has been reinforced by the findings of a report by Shelter Scotland which suggests that the number of homeless is now at an all time high."

Dr Winnie Ewing (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Does the member hold out any hope that a fair share of the 6,000 houses will come to the Highlands and Islands, given the difficulty of acquiring land for the purpose?

Mr Munro: I have no great hope that that will happen, although I would dearly love it if it did. That is a debate for another occasion.

The Scottish Council for Single Homeless says:

"The most recent survey of homeless applications in Scotland shows homelessness at record levels and still growing at a time when the supply of rented housing is shrinking. For the Executive to seek to extend the right to buy at this time is short sighted and likely to lead to increased homelessness."

My area is part of rural Scotland and there is a quite a distinction between urban and rural Scotland. Even in rural Scotland, circumstances and needs can be diverse. The motivation behind the voluntary housing movement in the Highlands was to create community assets that can benefit and sustain the community in perpetuity. The proposal to extend the right to buy to housing associations completely undermines that aim.

Since 1980, 10,071 council properties have been sold under right to buy in the Highland Council area. The market is shrinking all the time. Yesterday, a delegation from Highland Council addressed an all-party group in Parliament. The

members of the delegation, some of whom are with us today, made a very good case. They were not dismissive of the policies of the Executive, but wanted assurances that the unique problems of the Highlands would be fully taken into account during the legislative process.

Highland Council is committed to working with the Executive and the Parliament. Like the delegates, I am aware that policies that are good for the central belt are not necessarily good for the rural communities. The need for good rental housing to be available to all communities in the Highlands is clear. The bill that the Executive will bring forward to help to ensure that will be supported.

I support Highland Council in what it is trying to achieve and seek an early meeting between it and the Executive. I ask the Executive for complete assurance that rural communities will be given the opportunity to debate the legislation as it passes through Parliament. If we are extending the right to buy, we should also afford the opportunity and the choice of a right to rent.

12:15

Christine Grahame (South of Scotland) (SNP): It is a great pity that the minister is not here to hear constructive speeches such as those of John Farquhar Munro and others—including, I hope, my own.

I will address homelessness in older people, because I think that we are tending towards stereotypes, albeit quite valid ones, of young rough sleepers, and the women and young families, referred to by Mike Watson, who are often homeless as a consequence of matrimonial breakdown.

I will focus on the difficulties of obtaining data on older people who are homeless, an issue that has been raised by Age Concern. The points that I will raise form a call to the Executive to which I would like a response, in writing or otherwise.

First, we need a national definition of an older person. We do not have such a definition and we could do with one; a person on the streets may often be extremely old, physically, at 50. We need proactive research, to include those in hospitals and homes and those who are sharing with relatives and friends. They are, in reality, homeless, although they may not be designated as such. We should distinguish between single people and couples who are homeless. We should examine the causes of homelessness in older people, which are disparate—just as they are for any other part of society—but which additionally include dementia and mental illness. That is call No 1. Will the Executive undertake such research so that remedies can be put in place for the elderly

homeless?

Secondly, I have some data from Age Concern that is relevant to my next point. Thirty-two per cent of households in Scotland are headed by someone over 60, 11 per cent by someone over 75 and 5 per cent by someone over 80. As we know, all those figures are rising. The figures are split, almost equally, between home owners and people in public rented accommodation. Thirty-nine per cent of those homes have at least one problem that requires urgent repair. That is the background to two causes of homelessness among the elderly that are caused by either the inactivity or activity of the state.

On the first of those causes, inactivity, there is a failure to provide the elderly with the information, and sometimes the means, to adapt their homes so that with the passage of years, they can remain in their home and their community as the vast majority want to do. Simple changes, such as kitchen cupboards that people can reach, downstairs WCs, accessible sit-down showers and accessible entrances to homes, with ramps when steps become a barrier, could prevent accidents that lead to a spiral of decline.

The elderly lack accessible information about grants; there is no proactive campaign. There is also a great mixture of routes to information. I refer Ms Baillie—if she would listen for a moment—to the report of the Royal Commission on Long Term Care for the Elderly, chaired by Sir Stewart Sutherland. It is a wonderful tome that has almost become my bedtime reading. The report, on page 70, talks about aids and adaptations; it also provides an appendix that lists various items that could be charged to the state or to other charging structures. That is call No 2. Has the Executive taken any steps to implement the recommendations of Sir Stewart Sutherland for aids and adaptations, as referred to in appendix 1 of the Sutherland report?

I also want to refer to the unjust and oppressive clawback from the elderly for their care costs, both general and nursing, by the sale of their homes. Often elderly people take avoidance by transferring title to the names of family and friends. That is not always successful, as clawback can go back for many years, but when it is successful, it makes older people vulnerable to the vagaries of their alleged friends and families and they can be on the edge of being evicted at any stage. Again, I refer the minister to the excellent Sutherland report, which proposes remedies for this on page 56. One simple first step, which I have asked for over and over again, would be to detach the nursing costs from other care costs for the elderly when they are in homes and allocate the nursing costs to the national health service budget. That is call No 3.

Will the minister, in writing or otherwise, respond to the three calls I have made today? They are honest, constructive contributions to the debate on homelessness, in particular with regard to the elderly.

12:20

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): Before I start, I apologise for having forgotten my jacket. My attire is not intended as a mark of disrespect to my colleagues.

I do not intend to talk about the right to buy in particular, although I have received a couple of representations from local housing associations and councillors. As the strength of the Parliament lies in its committee system, I believe that the concerns that are being expressed will be examined in detail by the relevant committee and that the Executive will listen to what is said at that committee. I hope that that assures people who raise concerns with us.

I wish to concentrate on the measures proposed on anti-social behaviour by tenants, which have been discussed in part by my colleagues Karen Whitefield and Paul Martin. As I have said in the chamber on previous occasions, it is a problem that is frequently presented at my constituency surgeries, and I am sure that that is replicated in the surgeries of colleagues and councillors throughout Scotland.

Friction between people or families living in close proximity is often a source of irritation and annoyance. That does not just apply on council estates; it is true of owner-occupiers and people who exercise the right to buy. In the past, it has often been much more difficult to take action against owner-occupiers. That has been rectified in recent legislation.

It is important that we do not just apply the stick of punishment in dealing with neighbour problems, although that sanction does need to be there and to be visible. One of the common complaints that I have heard from victims of anti-social neighbours is that the perpetrator believes that nobody is going to do anything about it.

The residents who suffer from anti-social neighbours usually just want the problem solved. Often, they see the solution as moving the offender out of the area. That has to be the ultimate option, the force of which the Executive's proposals recognise and strengthen. However, as far as the wider community is concerned, it does not solve the problem, but merely moves it on. It can create new problems, especially where children are involved. Unfortunately, it is quite often the behaviour of children and young people that is the source of complaint.

There is a need for mediation and for helping anti-social neighbours to reform their behaviour, as well as for letting them know what could happen to them if they persist in their behaviour. Although not all nuisance behaviour is a cold-blooded and calculated campaign to upset and anger neighbours, I am sorry to say that some is. At other times, such behaviour results from a variety of problems: alcohol, substance and drug abuse, psychological problems or a general inability to cope. Those people need help rather than punishment, and I am pleased that the Executive's proposals include looking at and learning from mediation projects. A number of agencies need to be involved in dealing with those problems. They are not simply housing problems, but areas in which we need an holistic approach.

We must also recognise that some tenants are extremely vulnerable. As Paul Martin said, some young people are not yet able to sustain a tenancy, to live alone, to look after themselves and, in some cases, to look after young children at the same time. I have anecdotal knowledge from my constituency of how such vulnerable young people are targeted in their communities by criminals and drug dealers. Those young people also need help.

I hope that the Executive will consider how it can assist and expand supported tenancies, considering, for example, the experience of the various foyer projects that have been undertaken in some local authority areas. For all concerned, prevention is always better than cure, and I ask for the minister's views on how that area of social tenancy can be promoted.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): That leaves us time to squeeze in Mr Brian Adam before lunch.

Mr McAveety: Tasty.

12:24

Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP): Thank you. I was most appreciative of comments made by Malcolm Chisholm and John McAllion who, as much as is possible in such situations, tried to inject at least a measure of consensus into the debate. However, from time to time, I become concerned about the use of language in politics. Much of the terminology that is used in connection with the housing debate devalues the language. In terms of the housing stock transfer and the new housing partnership arrangements, to suggest that that is large-scale voluntary transfer is stretching one's understanding of the meaning of voluntary. There is very little voluntary about it at all. It is a way of offering a choice to councils, and ultimately to tenants as a group, to transfer housing stock away from local authorities—or else there will be

no investment. That is not voluntary; that is blackmail.

Some of the other language that is currently being used in politics also devalues words such as "modernise". I suggest that the £26 million that has been associated with expenditure on stock transfer feasibility studies has not produced any new houses. It has not put in new windows and it has not provided any of the much-needed central heating systems—it has not modernised any houses. Those are the real meanings of the word "modernise", which has been regularly misused by the Labour party.

I am extremely concerned about the large-scale voluntary transfers. This morning we have heard much about the lack of tenant involvement in the Glasgow proposals. In Aberdeen there is an attempt to involve tenants in discussions. The city council set up a city housing options working group. At an early stage the council invited representatives of tenants associations to join them; the tenants set up their own forum. At a meeting of the city housing options working group on February 12—as I said when I intervened on Mr Martin—it was quite clear what the tenants representatives wanted: they wanted to stay with the council. They wanted what every tenant wants—a good and improved service. However, because of the way in which the financing of local authority has deliberately been constructed, they will not get an improved service unless they go along with the transfer. The tenants have expressed their view. I do not see this as voluntary; it is blackmail.

Where there is a tenant-led movement, a change of tenure is not a problem. If they think that they can manage the stock better in the community, that is fine. That is another example of the misuse of language. The Labour party has tried to re-label Tory proposals by adding the word "community", as in community transfer or community stocks. The communities have not asked for these transfers and there is no evidence to suggest that they have. It is only after the proposals have been finalised that the tenants will be asked what they think about them. Take it or leave it is the option that they will be given. Dressing up a Tory policy to make it appear to have a basis in community and tenant interests is unacceptable. We should not be going in that direction. We should not be trying to force people down a route in order to arrive at the position that the Labour party wants.

Buried somewhere amongst the plethora of recent proposals is the suggestion that councils will be re-empowered in terms of housing. They will be involved strategically. That is only after they have got rid of all service provision—there will be no council houses. Now the Government will allow

councils to be involved in housing. What a compliment. In reality, this is the Tory idea of enabling councils. There is no service provision, but the council will be allowed to determine the strategic policy. Large-scale voluntary transfers are bad. They should be carried out only under the direction of tenant-led initiatives. Unless the tenants lead this action, we will not be responsive to community needs and wishes.

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): That brings the first section of the debate to a close. The second section will begin at approximately 3.30 pm, after First Minister's questions. The names of members who have been patiently waiting to be called throughout the morning have been noted. They will be called in the second section.

Business Motion

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): The next item of business is the business motion, to be moved by Mr Tom McCabe on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau.

12:30

The Minister for Parliament (Mr Tom McCabe): Before I move the motion as printed in the business bulletin, I should briefly explain its contents. Members will note that the motion covers business only until 20 January. The reason for that is, in part, to avoid pre-empting the work of the Procedures Committee. Members may be aware that the Procedures Committee will shortly be considering changes to the standing orders, changes that are necessary to define properly the budget bill. Next week, provision has been made to consider any recommendations that may come from the committee. If the standing orders are changed in a way that allows that definition of the budget bill, we will propose that a stage 1 debate on the budget bill be held during the week commencing 24 January.

Next week, I will also present further business for the week commencing 24 January and the week commencing 31 January.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees

a) as an addition to the Business Motion agreed on 16 December 1999—

Thursday 13 January 2000

after Continuation of Executive Debate on Housing insert:

followed by Executive Motion on Representation of the People Bill—UK Legislation

and, b) the following programme of business—

Wednesday 19 January 2000

2.30 pm Time For Reflection

followed by Ministerial Statement on Air Quality Strategy

followed by Executive Debate on Sexual Offences (Amendment) Bill

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business—debate on the subject of S1M-371 Mr Duncan McNeil: Flooding in Inverclyde

Thursday 20 January 2000

9.30 am Ministerial Statement

followed by Executive Debate on Tackling Drug Misuse in Scotland

followed by Business Motion

<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.30 pm	Question Time
3.10 pm	First Minister's Question Time
3.30 pm	Continuation of Executive Debate on Tackling Drug Misuse in Scotland
<i>followed by</i>	Motion to amend Standing Orders (definition of budget bill)
5.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business—debate on the subject of S1M-372 Jamie Stone: Dispersal of Civil Service Jobs to Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross

The Presiding Officer: I have no indication of anyone wishing to speak against the motion, so I will put the question to the chamber.

The question is, that motion S1M-410, in the name of Mr Tom McCabe, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

Lead Committee

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees the following designation of Lead Committee—

The Health and Community Care Committee to consider The Beef Bones (Scotland) Regulations 1999, SSI 1999/186—[*Mr McCabe.*]

The Presiding Officer: The question on that motion will be put at decision time at 5 o'clock.

12:31

Meeting suspended until 14:30.

14:31

On resuming—

Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): This afternoon, we start with question time. As we have introduced a new procedure, I shall take a couple of minutes to explain how it will work. I shall add on injury time afterwards.

After each questioner has had a chance to ask his or her question, it will be open to any member to ask a supplementary. Members can press their buttons, and their names will come up on the screen. I ask members please not to press any button until the member who is asking the question is on his or her feet. If members press too soon, they will risk being wiped off the list, along with those who were not called on the previous question.

I have to try to balance the pressure from members on a particular question with the interests of those members who are further down the list, waiting for their questions to be reached. Questions in both categories—the general questions and the First Minister's questions—that are not reached will receive written answers later in the afternoon.

The selection of questions is extremely difficult, and it would help if members dropped me a note in the morning, before question time, telling me if they have a particular interest so that I can take that fact into account. That does not guarantee that those members will be called to ask questions, but it would help. I cannot be expected to know all the geography that is involved in these questions. Although the chair is omnipotent, it is not omniscient. Any advice that members can give would be welcomed.

The serious point that I want to make is that, at the end of question time, there can be no points of order on not being selected to ask a question. Any points of grievance can be addressed to me outside, after question time, when I shall try to make amends, and possibly even offer cups of tea and sympathy.

Let us proceed.

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Rural Communities

1. Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what measures it is currently taking to promote the vitality and future viability of rural communities. (S1O-896)

The Minister for Rural Affairs (Ross Finnie):

The Executive is taking forward a wide range of policies and activities—for example, a £14.2 million rural transport funding package, an ambitious programme of land reform and the preparation of new rural development plans that will put almost £100 million into rural communities each year—in line with its commitment to support and enhance all aspects of rural life in Scotland.

Mr Paterson: I am sure that, along with everyone in this chamber, the minister is fully aware how vital the tourism industry is to the rural economy. Is he aware that a recent survey suggested that 40 per cent of businesses that are involved in that industry said that the Scottish Tourist Board is doing very poorly, and that a further 80 per cent thought that the Scottish Government did not understand the tourism industry at all? What plans does the Executive have to reform the structures and financing of the tourism industry in Scotland?

Ross Finnie: As Mr Paterson will be aware, the Executive is in the middle of producing a new tourism strategy. As part of that strategy, the Scottish Tourist Board and its partners have been asked to consider in particular the problem of growing tourism in remoter areas and to come up with fresh ideas for that. Those ideas will form part of the new strategy, which I hope will address the points that Mr Paterson has just made.

Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Will the minister expand on the Executive's commitment to support socially rented housing in rural areas and will the Executive meet representatives of housing providers in the Highlands and Islands?

Ross Finnie: If the member had been present throughout this morning's debate, she would know that that matter has been debated extensively. Discussions have already taken place between the Executive and Scottish Homes on increasing substantially the amount that is spent on provision of affordable rented accommodation in rural areas.

Dr Winnie Ewing (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): What steps will the Executive take to deal with the situation in some Highland communities where 90 per cent of the housing stock is holiday homes?

Ross Finnie: That is a problem and Dr Ewing's point is well made. The essential point—apart from the issue of holiday homes—is that, historically, there has been an underspend on provision of affordable housing in rural areas. That relates to my previous answer about the fact that the Executive has had discussions with Scottish Homes; we have asked it to increase substantially the proportion of its spending for provision of affordable housing in remote rural areas.

Housing (Stock Transfer)

2. Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): To ask the Scottish Executive what measures it intends to put in place to ensure that tenants who are concerned about transfer of council housing stock are made aware of the opportunities to voice their opinions. (S10-895)

The Minister for Communities (Ms Wendy Alexander): Glasgow City Council has set up 31 neighbourhood forums that are represented on a citywide tenants forum. I am aware of the interest in this matter and I have agreed to the forum's request for a meeting to discuss how best to include input from tenants in the discussion about the proposed stock transfer and the move towards community ownership.

Tommy Sheridan: Glasgow tenants and council trade unions were excluded from the year-long Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service feasibility study into stock transfer and there are no tenant or trade union representatives on the Executive's newly established steering group or on Glasgow City Council's development team. Given those facts, does the minister agree with the University of Paisley's independent business report, which said:

"Tenants and trade unions have been excluded from all discussions on the development of proposals to transfer the housing stock in Glasgow. This conflicts with the social inclusion agenda and does not augur well for the future?"

Ms Alexander: I met the joint trade unions in Glasgow in December, so what Tommy Sheridan says is factually inaccurate. I reiterate that I will meet the citywide tenants forum next week.

Tommy Sheridan: What is Ms Alexander's response to Glasgow City Council's biggest and most recent survey of its tenants, which took place three months ago?

Ms Alexander: I am not familiar with the details of the study.

Tommy Sheridan *rose*—

The Presiding Officer: You have had two supplementary questions, Mr Sheridan. I call Dorothy-Grace Elder.

Dorothy-Grace Elder (Glasgow) (SNP): All the Glasgow tenants associations that were set up before the proposed stock transfer are solidly opposed to the transfer. Is the minister aware of the deplorable tactics employed by Glasgow City Council in denying freedom of expression to tenants who oppose the transfer? The tactics include cancellation of the booking of a hall that is owned by Glasgow City Council. The Waverley centre in Drumchapel was booked by Glasgow Against Housing Stock Transfer, which is a tenants organisation. The tenants' booking was cancelled and they had to be taken to a church.

The Presiding Officer: That is enough. Can we hear the answer, please, Ms Alexander?

Ms Alexander: All parties in the chamber embrace the need to look for new solutions to housing problems and, in that spirit, Glasgow City Council is to be commended for exploring the options. I am happy, on behalf of the Executive and of Glasgow City Council, to provide the critical assurance for which Dorothy-Grace Elder asks: there will be no move towards community ownership unless the tenants of Glasgow vote for it. There will be a ballot and every tenant—not just a few—will have the opportunity to make the decision collectively.

Drug Rehabilitation

3. Brian Adam (North-East Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive to provide details of its plans for expenditure, announced in the Minister for Finance's statement of 6 October 1999, on drug rehabilitation broken down by local authority and health board areas. (S10-914)

The Deputy Minister for Justice (Angus MacKay): The Minister for Finance's statement emphasised the Scottish Executive's commitment to tackling the drugs menace by providing £10.5 million to establish a drugs enforcement agency. Local authorities and health boards are currently planning their budgets for next year and I expect to see clear plans for investment in services locally to tackle head on the drugs problem that affects many Scottish communities.

Brian Adam: I understood that the Minister for Finance also announced money for drug rehabilitation—that, rather than money for the drugs enforcement agency, was the basis of my question. Is the minister saying that no moneys will be allocated to individual local authorities and health boards for drug rehabilitation in the coming year?

Angus MacKay: No—moneys that go to local authorities and health boards are not ring-fenced as such. It is for the individual authorities to specify exactly how the totality of their allocation will be broken down. I can provide the member with current and previous years' expenditure patterns, but until those bodies take their own decisions about exactly how much they will allocate to drugs, it is impossible to give information about next year.

Dr Richard Simpson (Ochil) (Lab): Will the minister agree to examine the uptake of residential rehabilitation schemes? It is a matter of considerable concern that expensive schemes funded in Scotland are not being utilised.

Angus MacKay: It is a priority for the Executive to conclude as soon as possible the survey that is being undertaken of all expenditure that goes

through its budget. The survey includes an examination of residential detoxification centres, to ensure that best-practice proposals are replicated across Scotland. If individual projects do not provide value for money, we expect that those projects will be reshaped and expenditure moved elsewhere.

Parliamentary Debates

4. Mrs Lyndsay McIntosh (Central Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has to lodge further motions for debate on drugs, education and housing issues affecting Scotland. (S10-893)

The Minister for Parliament (Mr Tom McCabe): I informed Parliament today of the intention to hold next week a debate on drug misuse. We are debating housing today and the chamber will have an opportunity to discuss the improvement in Scottish education bill when it is introduced shortly.

Mrs McIntosh: I thank Mr McCabe for his answer. When I lodged this question, none of the substantial debates mentioned in it had taken place. Given that housing is being debated today and that the issue of tackling drugs comes before the chamber next week, I will put aside my suspicion that Mr McCabe has been reading my mail.

I commend the Executive for addressing issues of real importance—[*Applause.*] Wait a minute—this is uncharted territory for me. I thank the Executive for discussing issues of real importance, rather than the millennium non-bug, and for being guided by Conservative principles.

The Presiding Officer: We will let that pass.

Nicola Sturgeon (Glasgow) (SNP): On the subject of motions about education, is the minister aware of research that shows that participation in music by schoolchildren can greatly enhance their attainment in numeracy and literacy and improve behaviour and motivation? Is he further aware that, owing to a lack of resources, there is a huge variation in the provision of musical instrument tuition across local authorities? If so, what additional support will the Executive provide to local authorities to ensure that all children, if they so wish, can access opportunities to learn to play musical instruments?

Mr McCabe: Although education funding has been increased by 8 per cent, it is for the local authority to determine the way in which it distributes spending across all aspects of education. The education bill, which will be presented to Parliament in the near future, will contain sections on involving young people in all aspects of their education and I am sure that they will have the opportunity to comment on this issue

at that time.

Tayside University Hospitals NHS Trust

6. Mr Andrew Welsh (Angus) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what measures are being taken to ensure that there will be no increase in waiting times for non-emergency surgical procedures within Tayside University Hospitals NHS Trust over the next year. (S10-909)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Susan Deacon): I expect the trust to play its part in meeting the Executive's priorities for the national health service in Scotland. We are working with all health boards and NHS trusts across Scotland to speed treatment and to shorten waiting times. As I announced before Christmas, we plan to establish national maximum waiting times, to be met by March 2001, in the key clinical priorities of heart disease, cancer and, for the first time, mental illness.

Mr Welsh: Is the minister truly aware of the worry and uncertainty that is caused by increased waiting times for operations, and is she aware that she is now presiding over a worsening situation? Can she explain why waiting times for out-patients in Angus have not been issued to general practitioners over the past six months and how keeping surgeons and nurses from doing the work for which they were trained will deliver the improvements that she has promised for the NHS?

Susan Deacon: I am very much aware that waiting for treatment can cause patients worry and anxiety. That is why the Executive has put such emphasis on speeding treatment and reducing waiting times. What often adds to that worry and uncertainty is the misinformation that members occasionally put into the press and the public domain. I can give an assurance that we are continuing to work to take real action and real measures to ensure that waiting times are reduced. We know that that matters to people and we are taking action on it.

Mr John McAllion (Dundee East) (Lab): The minister will know that the increased spending that was made available this year to the Tayside University Hospitals NHS Trust was entirely taken up by the pay award to nurses and doctors. Does she accept that, if the Executive insists on the elimination of the trust's projected £12 million by the end of the current financial year, that will have serious implications for the health service on Tayside? In the interests of patients and staff alike on Tayside, will she consider allowing the trust to carry forward the deficit into a future financial year, particularly in the light of the fact that the trust is addressing the structural problems on Tayside through its acute services review?

Susan Deacon: In the current year, in excess of

£388 million has been allocated to health services in Tayside. That represents an increase of 4.25 per cent. I must take issue with the member: the figures that I have given indicate a real-terms increase, only part of which has been assigned to meeting the cost of pay awards.

On the deficit in Tayside, officials from my department are working with the board and the trust to put in place a sensible recovery plan that will enable the trust to manage its resources effectively while maintaining the level of patient care. It is always worth remembering that, whatever the size of a budget in the NHS, either locally or nationally, it must be managed effectively and sensibly, with patients' needs in mind. That is exactly what we want to do nationally, and it is what we want, working with health officials in Tayside, to do locally.

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): Will the minister acknowledge, following the answer that she has given to Mr McAllion, that the recovery plan that is being proposed by the management executive and that will be forced through in Tayside before the end of this financial year will result in a reduction in the volume of elective surgery work that is being done by the Tayside University Hospitals NHS Trust? That will have an impact on the waiting times of patients in all constituencies in Tayside. Does that not indicate that the Government's rhetoric on health spending does not accord with the reality that our constituents experience?

Susan Deacon: Mr Swinney's colleague Mr Welsh has already said that he is concerned about the anxiety that is felt by the people of Tayside. I have already made the point that misinformation put out by local members adds to that worry. Neither this Executive nor anyone else is imposing a financial plan on local health authorities in Tayside. The local trust in Tayside is working with the health board to develop a sensible recovery plan. If local members want to contribute to that process and ensure that their constituents' health needs are taken into account as part of it, they would be better engaging in constructive debate at a local level, rather than trying to score points in this Parliament.

Oban Hospital

7. George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what assurances it can give that there will be no cuts in clinical service provision at Oban hospital. (S10-905)

The Minister for Health and Community Care (Susan Deacon): It is for Argyll and Clyde Health Board and Argyll and Clyde Acute Hospitals Trust to decide on the services and facilities to be provided to meet the needs of the local population.

George Lyon: There is great concern in the local community about the recovery plan that is being drawn up by the acute hospitals trust because of a financial overspend. What will the implications be for Oban hospital? Will the minister give an assurance that doctors, nurses, staff and—most of all—the local community will be consulted about any changes that are brought forward as a result of the plan? They are very much in the dark right now and there is tremendous concern about the implications of the recovery plan.

Susan Deacon: I am glad that Mr Lyon has raised the issue of consultation and discussion on recovery plans and, more generally, on the delivery and design of health services at a local level. It is very important that local people are kept informed about decisions that affect them, and that local members are involved in discussions. I understand that Mr Lyon has been in touch with the local health authority and I encourage him to continue that dialogue. As I said before Christmas in the debate on the national health service, I expect NHS trusts and health boards to involve local communities in full consultation and discussion throughout these processes.

Ms Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (SNP): My question, too, is about the management of NHS resources and about plans for recovery. I draw the Executive's attention to the headline in an excellent publication that can be purchased locally: "Cash plea as flu crisis wrecks waiting lists". That situation has arisen because of a combination of circumstances, none of which is helped by the minister's precipitate withdrawal of emergency winter payments to local hospital trusts. Will she now reinstate those payments?

The Presiding Officer: Is this about Oban?

Ms MacDonald: If she does not reinstate them, will she resign on the ground that she is not managing the resources of the NHS?

The Presiding Officer: Does that refer to Oban?

Ms MacDonald: It is the same all over.

The Presiding Officer: As the supplementary question does not relate to the original question, we will proceed to question 8.

Carers

8. Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will provide a breakdown of the specific areas into which the £10 million pledged to assist carers will be channelled. (S10-903)

The Deputy Minister for Community Care (Iain Gray): We expect the £10 million to be used to enhance existing quality services—including

respite care—that are of direct benefit to carers, as well as to develop new and more innovative services. A copy of the department's letter to local authorities advising them of their share of the £10 million is available in the Scottish Parliament information centre. It is for individual authorities, in consultation with local carers groups, to decide how best to use those resources.

Mr Ingram: Will the minister acknowledge that the Executive's response to the needs of carers is wholly inadequate? Will he comment specifically on the plight of families and friends whose informal caring for mentally ill people saves the Government £280 million each year, according to Accounts Commission estimates?

Iain Gray: In the debate in which the £10 million for carers was announced, I made it clear that it is well understood that the health service and the community care systems could not continue without the informal care that is carried out by 500,000 or more Scots—we cannot match that. In that debate, we also agreed, as did carers organisations, that the money was a first step in giving the needs of carers a much higher priority. It is a step in the right direction.

Cathie Craigie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab): Does the minister agree that children who are carers need specialist support? It is important to ensure that young people who are carers have a childhood. Can he advise on proposals to assist such children?

Iain Gray: When the carers strategy was announced, the Executive acknowledged that there was not enough in it for young carers. I have asked officials to work on research and to bring forward further proposals, which I hope to present to the Parliament. I would expect that one area on which the £10 million that has been allocated to local authorities will be spent will be better information and services for young carers, perhaps through schools.

Roads (M74)

9. Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what guidance the Minister for Transport and the Environment gave to the leaders of Glasgow City, Renfrewshire and South Lanarkshire Councils at her meeting with them on 21 December 1999 on the extent to which the Scottish Executive does not consider that the M74 northern extension satisfies the assessment criteria used in the strategic roads review, and what advice the minister offered the council leaders on how the M74 northern extension should be amended to meet the Scottish Executive's criteria. (S10-917)

The Minister for Transport and the Environment (Sarah Boyack): As I made clear in

my statement to Parliament on 4 November, that proposal is to be promoted by the local authorities. Discussion focused on how they might deliver their proposal.

Mr Tosh: I thank the minister for that full and informative answer. [*Laughter.*] I hope that her relegation to the second row of the Labour seats has no relationship to recent press speculation about impending ministerial reshuffles. [MEMBERS: "Shame."] Will she consent to tell the chamber whether the Executive approves of and supports the current M74 proposal, whether it is encouraging Glasgow City Council and other councils to bring the scheme to completion, and whether it has offered any guidance to those councils as to whether the scheme requires substantial amendment and, if it does, what proposals the Executive will put to the councils for achieving a fresh set of planning and other statutory consents?

Sarah Boyack: I shall be extremely careful where I sit the next time I come into the chamber; I did not realise that it had such significance.

The key issue about the M74 extension, as was made absolutely clear in the strategic roads review, is that the project must be considered carefully. It would be a major urban motorway, running right through the centre of a city. There would be a lot of local traffic as well as a high proportion of commuting traffic. The matter therefore fits extremely well into the local transport strategies that are being developed by local authorities. Those issues, together with others relating to funding and to the opportunities that are available under the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991 and under the proposals for local road-user charging, which I have already indicated to Parliament will be introduced in the integrated transport bill, can all be taken forward by local authorities.

Janis Hughes (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab): Does the minister agree that many local businesses, particularly in my constituency, that are under the blight of the proposed M74 extension have been suffering greatly for a number of years because of the uncertainty surrounding the proposal? Will she confirm that she is considering the discussions that took place on 21 December 1999, and will she issue advice in the near future about the matter?

Sarah Boyack: The issue of blight was raised by one of the councils at that meeting; it is one of the many matters that I am currently considering.

2001 Census

10. Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it will make a statement on the questions to be included

in the 2001 census and in particular whether there will be any questions seeking information about religious denomination. (S1O-907)

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Justice (Mr Jim Wallace): Details of our proposals for the 2001 census in Scotland were announced last Monday when the draft census order in council was laid before the Parliament. It is not proposed to include a question on religion. We believe that, in Scottish circumstances, alternative ways of collecting information on religion will be a more appropriate way of meeting user needs. We plan to do that by sample surveys.

Karen Whitefield: I thank the minister for his response, but I must say that I am somewhat disappointed. Is he aware that research undertaken by the social and public health sciences unit of the University of Glasgow indicates that there are differences in health and employment opportunities between Catholics and people of Irish descent and non-Catholics? Does he feel that, in line with our commitment to tackling exclusion, there is a need to gain further and more substantial information on the matter, and that the inclusion of a question on religion in the 2001 census, which will happen in other parts of the United Kingdom, would provide that information?

Mr Wallace: I appreciate that this is an important issue. We have received a number of representations about it, all of which were given careful consideration. However, the conclusion was reached that the census was not the appropriate vehicle for gathering the sort of worthwhile information on this subject to which Karen Whitefield has referred. It can be difficult to identify how such a question is to be answered. For example, is a Christian a communicant Church member or someone who attends church regularly or irregularly?

We accept the point that, in advancing our equality strategy, some of that information must be made available. However, we believe that an examination of qualitative issues, such as the relevance of religion to promoting social inclusion and equality in the wider context of culture and lifestyle, can be better done and the results better achieved through sample surveys. That is what we are committed to doing.

Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP): Can the minister provide the reasons for not including a question on the Scots language in the census? Is there scope for amendment of the draft census order under the terms of the Census Act 1920?

Mr Wallace: We received a number of representations about the Scots language, but it appears from research that the Scots language means different things to different people, in terms

of what would be understood in answering the question. The proposal was rejected, as research undertaken on behalf of the Registrar General showed that such a question would not work well because there was no demonstrable need for it at a small-area level, for which census information is important.

It is my understanding that, in some cases, it may be possible to amend the order that was laid. I will confirm in a letter to Irene McGugan whether that question is one that can be amended. Any amendment would have to proceed by way of primary legislation because there is no provision in the Census Act 1920 for a question on religion.

Mr Keith Raffan (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD): Is the minister aware of the concern among ethnic minorities that the previous census grossly underestimated their numbers? What consultations has he had with ethnic minority groups to try to overcome that problem, particularly in terms of the range of languages that can be used on the census form and on the way in which the census is conducted?

Mr Wallace: There was considerable consultation following the publication of a white paper by the UK Government before the establishment of this Parliament. Many ethnic groups were involved in that consultation. There will be a question on ethnicity in the census, and it is my understanding that census forms can be made available with translation.

Foreign Language Teaching

11. Ms Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has to promote the teaching of foreign languages in Scotland during 2001, the European year of languages. (S10-910)

The Deputy Minister for Children and Education (Peter Peacock): The Scottish Executive is committed to the learning of foreign languages in Scotland. We are discussing with interested bodies how Scotland can participate in the European year of languages in 2001, and we will announce plans later this year.

Ms Oldfather: Does the minister agree that schools in my area in North Ayrshire have shown excellence in the teaching of modern languages? I am sure that he is aware that the uptake of standard grade Spanish, for example, in Kilwinning Academy, is twice the national average. Will he take that first-class track record into account in determining the location of the school of excellence in modern language teaching in Scotland?

Peter Peacock: I am aware of Irene Oldfather's personal interest in the matter. She was the vice-chair of education in North Ayrshire, and is

involved in the European Committee of the Regions, which makes her particularly aware of the importance of foreign languages. Because of my association with her on that committee, I am also aware of the work that has been done in North Ayrshire.

I am keen to make a decision soon on the school of excellence in modern language teaching, to which Irene Oldfather referred. We hope to make an announcement on that issue in the coming weeks. I am aware of the excellent submission made by North Ayrshire.

Local Government Finance

12. Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive how many jobs, if any, will be lost as a result of the announcement on local government finance on Wednesday 8 December 1999. (S10-898)

The Deputy Minister for Local Government (Mr Frank McAveety): Government-supported expenditure will be £6,746 million in 2000-01, an increase of 3.7 per cent over the comparable figure for this year, and higher than the projected increase in inflation. It is for local authorities to prepare their own budgets in the light of their own circumstances, which may vary, as will their employment decisions.

Mr Harding: I thank the minister for not answering my question. Does he agree that, yet again, the settlement will result in a reduction in services, fewer road repairs, closed libraries, more uncollected litter, an increase in council tax and people paying more and getting less?

Mr McAveety: It is interesting that we have had that question again from a member of the Scottish Conservative party, which presided over tremendous opportunities for local government in the 1980s and 1990s. On the figures, it is for local councils—as Mr Harding well knows, because he still sits as a local councillor—to determine how best to allocate their budgets. It would be wrong, on the principle of subsidiarity, on which this Parliament was set up, for the Executive to determine how best to allocate those budgets.

I draw the member's attention to two key facts. For two years running, local authorities' budgets have grown. We can also deal with the issue in terms of the comparative spend. If his Government was still in power, £2 billion less would be spent over the next three years, compared with what we will spend.

Andrew Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Is the minister aware that, in the first three years of the parliamentary session, the Labour Government will be spending £2.5 billion less than was spent by the Tory Government—which he has been berating—in its last three years?

On the increase in spending to which the minister referred, is he aware that it lags behind average earnings, which will increase by 4 per cent? If spending increases by 3.6 per cent, where will the jobs be lost, and is the minister responsible for that?

Mr McAveety: I will obviously take lectures from the great economist, Andrew Wilson. It took him until three days before the election to address the fact that the Scottish National party would be in deficit. That is the same Andrew Wilson who, along with his SNP colleagues, regularly trots out spending commitments without identifying where the money would come from. If Andrew Wilson can give me that information—[*Interruption.*] It is interesting that both the SNP and the Tories are again barracking me. It is an enjoyable experience. I do not mind being in the third row being barracked by that crowd.

Landfill

13. Mr Kenny MacAskill (Lothians) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive what measures it has put in place to prevent radioactive pollution escaping into the atmosphere from landfill sites. (S10-897)

The Minister for Transport and the Environment (Sarah Boyack): Regulation of the disposal of radioactive waste in Scotland is a matter for the Scottish Environment Protection Agency.

Mr MacAskill: Considering that SEPA has identified radioactive tritium levels that were some 200 times higher than background levels in the Lanarkshire landfill site, and given that the Executive has cut SEPA's funding by 6 per cent, how does the minister propose to monitor and police such abuses?

Sarah Boyack: It is important that that is done in a transparent manner. Radioactive waste is disposed of at 12 sites in Scotland, which are regulated. I have ensured that that information was placed in the Scottish Parliament information centre. It is important that that information is available. I have every confidence that SEPA is monitoring those sites.

If Mr MacAskill would like to raise any particular matters with me, I should be interested to hear from him. I answered his question on radioactive waste issues before Christmas. I should be happy to deal with detailed, specific questions if he has any others.

French Beef

14. Alex Johnstone (North-East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Executive what steps are being taken to ensure that French beef in the Scottish marketplace conforms to the same

standards laid down for home-produced beef given the rising incidence of BSE in France. (S10-916)

The Minister for Rural Affairs (Ross Finnie): A range of BSE-related legislative measures, such as those requiring the complete removal of specified risk material, are already in place to safeguard public health in relation to the consumption of beef by consumers; those controls apply to both domestic beef and beef imported from France.

Alex Johnstone: As much of the beef that is currently being imported from France is cow beef, would it be fair to say that it would be over 30 months of age? Does the minister consider that that particular requirement in the UK marketplace would be appropriate for beef produced in France?

Ross Finnie: The European Community directive governing those health matters would require France to comply with the requirements of this country. It would be for the European Commission to ensure that it is so doing. Under European rules—as Mr Johnstone will be aware—we are unfortunately, under the open market regulations, not able to check every piece of imported beef, but the Meat Hygiene Service and the State Veterinary Service regularly inspect it.

Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP): Notwithstanding the Euro-sceptic views of the Conservatives, is the minister prepared to meet his French colleague to see whether there is any way in which Scottish beef can get back into the French market, or is he resigned to waiting, perhaps for years, for the outcome of the current court case?

Ross Finnie: I am certainly not resigned to waiting for years for the current court case. I am concerned that, at present, the only position that has been put to the United Kingdom—or anywhere else—is that the French might wish to pursue the issue of a herd-based scheme. Alasdair Morgan will be aware that that could take a very long time.

The interest in instituting a herd-based scheme is the only position that has been put by the French Government. It is not consistent with our position—supported by the rest of Europe—that the date-based export scheme is entirely correct and safe and should be implemented immediately by the French, to comply with their European requirements.

EU Beef Labelling Scheme

15. Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive whether it has made any representations to the European Union requesting that the implementation of council regulation 820/97, which allows for the introduction of a compulsory beef labelling scheme, not be delayed

any further. (S10-915)

The Minister for Rural Affairs (Ross Finnie): I attended the EU Council meeting in December at which the proposals for compulsory beef labelling were, regrettably, deferred by the EU until 1 September 2000. I had to concur reluctantly with the UK position to support that deferral because many EU member states—including the UK—are not in a position to implement the scheme in full. I believe that the proposals can be taken forward now and officials in the Scottish Executive rural affairs department are working with others to ensure that the new date can be met.

Nora Radcliffe: Has the minister tried, as I have, to make an informed choice in the supermarket? Does he accept that continuing—and sometimes deliberate—confusion over labelling and the difficulties that it poses for consumers is an obstacle to the recovery of the Scottish beef sector and other sectors?

Ross Finnie: I would not describe myself as a natural shopper but, thinking of the occasions when I have had to exercise that choice, I could not agree more with Nora Radcliffe's comments. That is why, in October, in an attempt to strengthen the voluntary arrangements in advance of the compulsory arrangements coming into place, the Executive consulted to ensure that we will have clearer descriptions that will help to distinguish between imported products and products that are produced in Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: I will take an injury time question from Mr Rumbles.

Rural Schools (Traffic Calming)

16. Mr Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): To ask the Scottish Executive what plans it has to introduce traffic-calming measures outside rural schools in areas such as Aberdeenshire. (S10-900)

The Minister for Transport and the Environment (Sarah Boyack): Decisions about the introduction of traffic-calming measures on local roads are the responsibility of local authorities. The Scottish Executive is responsible for trunk roads. We are not aware of particular safety problems on trunk roads in Aberdeenshire associated with rural schools.

Mr Rumbles: Aberdeenshire Council wants to install amber flashing lights on a trial basis near three schools: Craigievar, Tough and Kildrummy. Such lights are not allowed on those roads under current regulations; they may be installed only where many children cross the road to and from a school.

Does the minister accept that that rarely happens in rural schools and that children are still

at risk if they are dropped off and collected from the school without actually crossing the road? Will the Executive consider those regulations specifically?

Sarah Boyack: We have said that we are happy to consider the issue of road markings outside those schools, to help identify the need for safety measures there. The issue of lights is being progressed by officials of the Scottish Executive and local authority transportation officers.

First Minister's Question Time

SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

Secretary of State for Scotland (Meetings)

1. Mr Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Executive when the First Minister last met the Secretary of State for Scotland and what issues they discussed. (S1F-1)

The First Minister (Donald Dewar): To be precise and accurate, I should say that I last met the Secretary of State for Scotland last night, but that was in the street and by chance.

I am sure that Alex Salmond actually wants an answer to his question, so I will inform him that the last formal meeting was on 1 December. The routine has been rather interrupted by the holiday period, but I am looking forward to meeting the Secretary of State for Scotland tomorrow.

Mr Salmond: I am sure that no turf war took place in the street last night.

Does the First Minister remember that, last year, when he had something to do with the Scottish Office, the Scottish Office's response to a decline in student applications was that the figures were misleading and not a good indicator? Now that that decline in applications has been transformed into a 2.3 per cent decline in students attending universities and colleges in Scotland, will the First Minister revise his opinion and agree with the central finding of the Cubie committee that the present circumstances of student finance in Scotland, introduced by the Labour party after the election, have been discredited?

The First Minister: Proceedings in the chamber have illustrated the fact that there is always room for argument about the best form of student support. There might be a good deal of agreement about the general principles of fairness and widening access, but there is much dispute about the machinery and the methodology.

Of course, I looked at the figures when they were published the other day. The 2.3 per cent includes quite significant numbers from overseas and from areas for which there are obvious explanations. When that adjustment is made, I think that the decline is just over 1 per cent, which is not quite as significant or exciting as Mr Salmond might like to make it, in particular when it is compared with the high numbers in the immediately preceding year.

Mr Salmond: I think that a decline in Scottish students attending Scottish universities is highly significant, as is such a decline in students from the rest of the UK, from the rest of Europe and

from the rest of the world. The point about the figures is that they show a decline in every category of student at Scottish universities. Given that, will the First Minister say—at the second time of asking—whether he agrees with a central finding of the Cubie committee, that the present arrangements for student finance have been discredited?

The First Minister: I have said to Mr Salmond, and I repeat, that if he looks at the variations in student numbers at Scottish universities over a wide range of years, he will see that small gradations from year to year are endemic. There is a small variation this year, which certainly does not substantiate the general attack that Mr Salmond is attempting to mount.

The Cubie report is a helpful and important document. We have been totally justified in establishing the Cubie committee by the complexity of its findings and by the fact that it has rejected entirely the simplistic nostrums that were urged upon us by both Mr Salmond's party and Mr McLetchie's when first we came to this chamber.

I can give Mr Salmond a promise that the Executive is looking at the Cubie findings with a great deal of care and attention and that, in due course, we will come to the chamber with some recommendations.

Mr Salmond: But every other party in the chamber, unlike the Labour party, submitted evidence to the Cubie committee. Can the First Minister address the simple question whether he accepts the finding of the Cubie committee that the present arrangements for student finance have been discredited?

Given the commitment in the Executive's programme for government document "Making a fudge together", to increase student numbers in Scotland by 42,000 by 2002, does the First Minister regard the decline this year of 736 as progress towards that objective?

The First Minister: I will not enter into a competition about fudge making with Mr Salmond, as that would not be particularly helpful. The pledge that we made in our document was made with serious intent, and we intend to work to achieve it. It applies not just to universities, but to further and higher education. If Mr Salmond considers, for example, the substantial increase in funding that we have given to further education and compares our funding for higher education with the Conservative party's plans, he will find that it is likely that we will make that progress. We are certainly providing the resources.

For reasons connected with another question, I have looked at Aberdeen College, which will have an increase of over 12 per cent this year against the previous year's funding. That is typical in the

further education sector.

The subject is broader, and perhaps requires a little more preparation and thought than Mr Salmond has given to his particular points.

2. David McLetchie (Lothians) (Con): I think I know the answer, but I will ask again.

To ask the First Minister when he last met the Secretary of State for Scotland and what issues they discussed. (S1F-5)

The First Minister: As a result of some very sensible decisions that you have taken, Sir David, this might be that question's last appearance. We ought to say goodbye to an old friend with some affection.

I will content myself by referring Mr McLetchie to the answer that I gave to Mr Salmond some minutes ago.

David McLetchie: Thank you. I am sure that I will have the opportunity of reacquainting the First Minister with lots of his old friends on future occasions in question time.

At the First Minister's meeting with the Secretary of State for Scotland tomorrow, will he take up with him the recent comments of his colleague Brian Donohoe, the MP for Cunninghame South? In particular, I refer to Mr Donohoe's comment in last week's *Sunday Mail*:

"If . . . Holyrood starts delivering and stops wasting money on frivolous ideas".

That comment echoes the views of many people in Scotland about the failings of the Executive. Does the First Minister agree that Mr Donohoe's comments are an indictment of the Executive's whole agenda?

The First Minister: Mr Donohoe has possibly made the mistake of concentrating on the ideas of the Conservative party, as expressed in this chamber. I do not agree with him.

David McLetchie: I did not expect Mr Dewar to agree with him. At this very moment, no doubt, Mr Donohoe is on his way to some political re-education gulag run by Mr Campbell. [*Laughter.*]

I invite the First Minister to consider that perhaps Mr Donohoe is simply reflecting the views of many people in Ayrshire. After all, the health service is in crisis, crime is rising at a time when the number of police officers is falling, and the Executive is intent on taxing motorists off the roads and not investing money in our roads network. Is it not time to face the fact that the Scottish public are severely disillusioned with the performance of the Administration and that the First Minister should be making a new year resolution to put the Scottish Parliament back on the right track?

The First Minister: I notice that the Ayr by-

election has started early. I can promise the chamber—and Mr McLetchie specifically—that I will not come to listen to him in Ayr when he makes the same speech again.

Ms Irene Oldfather (Cunninghame South) (Lab): Will the First Minister join me in expressing disappointment that my Ayrshire colleague, Mr Gallie, has decided not to run in the Ayr by-election, in favour of Westminster? [MEMBERS: "Answer."] Perhaps the First Minister would care to speculate as to whether that tells us something about how the Conservatives view their prospects in Ayr. [*Interruption.*]

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): Order. Questions to the First Minister can be only on matters for which he is responsible. He is not responsible for anything in the Conservative party—of that I am certain.

The First Minister: In that case, I am in some difficulties, Sir David. Perhaps I will confine myself to saying that that is an interesting comment on the priority given to the Parliament by the deputy leader of the Conservative group. I am tempted to remark that on this occasion, Mr Gallie is voting with his feet, which is probably a more effective way of acting than voting with his head. [*Laughter.*]

Phil Gallie (South of Scotland) (Con): Thank you. From the acclaim in the chamber, it is obvious that the Conservatives will do very well in Ayr. Indeed, that will be the case. As far as my own position goes, I have made it quite clear that I support the Scottish Parliament. It is here; it has to be made to stay as part of the union. It is important that it works with Westminster, and on that basis, Westminster will require people who have experience of both Parliaments. I look forward to winning the seat in Ayr on a future occasion. [*Interruption.*]

The First Minister rose—

The Presiding Officer: Order. I am sorry, First Minister, but we are not going to have questions in the chamber about by-elections. It was not even a question, anyway.

National Health Service

3. Kay Ullrich (West of Scotland) (SNP): To ask the First Minister whether he will outline his plans to alleviate the current pressures experienced by the NHS. (S1F-15)

The First Minister (Donald Dewar): My colleague Susan Deacon, the Minister for Health and Community Care, gave a very full account yesterday of the comprehensive action being taken by the NHS in Scotland to deal with the severe pressure currently arising from flu and flu-like illnesses. It is—and we make no secret of it—an extremely testing time for the NHS, but we

believe that it is meeting the challenge and that people are receiving the urgent treatment and care that they need.

I would like to endorse the tribute paid by Susan Deacon to all NHS staff for their whole-hearted effort and commitment throughout this difficult period. I invite everyone in the chamber to join me in doing that.

Kay Ullrich: I thank the First Minister for his answer. Given that there has been a chronic bed shortage in the NHS in Scotland since long before the current flu outbreak, with 1,700 beds lost since March 1997, will the First Minister now give an assurance that immediate funding will be made available to local authorities to allow them to place in nursing and residential care the 2,000 elderly people currently occupying acute hospital beds?

The First Minister: Mrs Ullrich has made that point repeatedly; if it was a good point, I would not object, but I think that she is wrong. We do not strip out beds for financial reasons. We strip out beds because, for example, they are in mental hospitals, which are now outdated and surplus to requirements. When it comes down to the acute beds about which Mrs Ullrich is worried, we remove beds on the basis of the best possible advice—acute services reviews carried out by medical men of reputation and skill.

We do not want a great superfluity of beds—that would be wrong. However, we bring beds into commission as pressures increase. Susan Deacon gave the example of 140 extra beds in Lothian as a response to the present crisis. We will continue that policy. Since 1997, we have increased the number of intensive therapy unit beds by 13 per cent. We will continue to encourage the staff of the health service to use their skills and to make proper judgments on the best way forward.

Mrs Ullrich will know that grant-aided expenditure for social work is now £1.1 billion—it increased by £51.3 million this year. A good deal has been done and we hope to see improvements in the future.

These are quite intractable problems, which are difficult to banish, even with the help of an eloquent speech by Mrs Ullrich.

Kay Ullrich: Any average local authority will have assessed about 120 people awaiting placement for long-term care and will have sufficient funding to place four to six people each month.

I take it that the First Minister's answer to my question is no. Does that mean that he is saying that NHS beds will continue to be blocked and that 2,000 elderly people will continue to be denied the quality of care that they deserve?

The First Minister: No. I was trying to explain to

Mrs Ullrich that there has been a significant increase in funding, through grant-aided expenditure for social work. Furthermore, efforts have been made to ensure that there is a proper supply of beds based on the best medical advice available.

I know that there is a great tendency for ministers and MSPs to throw about statistics, but as Mrs Ullrich has asked me, I should remind her that this year there is £300 million of new money in the health service. Mrs Ullrich may shrug her shoulders and sigh, but when she makes the charge of neglecting the health service and putting nothing into it, I am bound to remind her of the facts.

Over the period of the comprehensive spending review, £1.8 billion cumulatively has been added to the plans that we inherited. Of course we will continue to give priority to the health service—we believe in it and are committed to its success and proper funding. However, we will continue to work in the world of reality, within the boundaries of what any Administration is likely to be able to afford.

I do not think—I say this as one who has been subject to the same temptation—that it is helpful to suggest that it is possible to turn on the tap and cure all problems in a short time. That is a luxury which Opposition parties can believe in, but I assure Mrs Ullrich that it is not helpful.

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I join other members in thanking the thousands of NHS staff who have worked well beyond the call of duty over the past few weeks.

With reference to Kay Ullrich's question, I must say that while we will always want—and indeed need—more money for the national health service, the simple fact is that in the three-year period beginning with the establishment of the Parliament, there will be more growth in the NHS budget than at any time in recent history.

The First Minister: I agree with the facts and figures that Malcolm Chisholm has just mentioned. The situation is not without difficulty—that is self-evident and has been underlined by the flu crisis. The situation is improving, in terms of the internal machinery of the health service, the co-ordination of the effort and the resources that are available.

Govan Shipyard

4. Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): To ask the First Minister what steps have been taken by Scottish ministers to support the bid to build up to six roll-on-roll-off ferries for the Ministry of Defence at BAE Systems' Govan shipyard. (S1F-17)

The First Minister (Donald Dewar): Scottish

ministers are fully aware that that order is critically important in securing a future for the BAE Systems yard in Govan. The Secretary of State for Defence is aware of and appreciates the strong support for Govan's bid from all—I hope—the parties in Scotland. He is also aware of the industrial and strategic importance of that particular order.

Mr McNeil: I welcome the First Minister's answer, and I am sure that my colleagues in the cross-party shipbuilding group will do so as well.

As the First Minister said, the bid is important not only for people in Govan—many people in my constituency work there.

This is a major contract, and securing it would mean three years of job security and would lay real foundations for a long-term future. Does the First Minister agree that it would be an absolute failure and a severe blow to the industry if the contract went outside the United Kingdom?

The First Minister: As Duncan McNeil and most members will appreciate, one of the problems is that this is not a warship contract—it is a contract for commercially operated ferries. The protection for Royal Navy orders that allows us to confine bids to UK yards therefore does not apply.

It is also fair to remind the chamber that the hulls—which would be Govan's contribution if the Sea Lion Consortium were to be successful—are a comparatively small part of the total contract, which includes the running and management of the ferries over a number of years.

It is a complex and difficult situation. I have great faith in Govan and in the work force there. They have done remarkably well to survive recent crises and difficulties. However, it is only prudent and fair to remind people that this is a competitive tender, and that Govan's bid will therefore have to be competitive. With the workers' skills, I very much hope that it will be. Everyone in the chamber will certainly wish Govan well and will do everything that they can to give it a fair wind.

My colleague Henry McLeish has met not only the representatives of the work force, but senior management from BAE Systems. We all hope that there will be a happy outcome, which the yard deserves.

Ben Wallace (North-East Scotland) (Con): Will the First Minister make representations to the Secretary of State for Defence, to ensure that Scotland puts forward the best possible case to secure the contract for the two supercarriers that are due to be ordered in the next few years for the Ministry of Defence?

The First Minister: That is a rather more general question about different orders, and I might get into difficulty if I went too far down that road.

We are in an age in which the competitiveness of the tender and the ability to meet the technical specifications are the first essential requirements for any successful bid. Orders of this importance are not and should not normally be settled on competitive lobbying, but are settled on the ability to deliver. That is a truism which we should not lose sight of.

The Presiding Officer: We will have one last question, from Jamie Stone.

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): As I will not get to ask my coppers question, I will repeat Ben Wallace's question and ask the First Minister to consider the BARMAC yards and—

The Presiding Officer: I called Mr Stone to ask question 5 on police funding. He has blown it, Mr Dewar, but you may answer.

The First Minister: The BARMAC question definitely goes somewhat wide of the original question 5, but I understand Jamie Stone's concern and interest. The situation is difficult, because we have lost a large number of jobs up there in what is, admittedly, a cyclical industry. The support group for oil and gas fabricators is sitting at the moment. The Government is at that table along with the owners, and we will do all that we can to encourage the industry—although, as I am sure Jamie Stone recognises, the present stage of development in the North sea makes it harder to find the kind of large platform orders that have traditionally gone to BARMAC and yards like it.

It may be of little comfort at the moment, but I was pleased to see that the yard at Methil had this week at least obtained an order worth, I think, £14 million for a structure. We have to hope that the steps that the Government has taken to stimulate the oil industry and exploration in the North sea will, over a period, bring some recovery to an industry that is of real importance to the Highlands.

Housing

Resumed debate.

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): We will now resume the debate on housing. The next speaker will be Dr Sylvia Jackson.

15:35

Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab): In this morning's debate on housing, a consensus was developing around the aims of the Government's housing programme. Although other issues have been raised which will need further discussion, I want first to address those aims.

The first aim is to increase and improve existing housing stock. The 18,000 houses that will be built over three years—7,000 of which will be built this year—will provide affordable rented accommodation and houses for low-cost ownership and will include new and improved homes across rural and urban areas.

The second aim is to develop housing within communities to include mixed-housing types, which, it is hoped, will end the type of estates that exist not only in my constituency but in others and which not even homeless people want to live in.

The third aim is to tackle homelessness effectively, which is already being addressed through the rough sleepers initiative. Councils will soon be bidding on approaches to take care of the homeless problem. Research which has shown that homelessness mostly results from failed tenancy and that a range of support is needed in that area will, I hope, be taken on board in the various initiatives.

The fourth aim is to eradicate dampness in housing. We have heard much about the warm deal and the SNP mentioned some of the difficulties with that programme. I hope that those problems will be dealt with so that we can move forward with the scheme, which has the biggest grant scheme ever known and has innovative links to the new deal.

The fifth aim is to develop a single social tenancy built around the secure tenancy agreement, with the same rights for all public sector tenants.

The final aim of the Government's programme is to review the relationship of Scottish Homes with councils with a view to creating a greater partnership role.

Those aims met with agreement in this morning's debate. However, the debate centred on two areas that were covered very well by Robert Brown and Margaret Curran, the first of which was

about the concept of community ownership. The aims of community ownership are to encourage investment in new and existing housing stock and to promote community empowerment, both of which are very laudable. Changes are chosen by the tenants themselves.

However, the issue is about community empowerment, which means that tenants take more responsibility and ownership of decisions. Tenants need to be fully aware of the available options and to be fully involved in an effective dialogue that will lead to a final decision. That will take time and must allow for variation between local authorities, which point was well made by Margaret Curran this morning. Will the minister tell us how that dialogue can be made more effective and how flexibility will be allowed within the system?

The second topic that caused debate this morning was the right to buy, which raises two contentious issues relevant to my rural constituency. The first issue is the viability of smaller housing associations if houses are removed by the right to buy, which is something that the Rural Stirling Housing Association certainly believes will pose possible problems.

Secondly, as social needs housing is in short supply in rural areas, there can be very heavy demand for it. Although we should all accept that special needs housing should stay out of the right to buy, that new social rented housing will be built and that there will capping on discount—a cost flaw rule system—there is still concern that the right to buy will reduce further the social rented stock or at least not increase in the way that the minister anticipates. One way round that would be to have a mechanism at local level to monitor and regulate the number of social rented houses, to ensure that numbers increase in the manner that the minister expects. That should become a possibility as the councils take a strategic role in the local housing plan, within the community planning mechanism.

Finally, I hope that the innovations that have taken place in Stirling, where domestic sprinklers have been incorporated in new-build housing, can be included in the scheme.

15:40

Richard Lochhead (North-East Scotland) (SNP): I will talk about the implications of the minister's proposals for rural communities around Scotland and appreciate that my remarks will echo many of the fine points that have been made earlier today.

Alarm bells are ringing in rural housing associations around Scotland due to the extension of the right to buy. Rural communities have far

fewer choices. If houses are sold off, people must leave the community and live elsewhere. It is not the same as in larger towns and cities, where people can simply transfer to another part of the community and take a bus to visit their friends or go to work. Rural communities are much more sensitive to ill-thought-out proposals such as this one. The only people who tend to win when properties are sold off in rural communities are incomers and estate agents. The locals lose out.

We can see that there are already problems in some communities in Scotland, such as Raasay, where the local Lochalsh and Skye Housing Association is unable to find land to build the four units that it is desperate to build. The association has only four units in the area. If one or two are sold off, the problem will be exacerbated.

There are also problems in smaller communities, such as Memsie in Aberdeenshire, which has only three public sector houses—despite the fact that there are 3,600 people on the waiting list in Aberdeenshire—compared with six a few years ago. The Government's proposals will lead to worse problems in that area of the world.

We need much more social rented housing, not less. Members should not just take the SNP's word for it. According to "Rural Audit: a health check on rural Britain", a piece of independent research commissioned by Labour MPs and published only a few months ago:

"A number of studies have found that the problems of affordability in rural areas have worsened over the last decade. One clear reason for this has been the substantial shortfall of provision of social housing."

The Government's rural development framework of 1998, which has a foreword from the First Minister, who was Secretary of State for Scotland at the time, says:

"Rural housing problems are exacerbated by second and holiday homes, commuters, retiring incomers and the Right to Buy."

Members need not take our word for it, therefore, but the Government's own word.

Dr Winnie Ewing (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Does the member agree that the power of compulsory purchase to buy land for key housing developments, which was vested in the Highlands and Islands Development Board and which was transferred to the enterprise companies, should be exercised in the extreme cases to which he refers?

Richard Lochhead: Yes. The member makes an excellent point and I certainly agree with what she says.

The problem is that the minister is so cocooned in her Edinburgh office that she is completely out of touch with the reality on the ground in rural

Scotland. It is not easy to find land to build homes to replace those that are sold off. There are infrastructure problems, which can cost local authority housing associations a lot of money. As Shetland Islands Council has pointed out in correspondence with many members, North of Scotland Water Authority will not connect houses on distant parts of land in rural communities because of the exorbitant cost of doing so.

The work of many of our associations has been undermined by the Government's proposals. Voluntary organisations and the people who work for them have put in a lot of time and effort because they believed that they were setting up something for the benefit of the whole community. Now they see that what they have done may be on the open market somewhere down the line. Their work has been undermined and to a certain extent they have been betrayed.

The minister's policy aims to extend ownership in urban communities where there is a lot of rented accommodation. In rural communities, the situation is the opposite. There is plenty of ownership, but not enough affordable rented accommodation for local people, particularly young people and young families, who want to stay in their communities. The policy is ill thought out. No one to whom I have spoken—I expect that this is the same for other members—in rural communities and rural housing associations supports the proposal.

The message to Wendy Alexander that I have heard from people is, "Get off your high horse and stop trying to make a name for yourself at the expense of rural Scotland." The SNP's message to Wendy Alexander is, "Don't wreck rural housing in the same way that you have wrecked housing in many urban areas of Scotland." If she does not take on board the many real, pressing concerns, the Minister for Communities will become the minister who destroyed communities.

15:45

George Lyon (Argyll and Bute) (LD): I welcome the broad thrust of the Executive's housing proposals, and we support the majority of the proposals that have been put forward by the Minister for Communities today.

I make no apologies, however, for turning to the issue whose impact on rural Scotland gives us grave concern. As John Farquhar Munro has said, we need Highlands and Islands solutions for the Highlands and Islands, because there are particular problems to address there. One fit-all solution will not do for the whole of Scotland because of the impact that it would have on rural areas.

Several issues arise from the introduction of the

right to buy, and I ask the minister to respond to these.

First, could she comment on the impact of low-cost home ownership schemes? They have been championed by the Isle of Bute Housing Association, my local housing association, and have been very successful in developing a balanced approach between owned and rented property, and in avoiding mono-tenure estates. Figures from the Isle of Bute Housing Association show that 33 per cent of their houses in mid-Argyll are for low-cost home ownership. It is important that the success of that scheme is not undermined by the measures taken on the right to buy.

Secondly, on the balance of provision between flats and semi-detached or terraced housing, it is important not to end up with all the semi-detached and terraced housing stock sold. Figures for the Campbeltown area, where the right to buy exists, demonstrate that the detached or terraced Scottish Homes stock accounts for the majority of sales of all housing stock since 1980.

Thirdly, on exemptions for special needs housing from right to buy, concerns have been raised about housing built to amenity standard located in or near town centres, where there needs to be easy access for the people who take up amenity housing. An example from my constituency is Bridge Park in Rothesay, which contains amenity housing for the elderly within easy walking distance of the town centre. Many of the homes house elderly or infirm residents, but they would not qualify for exemption from right to buy under the present criteria. If sold, they would prove virtually impossible to replace.

Finally, I wish to raise a point that has not been discussed much so far in this debate: the availability of land for new build. It is all very well saying that we will build 6,000 houses to replace those that have been sold. Indeed, the ratio of houses sold to those that are built to replace them is 8:1. In rural Scotland, we need land to be available: land to which planning permission applies and which has accessible and affordable services in order that it may be used. It is no use saying that there is plenty of land when much of it does not have the accessible services that make the piece of ground a viable building proposition.

We need reassurance that, if we are to build 6,000 new houses in rural areas, there is land available. As Malcolm Chisholm said, there are real concerns about the impact of right to buy, not only in rural Scotland but across urban Scotland. The contradiction is that the examples and financial models used by the Executive are being challenged by the housing professionals.

It is all very well to enter into the issue of who is wrong and who is right, but this Parliament is

supposed to be about listening and taking on board the genuine concerns of professionals and other people. Let us examine the real impact and discuss the financial models. Let us come up with the right solution, one that does not end up with rural Scotland sustaining a huge hammer blow because of the right-to-buy legislation.

15:49

Mr Murray Tosh (South of Scotland) (Con):

The Conservative group in the Parliament generally supports the Minister for Communities' statement this morning and the thrust of the Executive's policy. It is clear to anyone who has been involved in housing in Scotland, at any time this century, that there has never been enough money for building or for modernisation and refurbishment. In so far as the Executive's proposals will unlock further resources and allow more investment in the housing stock, any reasonable person must support them. It is logical to support what the Executive says on the right to buy. Rights do not adhere to properties or to geographical areas but to people. We cannot reasonably distinguish in principle between one category of tenant and another, although there are legal difficulties that I will mention.

I question, however, the practical implications of the proposals and I hope that the Deputy Minister for Local Government will respond in his statement. What is likely to be the long-term status of the charitable housing associations? The force of the Government's logic is that the proposals should be applied to them in the future. Charity law will be under review, and if the Executive has longer-term intentions, it would be helpful to know that. The Minister for Communities said this morning that the modelling done for the Executive by Scottish Homes had shown that housing associations in general could absorb the loss of assets through sales. That is clearly the case for housing associations as a whole but it is not necessarily true for specific housing associations.

There may be problems for modern housing associations. I should have begun by declaring an interest as I own a £1 share in a housing association. Its development programme is mainly very recent and the ratio of housing association grant is not the 70 per cent stated in the Scottish Homes advice to ministers but barely 50 per cent for the most recent developments. The association calculates that if it sells a house to a tenant with a 55 per cent discount, it will be lucky to cover the remaining debt and it will have no asset to invest to replace the lost income flow. If it sells a flat, it is liable to make a £4,000 loss.

That is a very real concern for small housing associations that are struggling towards viability and depend on the income stream from rent and

need a certain number of tenants to be viable at all. The Executive must spell out what is to happen to such associations: 120 houses a year is not a lot but, over a decade, if the association is in the wrong place, a lot of stock can be lost and some housing associations may lose their viability.

The Executive should also explain how it will be able to implement the right-to-buy policy, because the houses belong not to the public sector but to housing associations whose rules and constitutions would not permit them to sell houses in such circumstances. Presumably a legal change will be needed.

We should also look at local authorities inheriting the Scottish Homes funding role. Procurement of housing is not easy and takes a long time. Plans fall through. Sometimes the Lands Tribunal is involved, sometimes there are site difficulties, sometimes the housing association needs extra money for additional expenses. There are bottlenecks in the process. In some years, a lot of money is forthcoming in a council area and in other years, it is not because Scottish Homes can vary the money and allocate it across broad areas. If funding goes specifically to councils, there will be difficulties in many areas, particularly in the most pressured housing markets, in councils and associations bringing forward development sites and making sure that they are there in time to meet the available resource. There is some inflexibility to the proposal.

On the single regulatory framework, if the ex-local authority housing association stock is treated in the same way as housing association stock, that will call for a reserve of capital for future modernisation and refurbishment to be built up from rents. That will have a rent implication, which in turn will have a housing benefit implication. It would be useful to hear from ministers that the existing housing benefit regime will protect Scotland in those circumstances. It would also be useful to know what their estimates are of the impact on the Scottish block of any significant rise in housing benefit as a consequence.

This party supports the principles that lie behind the Executive statement. We are concerned, however, because we do not know—as ministers still have to spell it out—how many of these objectives will be implemented. There is a lot of information that this Parliament must have before it can confidently support the entire bill in every detail. None the less, we support the principle of the bill.

15:55

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): Like my colleagues, I am pleased that we are having this debate. I have a specific interest in

housing issues, as I worked as a homeless persons officer. I welcome the majority of what is outlined in the minister's proposals for the housing bill, in particular the need for action to provide good-quality, accessible housing in strong, secure communities. A roof over people's heads is a fundamental human right. It is a shameful indictment of society that homelessness in Scotland has more than doubled over the past two decades.

The minister mentioned the number of empty houses and the number of people who are in priority need: there was some sort of equation. Finding ways of making those empty houses attractive to let is important. However, simply quoting numbers of empty houses gives no indication of size, type, location, suitability or state of repair. It does not give a true reflection of supply and need.

Those who are in priority need—for example, people with children—can be helped to a degree. As long as they are unintentionally homeless, there is a statutory duty to find them a house. How long that takes is another matter. Unfortunately, many people are not deemed to be in priority need—for example, single people and couples who have no dependent children. It is extremely difficult to explain to them that, although they are homeless, society has no responsibility to house them. I am pleased that the Executive is beginning seriously to tackle the scourge of homelessness. Further, I would like some of the public misconceptions of homelessness to be addressed. In many cases, the circumstances could affect any of us.

My main point today concerns the issue of the proposed extension of the right to buy. In the 1950s, the Tories promised to build a nation of home owners. Perhaps they believed that that would produce a nation of Tory voters. The scheme to achieve that involved selling off public housing at low prices and ensuring that councils were unable to replace those houses. The Tories just about managed to achieve their aim—an aim that was abhorred by socialists and which was to result in a massive reduction in public rented housing. It also resulted in many people being unable to afford their mortgages and maintenance costs.

We are told that a recent survey shows that 83 per cent of people in this country aspire to own their home. I have two points to make on that. First, what other realistic choice of decent housing is there at the moment? Secondly, aspiring to own a home is different from the reality of being able to afford the mortgage and repair and maintenance costs. There is a market for anyone who aspires to own his or her home, but the aspirations of potential home owners should not be realised at

the expense of the needs of the homeless or people who are on waiting lists.

It is argued that the single social tenancy cannot be fairly introduced without extending the right to buy. If that is the argument, the exemption from the right to buy of additional categories of special needs housing must be an anomaly. Further, why is the Executive telling housing associations to consider adopting charitable status to exempt them from the proposed extension? Without such an extension, I foresee the possibility of a withering away of the right to buy, and the massive expansion of affordable, decent public rented housing could be a reality.

Many housing organisations—and other organisations, such as Scottish Women's Aid—have expressed concern over the extension of the right to buy. The Scottish Federation of Housing Associations says that

“rented housing would be residual housing of last resort”

and that

“it could easily create the kind of socially excluded communities that current Government policy is attempting to eradicate”.

Those views must be taken into account in this debate.

In response to a question in this chamber, the minister said that, on this issue, we sometimes have to listen to the people, which is the purpose of this Parliament, and not necessarily to the professionals. Not all those organisations are professionals. I hope that the minister will seek out, and listen to, the voices of the many thousands of people who are homeless or on never-ending waiting lists. Their aspiration and need is for a decent, affordable roof over their heads. The many thousands who are not in the privileged position of being able to buy need a right to rent.

15:59

Robin Harper (Lothians) (Green): I would like to preface my remarks by saying that, having heard the speeches from Robert Brown and John McAllion this morning and from Richard Lochhead and Elaine Smith this afternoon, I urge the minister to revisit the idea of extending the right to buy.

I want to address the warm deal. Mr McAveety had his ear well bent in a television interview on that subject last night and I want to continue that process. The most common complaint about the warm deal is that it enables only partial improvements to properties. Although the programme has been broadened to allow for more than one measure to be taken per house, the improvements that are undertaken are rarely comprehensive. The Government has set a goal

for the scheme that consists of a banner number of households being serviced by a given date. By structuring the scheme to achieve this purely numerical goal, the Government has given precedence to quantity over quality. With such priorities that scheme is unlikely to deliver meaningful improvements in energy efficiency to the housing stock as a whole.

In reaction to the current grant framework, one critic lamented that a great number of homes will have to be revisited because they were not dealt with properly the first time. He argues that the Government must acknowledge that it is cost-effective to put into houses as many measures as are sensible when a house is visited for the first time.

It is doubtful whether the grants will effectively correct the energy inefficiency of the properties and the people that are in need of that. The situation is particularly exacerbated in Scotland where, bizarrely, we have worse climatic conditions, but our grants are £200 lower than are those given south of the border. Scottish local authorities contend that the grants are not sufficient to cover the installation of condensing gas boilers. Central heating is indisputably a necessary step towards alleviation of cold and damp and gas boilers are an energy-efficient form of heating. Scottish local authorities justifiably question the basis for that disparity in grants.

The scheme has been criticised for providing only partial remedies for increasing the energy efficiency of properties. The Government's numerical approach emphasises the quantity of properties that are improved rather than the quality of the improvements that are delivered, which exacerbates the problem. A qualitative goal such as ensuring that energy efficiency is materially increased in each treated property would be more suitable. Using such an approach, the gross number of properties treated might decrease but that system would guarantee that refurbishment significantly increased energy efficiency. It would also be more cost-effective because it would reduce the necessity to revisit properties for additional work.

The figures that I quote are based on a survey that was carried out for me by one of the Parliament's first interns. It took ten weeks and responses were received from more than half of Scotland's local authorities, so I hope that the Executive takes seriously what I have to say. I also hope that the Parliament will give consideration to the motion in Fiona Hyslop's name.

A majority of local authorities agree that there is the potential for improvement of up to 30 per cent in the energy efficiency of the total housing stock in some of their districts. However, each authority

also maintains that attaining that potential level of improvement is an unrealistic goal in the context of current limitations. The authorities identify two primary limitations on their efforts to achieve 30 per cent improvements. First, they assert that insufficient funding is available. Local authorities are asked to undertake a comprehensive programme of energy efficiency promotion and renovation without being given any additional funds to support their efforts.

Secondly, local authorities lack the authority to regulate in the private sector. In most areas owner-occupied and private rented stock together comprise the majority of the housing stock, but local authorities have extremely limited powers to direct energy efficiency updates in those sectors. They therefore lack the ability to initiate improvements in the majority of the local housing stock. They can seek only to enhance energy efficiency in the publicly held minority housing stock. Most local authorities have had to readjust their targets to a 16 per cent improvement by 2007, which is half the target that was projected. I ask the minister, please, to revisit the issue as a matter of urgency in the next few months.

16:04

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab): I am not sure that I can cover the number of issues and figures that Robin Harper managed to cover at such breakneck speed, but I will try to get in as many points as I can.

I am delighted that we are having this debate. As John McAllion mentioned, one of the triumphs of the Parliament is that members have time to discuss issues such as this in detail. It is at the heart of the Executive's social policy.

Since the Labour Government came to power in 1997, much has been done, such as the warm deal, to recognise and address the problems that undoubtedly exist in housing. The warm deal has had substantial mention today and I do not intend to discuss it in any great detail, except to say that, unbelievably, there were some inaccuracies during BBC2's "Newsnight Scotland" programme last night. My colleague Des McNulty, who used to be the councillor for the area that was mentioned in the programme, will deal with that issue in detail if he is called to speak.

I particularly welcome the opportunity being given to Glasgow to make a fresh start on housing through the community housing trust, to wipe out the debt burden that has hung over the city for so long and, more important, to lever in much-needed funding to improve people's homes. As we have heard already, that opportunity will also give tenants a much greater say in the management of the areas in which they live.

Those of us who have been involved in tenant-management co-operatives in our constituencies know how effective they have been in stabilising estates and in giving residents a sense of ownership of and achievement in their areas. By giving tenants the opportunity to participate in the running of their areas, through non-profit making organisations, I believe that we can make significant improvements to the quality of socially rented housing in Glasgow. For example, by installing new windows and central heating, we will eradicate, once and for all, the problem of dampness that for too long has been a scourge on the health of that city.

With all due respect to Lord James, I find it rather ironic that, in his speech, he recognised the link between poor housing and health, given that a Tory Government suppressed the Black report in the 1980s. Had he recognised the problem then, we might not have such a significant problem to deal with today.

My only caveat about the new community housing trust in Glasgow was raised by my colleague Margaret Curran this morning. It concerns the participation of tenants and trade unions in the process. I am relieved to hear that there will be some progress on that issue in the weeks to come—I was sure that, ultimately, there would be, and I welcome it.

We have heard much in recent weeks about the extension of the single social tenancy and of the right to buy, about which I seek reassurance from ministers. As ministers know, there are several excellent housing associations in my constituency, which work hard to provide good-quality housing. I have discussed with several of them the impact of these proposals on their operations and I will use an example of one of them to illustrate a problem faced by many.

Queens Cross Housing Association has a waiting list of 1,002 people and families and an average turnover of 150 properties a year. Based on those figures, it will take nine years to meet current demand. Queens Cross is in an attractive area of my constituency, where some former housing association properties sell for £60,000 on average. The incentive to buy will be high, and both I and the housing association are concerned that those policies will damage the social mix that it has helped to achieve in the area, with good housing disappearing into the private sector and fewer good houses available for rent.

I am sure that ministers have not overlooked that point, but I ask them to consider further the reform of the discount system and to allow local authorities and housing associations to vary the available discounts. I also ask for consideration to be given to areas of particular pressure, so that there can be local flexibility.

For many people, the opportunity to own their own home is light years away, because they do not even have the prospect of living in their own home. Recently, I had the opportunity to spend a night with the Simon Community's street work team in Glasgow, working with homeless people and finding out about their needs. I wish to pay tribute to the people who do that job day in, day out, as it is a hard job that requires a considerable amount of dedication. I echo Elaine Murray's comments about the need to ensure that if at all possible people do not find themselves homeless and about supported accommodation becoming the norm, rather than remaining an unusual feature of housing provision.

I am conscious of the time and will be brief in drawing attention to the difficulty many of the ethnic minority people I represent experience when trying to find socially rented accommodation. That is of particular concern to me. I hope that that will be addressed in the bill that is to be introduced to the chamber.

16:10

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP): My colleagues and members from all parties have highlighted many of the problems that affect housing in Scotland. Although it is clear that those problems are experienced by all sections of the community, I believe that among our ethnic minority communities housing problems are especially severe. Patricia Ferguson touched on that at the end of her speech. I hope that she and colleagues from all parties will join me in being particularly concerned about the extension of the right to buy in housing associations. That and the massive stock transfer that is proposed for Glasgow are a particular worry of mine.

We in Scotland take pride in being an open and inclusive society. Newcomers to Scotland have always been welcomed. However, we must recognise that all too often the experience of people in the ethnic minority community has not been happy. Research has shown that the ethnic minorities suffer disproportionately from gross overcrowding, substandard housing, insecurity because of racial harassment and growing isolation. Their elders, in particular, suffer from alienation because of their culture. Because of discrimination in the public and private rented sectors, owner occupation has often been the only option for black people, although they are often able to afford only the very worst housing.

A Commission for Racial Equality survey found that in Glasgow 83 per cent of black households live in owner-occupied accommodation in substantial need of repair. They experience poor living conditions and are unable to finance repairs. Modernisation is an absolute impossibility and

they suffer from severe overcrowding. Research carried out by the University of Stirling, also with Glasgow's ethnic minority community, shows that overcrowding and homelessness among the black and ethnic minority communities is 15 times greater than it was 10 years ago.

According to the 1991 census, members of the ethnic minority community were three times more likely to suffer from overcrowding than their white counterparts. I want to give an example of that, although I will try to keep it as short as I can. It will give members an idea of how some people have to live. The example is that of a widow in Glasgow's ethnic minority community. She is on social security. Her 23-year-old daughter is in a wheelchair and her 19-year-old son is crippled. She also has a 16-year-old son. Since 1987, they have lived in a two-up, one-bedroom, private rented insecure tenancy.

The oldest son sleeps in the kitchen; the rest of the family shares the bedroom. The woman receives no social services support and is unable to leave her family alone for any time. She rarely leaves the house at all. In May 1992—nearly 8 years ago—she applied for housing association housing. She was told that there was no possibility of the association's being able to rehouse her family in the immediate or short term, and that it would, in fact, be a miracle if a suitable flat became available. What chance do those people have of being rehoused if the right to buy is extended? I ask the minister to consider that.

It is vital that the problems of ethnic minorities are properly addressed. A major obstacle to dealing with those problems is the lack of statistics. I have not been told to wind up yet, so I will carry on.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Not too long, I hope.

Ms White: This is a very important subject, and no one has really touched on it.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): I understand the particular concerns of the ethnic minority community in Glasgow and elsewhere. What does Ms White think her party's policy of urging people to wait until it has won an election and negotiated independence will do for the people of Scotland? The reality is that unless we get rid of the debt problem in Glasgow and lever in more money, we will have a major problem there.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Could you answer that and close, please, Ms White.

Ms White: I will not bother taking the time to answer that question. It is very sad that Johann Lamont feels that she has to intervene to score political points. She should be persuading her party not to extend the right to buy and looking

after people such as the homeless and ethnic minorities.

I want to touch very briefly—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Close now, please. We are desperately short of time.

Ms White: I will try to close as quickly as I can. Positive Action in Housing, which I have mentioned before, has for years been calling for the provision of accurate and current figures. I ask the minister to put money into Scottish Homes and I ask Scottish Homes to play an important role in gathering those figures, and to provide adequate funding for research and to train young black people in housing matters so that they, too, can sit on boards.

I am sorry that Johann Lamont had to try to score cheap political points in a debate that is about everyone who lives in Scotland regardless of their creed or colour.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That now ends the time for speeches from the floor. I apologise to the 10 members who wished to speak but were not called. If the opening speakers and others had observed the time limits, five other members could have spoken in the debate. I have noted those who have waited patiently throughout—the sun will shine on them on a future occasion.

We move now to the concluding speeches, the time for which I have had to trim. The Liberal Democrats and Conservatives will have nine minutes each, the SNP 11 minutes and the Executive 14 minutes.

16:15

Tavish Scott (Shetland) (LD): I have very much enjoyed listening to this debate, in which there have been some extremely good speeches from members in all parts of the chamber. I have learned much.

The Liberal Democrats agree that the priority that the Scottish Executive gives to housing in the first major piece of proposed social legislation in this Parliament is the right approach. Such an approach is long overdue. Speeches from members of all parties have reflected the need for such legislation.

It is right that a right to high-quality housing is regarded as an integral part of social inclusion. The approach will try to provide decent and affordable housing. The aspiration linked to the homelessness initiative that has been discussed today—that by 2003 no one will sleep rough—is important.

As the minister said, this Parliament needs to do something about the 0.5 million damp houses in Scotland. Much of what has been said today has

been about that. As Patricia Ferguson said, cold, damp and cramped homes affect health, education and job opportunities. Scottish people need greater security from bad landlords and more power to make decisions about their homes. The minister and other members pointed out that £300 million of new money is being invested in housing regeneration.

It was noticeable from Fiona Hyslop's combative performance giving the SNP's perspective on these proposals that Andrew Wilson has had a busy Christmas, as spending commitments have certainly been reined in. However, Fiona could not resist suggesting that local authorities should spend money—a spending commitment is still a spending commitment, so the SNP has not quite kicked the habit it had before Christmas.

The Liberal Democrats support many proposals in the bill, such as the introduction of probationary tenancies to tackle anti-social behaviour, and the strengthening of the role of local authorities in housing. Local authorities will be responsible for determining the priorities for all funding of housing in their area. It is important that they have that strategic role, as they are surely in the right position to judge local needs. Therefore, I do not believe that it is a good policy to aim for a specific percentage target of socially rented housing—surely circumstances will vary across the country. For example, as John Farquhar Munro said this morning, the Highlands need Highland solutions.

The minister announced in December that Scottish Homes will be converted into an agency of the Scottish Executive. The new Scottish Homes will assume responsibility for the regulation and monitoring of all registered social landlords. As the minister pointed out in December, that is the end of a quango and a progressive change that Liberal Democrats support. It will put people—especially local people—back in control over the direction of their housing investment, and will ensure that standards are not just maintained, but improved.

Liberal Democrats have reservations about the right-to-buy proposals, but I note that such reservations were not confined to members of my party: John McAllion, Malcolm Chisholm and Margaret Curran, the convener of the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee, all expressed concern about that. The important point is that Parliament will have the opportunity, through the committee, to assess the minister's proposals and to assess the evidence that housing associations and organisations will present. It is surely right to tackle the question of the right to buy in an appropriate setting.

John McAllion and others said that a single social tenancy is an admirable principle, but as was made clear in an answer the minister gave

him this morning, at least a third of tenants will not have the right to buy under these proposals. It cannot, therefore, be regarded as the central feature of the overall package that is the single social tenancy.

Members have illustrated the difficulties that could be created by right to buy in urban Scotland. The varied circumstances in Scotland's cities are exactly that. The variety of views on urban housing is illustrated by the fact that a single model for Glasgow will not be the best option for all parts of that city, let alone for other cities too. The committee has an important role in assessing whether that is the right way to go or whether there are better ways to tackle housing issues, particularly in terms of stock transfer. In that context, Mike Watson mentioned the extent of the proposed house building programme and asked whether it would be adequate.

Many colleagues have also highlighted the difficulties that rural housing associations foresee in the particular form of right to buy that is proposed. It was disappointing that the Conservatives chose this morning to dismiss with such ease the concerns of rural housing associations. Murray Tosh, who has now left the chamber, could not quite decide whether he wanted a strategic right to buy or an absolute right to buy.

In my constituency, housing professionals from Shetland Islands Council have pointed out that the key aim of the new housing partnership is to protect housing stock from right to buy and to retain the rented social sector. In addition, the greatest number of housing association right-to-buy sales are likely to be in Lerwick—the place in which there is most demand for housing. I reiterate a point that many rural members made this morning: replacing those houses is bound up with the problem of the availability of land. In that area, the housing strategy for Shetland identifies the need for social housing for rent.

I have two further points about the rural perspective on housing and about my constituency. The replacement costs of building are important. Shetland Islands Council's housing plan points out that design specification, transport and climate add 20 to 50 per cent to construction costs in the central belt. That has implications for replacement costs and, even if discounts are capped, the disparity between the figures becomes ever bigger in such a scenario. The director of Hjaltland Housing Association wrote to me saying that, under the proposals, his organisation would be unlikely to be able to replace stock even at market value, never mind discounted value, as the market price falls considerably short of the replacement cost.

Shelter and other organisations have expressed

concern about the figures for likely sales that the Executive has announced. I understand that Shelter has been involved in discussions with the minister and her officials. It suggests that the right-to-buy figures underestimate the number of properties that would be sold. My local council has sold 108 properties in the past year and that background gives rise to real concern for the housing association.

Those points must be carefully considered and the Social Inclusion, Housing and Voluntary Sector Committee will be the forum in which that can be done. If we do what we promised to do when we set up this Parliament—conduct proper scrutiny of proposed legislation—we will be able to have a proper debate about the matter and ensure that all concerns are addressed.

Just as urban areas should not be seen as exactly the same throughout Scotland, neither should rural areas. There are apparently 42 different definitions of rural Scotland. Lumping Inverness and Perth together as rural in terms of housing policy is unhelpful and somewhat misleading, as it must skew the figures.

Alternatives have been proposed. I hope that the options will be considered when the bill comes before the appropriate committee. For rural Scotland, improvements have been suggested to the tenant incentive scheme currently run by Scottish Homes. Extended rural home ownership grants have also been suggested. Both measures would encourage social tenants into the private sector while maintaining the socially rented sector.

Other groups have proposed a strategic right to buy. I am advised that Shelter does not oppose right to buy, but sees the attraction of extending it to all tenants of social landlords. A truly strategic right to buy would allow landlords to vary discounts in priority areas. As John McAllion mentioned this morning, the Chartered Institute of Housing has suggested that there could be higher discounts in areas in which there is a shortage of owner-occupied housing or where rented housing is in low demand. Lower discounts would be needed where there is a shortage of rented housing to meet identified needs. In other words, some positive alternatives have been suggested and deserve careful consideration.

Robin Harper made some good points about the healthy homes initiative. More can always be done, but I looked up the written answer that was prepared last year on the subject. It said:

"The budget for improving home energy efficiency for low-income households in Scotland is £12 million for 1999-2000."—[*Official Report, Written Answers*, 21 December 1999; Vol 4, p 12.]

Some £4.5 million of that—

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): I am

sorry, Mr Scott, but you must wind up now.

Tavish Scott: I shall be very brief. A considerable amount of money is being put into housing and I recognise the points that were made about progress.

In housing policy terms, the Liberal Democrats support much of the bill's proposals. There are reservations about right to buy, which I hope can be addressed in committee, but a constructive debate about finding ways to improve and strengthen measures proposed by the Executive is surely what this Parliament is about. This debate has been progress toward that end.

16:25

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con): When the Minister for Communities eventually arrived this morning, she addressed us at some length and attempted to illustrate—with some success—how the old ways have failed. She pointed out that there was no longer any room for rhetoric and then spent two minutes embarking on some good old-fashioned rhetoric of her own, in which she attacked David McLetchie, who was not even here, and Tommy Sheridan, who had not even opened his mouth. She then read a letter from an admirer who, among other things, apologised for taking up so much of her time. Most of us wondered if it was from her granny.

Let me be clear from the outset that the minister was correct to point out that housing is too serious an issue for facile debate. There is a way forward, and all of us have a clear duty to address it positively and constructively. Having said that, neither I nor anyone else in the Conservative party has any need to apologise for the record of the previous Conservative Government. A Government that spent £8 billion on public sector housing in Scotland, increased home ownership from 35 per cent to 60 per cent, and quadrupled the number of sheltered houses for let has little to apologise for.

Having said that, the post-war Scottish housing experience has, we must all agree, been grim, and blame lies in a number of directions. I have always recognised that it is easy to have 20:20 vision in hindsight and that the errors that were made by those in government and in local authorities in the post-war period were made with the best intentions. However, they have left us with a horrendous legacy. Just as we built too many houses and too many houses of the wrong type, it was realised far too late that the aspiration of the Scottish people in the 1960s was towards home ownership, rather than the post-war ideal of getting a council house.

To see the way forward, we must appreciate where we are. We face a massive problem of

investment in Scotland's public sector housing. Shelter estimates the necessary investment to be £10 billion. Glasgow City Council, operating from a different source, estimates that £6 billion is required to bring its housing to an acceptable standard. How is that to be financed? Out of every £1 spent on rent in Glasgow, 53p goes to pay debt charges. Against that background, it is essential that old-fashioned and blinkered political thinking be cast aside in order to see a way forward.

Much has been said about the fact that the Labour Executive's housing policy bears a remarkable—almost amazing—similarity to that of the previous Conservative Government, and of this Conservative group. I am sure that that makes the minister uncomfortable. I know that her deputy will be. It makes me uncomfortable, but we must all work together in this chamber in the best interests of the Scottish people to improve the current housing situation. We will co-operate with anyone who comes up with appropriate ideas that will improve the housing lot of the Scottish people. We look forward with anticipation to the housing bill, although we feel that the process should be expedited—it is taking far too long.

What would our ideas be? First, let us consider housing stock transfers. I listened with interest to what Fiona Hyslop and others said about that and to the fears that they expressed. I accept that the consultation process has been lacking. What is the answer? I have mentioned the lack of investment in Glasgow. I have been there, as have Frank McAveety and Kenny Gibson. We have seen the situation. Some of Glasgow's peripheral schemes resemble Kosovo on a bad day. If nothing is done about the problem of investment, a high percentage of the population of Glasgow will be living in third world conditions. None of us wants that.

Housing stock transfer is the way forward, although it may not be done as Conservatives would like. We think that an en bloc transfer is doomed to fail because it does not recognise the essential factor in any housing policy, which is that if we give people ownership of a problem, they will accept the responsibilities that go with it. Manageable units of 10,000 to 15,000 at the most are the breakdown position. When there is local input and a local appreciation of the problems, there will be constructive dialogue with the tenants and a constructive input from them. We will not achieve that with Glasgow City Council housing department mark two.

We would like the right to buy to be extended, as is proposed by the minister, to housing association tenants; but we also recognise that there is the potential for problems. The minister has not thought through the financial consequences for housing associations in respect of the loss of their

stock. That is especially the case in respect of rural housing associations, which owing to their size may lack critical mass if they lose a significant proportion of their housing stock. She must examine that issue fully and come back with potential answers.

Ms Alexander: Does Bill Aitken appreciate that the total value of housing association stock in Scotland is £4 billion? Even if all of it were sold at a 50 per cent discount, that would leave a balance of £2 billion. The total value of outstanding loans on housing association stock is less than £1 billion. In aggregate, housing associations will be building balances. I accept—and the consultation paper makes clear—that there may be individual housing associations that will have difficulties within those global sums. We have given a guarantee that we will consider the financial difficulties of individual housing associations. Housing associations will be building balances.

Bill Aitken: I am grateful for that response, but I am not certain that the minister appreciates the potential difficulty for some housing associations of losing a rental stream upon which they have based their financial assumptions. That issue must be examined. If necessary, they should have the right to retain the housing action grant, which would be reclaimed by the Government, or there would have to be some other compensation.

Tavish Scott made a point about rural housing—in a constructive vein—and Mike Rumbles made a point about it in a banal and unconstructive vein. I will make the Conservative position on rural housing clear. We appreciate the unique difficulties that relate to housing in the Highlands and Islands. We sympathise and empathise. We would do nothing to prejudice that. That is why I insist that the minister produce proposals—at the bill stage—that show what potential loss the right to buy would cause those housing associations.

We would also like there to be some planning relaxation where there is a lack of housing for rent in country areas that have become denuded of population largely because—I am sure Tavish Scott agrees—of the shortage of homes for young people to rent or buy.

We would support a bill that recognises that special needs housing should be a priority. Five per cent of the houses in every new housing development should be given over to those who are handicapped and have special needs. We cannot have all those people being isolated and living together. If we believe in an inclusive society, they should be included in it.

It is not good enough for the minister to talk about homelessness being a relic of Thatcherism, as it has increased by 11 per cent since the Labour Government took over. She must examine

that problem.

This has been a good debate; there have been many interesting and constructive speeches. It is clear that there is no consensus in the Executive coalition. For the first time, the Parliament will be able to vote on a bill issue by issue, as issues arise. The Conservative group has highlighted its priorities and what it sees as the way ahead. If there can be a consensus directed towards what we have proposed today, a new and enlightened housing future could be there for the taking for the people of Scotland.

16:35

Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP): I would like to say how welcome today's debate has been. It is always interesting to see the new Tories of new Labour following a Thatcherite agenda. I know that it suits neither party to be seen to be agreeing with each other but Bill Aitken and Murray Tosh have let the cat out of the bag this afternoon. It seems somewhat discourteous of the minister not to acknowledge the debt of gratitude that she owes to her Conservative predecessors.

The extension of the right to buy has the minister's name stamped all over it. It is an ideological totem, a tribute to the minister's role at the cutting edge of the Blairite revolution, a triumph of zeal over common sense and a classic example of not letting the truth get in the way of a good argument.

The truth is that the extension policy is ill thought out and is based on spurious arithmetic and a rose-tinted view of the future. It might be supported by the troops opposite but, having heard some of the comments today, I am somewhat doubtful. It is opposed by everyone from the Scottish Tenants Association to the Council of Mortgage Lenders.

Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): Will Mr Gibson take this opportunity to put on record the SNP's opposition to the extension of the right to buy to 40,000 housing association tenants?

Mr Gibson: I think that we have already made our position clear in today's debate.

Mr McNeil: Will Mr Gibson tell us, then?

Mr Gibson: I will state it for the record, as Mr McNeil obviously did not listen to the debate. We are opposed to the extension policy.

The minister has been told that the policy is wrong, but to no avail. Like her ideological forebear, Mrs Thatcher, the lady is not for turning. When outlining her vision, the minister talked about the bleak existence for many living in peripheral housing estates and enduring poor-

quality housing across Scotland. She had the gall to denounce the situation, yet she will not accept that Labour councils, previous Labour Governments and the present Labour Government bear any responsibility for the appalling state of affairs.

When I was leader of the opposition in Glasgow City Council, the administration was forced to admit that, despite continuous claims of under-investment, it had spent £1.8 billion on housing between 1982 and 1997. Such was the level of mismanagement in Glasgow City Council that tenants always suspected that if they got new windows, their house would be demolished the following year. Glasgow's housing crisis has many causes, but the Labour party in Glasgow must accept some responsibility for gross mismanagement and incompetence over many years. Some record, Frank.

Johann Lamont: Will Mr Gibson recognise the sterling work done by Glasgow City Council in the face of the Tories' hostility to the public rented sector in developing excellent initiatives in housing co-operatives, housing associations and tenant-management co-operatives? Many of those initiatives were developed in the area that Mr Gibson sought to represent and I currently represent.

Mr Gibson: If Johann Lamont knew the rules of the Parliament, she would realise that I also represent that area.

Whenever Glasgow City Council is mentioned, Johann Lamont feels duty bound to defend its record, perhaps because her husband is a serving member of the authority. Labour has been in government for 20 years since the war, has led Glasgow's council for 60 of the last 66 years and has squandered £1.8 billion on poorly thought out capital investment projects. Does Johann Lamont think that the Labour party should not take some of the blame for the fact that Glasgow has the worst housing in Europe west of Naples? The arrogance of the Labour party is beyond belief.

Johann Lamont *rose*—

Ms Margaret Curran (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Gibson: I knew that I would get everyone going. Other speakers might put people to sleep, but I do not.

The minister talked about increasing expenditure on housing—

Johann Lamont: On a point of order.

The Presiding Officer: I hope that it is a real point of order and not just because Mr Gibson will

not give way.

Johann Lamont: Is it appropriate for a member to doubt my motives when I raise political questions about an area that I represent? Mr Gibson may wish to speak to my husband, who in fact did not have a vote in his own house when he stood for selection. Any judgment I have made—

The Presiding Officer: That is not a point of order; it is a continuation of an argument. The member must be responsible for his own remarks and if he does not give way, that is also his responsibility.

Mr Gibson: I apologise for my bad voice today—I should not have kissed Frank McAveety under the mistletoe before Christmas.

On COSLA's figures, each year, 10,000 home modernisations, 1,800 all-house window replacements and 3,200 central heating systems could have been provided across Scotland if set-aside legislation had been abolished.

Bristow Muldoon (Livingston) (Lab): Will the member give way?

Mr Gibson: No. When will the minister abolish set-aside, which was implemented in the dying days of the discredited Michael Forsyth regime, and allow real investment in Scotland's public sector housing?

The Deputy Minister for Communities (Jackie Baillie): Will the member give way?

Mr Gibson: All right.

Jackie Baillie: As it is me? Thank you. I seek some clarification. Mr Gibson has indicated that he supports single social tenancies, some with right to buy and some without. What would the SNP do for new tenants in both council and housing association housing who currently have the right to buy?

Mr Gibson: In fact, I shall move on.

It is interesting to note that of the policies the minister has not lifted from the Tories, her better ideas have been lifted from the SNP. Of eight major policy commitments made by the minister, six were in the SNP manifesto, none of which were in Labour's: secure tenancy, new rights for tenant consultation, legislation for a single regulatory framework, the strategic role of local authorities, Scottish Homes losing its quango status and probationary tenancies. Fiona Hyslop spelled out those commitments earlier today. She also spelled out that the SNP—under the penny for Scotland proposals—would have spent an additional £236 million on housing measures. We would have reversed the rise in homelessness that has happened under new Labour.

I was interested to hear speeches from new

Labour's erstwhile coalition partners. The real difficulties that will follow from extending the right to buy, in particular in rural Scotland, were eloquently put. We heard about the planning difficulties that would ensue; distortions in house availability; populism instead of well-thought-out policy; the effect on the financial viability of housing associations; and the fact that the views of professionals who oppose the measure are being ignored. Brave words from the Lib Dems, but when it comes to the vote—as always—they will chicken out. I know it, they know it, members know it.

Margaret Curran and Elaine Smith, among others, made positive speeches on stock transfer and right to buy. They highlighted the need for tenants who are affected to be more fully informed, for meaningful and constructive dialogue and for choice and quality in the public rented sector.

It is clear that under the minister's proposals the poor, the homeless, women and disabled people will be most harmed. I understand that the minister may be unwilling to take advice from the SNP, but will she take notice of the comments of Labour back benchers, or indeed Shelter, which is quoted in *The Herald* today:

"We have no doubts that the Executive's plans will limit the number of affordable rented homes in Scotland. Any plans the Executive has to tackle homelessness will be undermined by these proposals."

I will conclude by focusing on the housing situation in Glasgow. There can be no doubt that what happens in Glasgow in the next 18 to 24 months will have a profound effect, which will be felt for years to come, on the whole country. If the Scottish Executive and Glasgow City Council succeed in transferring Glasgow's stock out of the public sector, that will signal the end of public housing as we have known it in this country for decades. That, in itself, is nothing to be scared of. New Labour's arrogant assumption is that those who oppose it do so because they are afraid of change. As a lifelong Scottish nationalist—unlike other members who are British nationalists—[MEMBERS: "What?"] They do not believe in a one-world government, so they are obviously Brit nats. I am committed to my country's restoration as an independent sovereign state, so change is the last thing that I am afraid of.

The transfer should be opposed not because it is radical, but because it is wrong—not morally wrong, but "won't work" wrong. If we strip the sentimentality and spin out of the argument and look at the brass tacks of the case for stock transfer in Glasgow, the reasons it is doomed to failure stare us in the face.

Glasgow has 95,000 units of housing and a total debt of more than £900 million. After that debt is

transferred from the rent payer to the taxpayer, the new landlord will be able to start afresh and borrow the money it requires to renovate the stock. The estimated cost of renovation of the 75,000 units that remain after demolition is £1.2 billion. I do not know where Bill Aitken got the £6 billion figure. I am happy for anyone to correct me on the figure of £1.2 billion.

Ninety-five thousand rent payers cannot pay back £0.9 billion but, under the new system, 75,000 rent payers will be able to afford £1.2 billion. The reality is that the new landlord will be so stuck in hock that it will be unable to carry out its duties. More than that, the landlord will be at the mercy of every fluctuation in market conditions, from increased voids to high arrears or changes in interest rates. With no public backing, it could face crisis after crisis. We have already heard that lenders are getting cold feet as a result of this.

As I am sure the minister is aware, in banking, the risk-reward equation is king. Given the size of the risk any lender will be taking with Glasgow, they will expect the reward to be substantial. The minister knows that as far as finance is concerned, she is trying to put a quart into a pint pot. The only way out of the dilemma will be to allow a new landlord to drive rents up, thus increasing voids and arrears and putting an intolerable burden on the public purse through, for example, increased claims for housing benefit, which will increase poverty and so on, and will go against the Executive's own plans vis-à-vis social exclusion.

If it is to regenerate its public stock, Glasgow requires a sophisticated approach based on the needs of its citizens and tenants. It does not need another grand plan, especially not one as ill thought out as the proposed community trust. Why not write off Glasgow City Council's debt now? Why does it have to be tied in with a stock transfer?

Ms Curran: Will the member give way?

Mr Gibson: I am just about to finish.

The Scottish Executive is overseeing a housing policy that is underfunded, divisive and potentially disastrous. We have already heard from a number of members that there has been no consultation. It may have made forums, but unfortunately the Executive cannot tell the difference between a sales pitch and consultation.

We need a housing policy that is based on the needs of tenants. We need a housing minister who is open to the ideas of the housing profession and tenants representatives, not one who casually dismisses their views as those of vested interests. What we have heard today from the Minister for Communities and her supporters is ideology over common sense; the majority of people in the

country would join me in rejecting it.

16:47

The Deputy Minister for Local Government (Mr Frank McAveety): I am tempted to invite Kenny Gibson to indicate where in his speech he put content rather than ideology. However, contrary to the mythology that he presented, maybe I will have another chance under the mistletoe. I apologise if my voice is hoarse, but I think that I am picking up the flu bug that everybody else in Scotland has. It may take time, therefore, to get through this. [MEMBERS: "Is it a crisis?"] It is not a crisis—it is just a trauma when I am ill.

First, I welcome the 30 contributions in today's debate, which is testament to what John McAllion said this morning about the opportunity for the Scottish Parliament to address the fundamental issue of how to deal with housing in Scotland. The two issues that preoccupied most of the contributions were the fundamental ones of housing and land. If we consider the politics of many of this nation's parties, particularly the noble and glorious parties that make up the partnership—the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats—we will find a history of making a real difference in terms of both housing and the land reform debate.

We consider those issues in the genuine context of inviting new ideas on Scottish housing. We are not talking about the housing of the 1920s, about which my predecessors in Glasgow had noble aspirations. We are not necessarily having the debate of the early 1980s, although, sadly, some of my colleagues in the Opposition have engaged in that. In terms of aspirations and accessibility, the world has moved on since the early 1980s—

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): Will the minister give way?

Mr McAveety: I will let Fiona in in a moment, but it is important that I develop the theoretical point underpinning what I am saying before we go into some of the details. So far today, some people have been fairly flaccid in their contributions.

The fundamental issue is how to address what we want for 2000 and beyond. That is what many of the members of the partnership parties want to engage in, no matter how difficult it is. I say that with sincerity. I do not know any Labour member who does not wish to address the situation that we face in this century, rather than the situation in the past. If members ask me whether I believe fundamentally in some of the policies in which I believed in 1982, I am honest enough to say that I do not. The world has changed—I am willing to recognise that.

There is an ideological divide in the chamber—we should engage in that debate. However, let us consider some of the genuine issues raised by members. I will do my best to address the members who raised the points and I guarantee that if I omit anything in the time available, I will respond in writing to those members.

The first issue is the philosophy, on which I have touched. The second issue is the resource base. We must consider how to get investment into the various tenures of housing in Scotland and how to respond to the different aspirations of people in Scotland. How do we handle the debate around stock transfer, whatever model is arrived at in the areas that are examining that option? The final issue is how the Executive and the Parliament should respond to the increase in homelessness. Those are the fundamental areas on which I want to touch.

There is a debate about whether we engage with the single social tenancy and aspire for the right to buy to be made available to the 43,000 tenants who are denied it because of the exemption created by the Conservatives in their housing legislation. We want consistency across all the submissions for single social tenancy. I think that everyone agrees on that. The question is whether that should be extended to other tenants in Scotland—not just to the 43,000 tenants of housing associations who do not have that right. Kenny Gibson seemed to avoid that issue. Whatever model existing public sector tenants move into, will their sons and daughters have the rights of succession, as is currently the case? I hope that the SNP will address that fundamental concern. It is an aspiration of the people of Scotland that the Executive is prepared to address.

There are two issues: housing aspirations and accessibility. We can meet both. In the 1980s, the Tories posited that one was diametrically opposed to the other. Our partnership approach is about the way in which we can increase the opportunities for home ownership—which the majority of Scots want—as well as ensure decent, affordable rented accommodation that is accessible and addresses social need. We can marry the noble concerns that John McAllion alluded to this morning in our policies, which will need to be engaged with in further detail through the committee structure. That is the beauty of this Parliament—we have the opportunity for informed debate on such matters.

Mr Tosh: I would like to ask a specific point about charitable housing associations. It is a fairly random argument that some associations are charitable and some are not. The Executive appears to be giving rights to tenants of non-charitable associations, but what about the tenants of housing associations that have charitable status

for tax avoidance reasons? Will they enjoy the same rights?

Mr McAveety: The paper indicates that they will not enjoy the same rights because, unless there is a significant review of charity law, we cannot transfer charitable assets to private owners. That is not a matter for us to address here, but it could be taken up in a different arena.

Fiona Hyslop: Will the minister give way?

Mr McAveety: Not at the moment.

There has been a debate about the disparity between rural and urban housing. Executive figures suggest that sales have been roughly 36 per cent in urban areas and 34 per cent in rural areas. There is no marked disparity. However, we must address some of the concerns raised by the statutory agencies about whether the right to buy has a disproportionate impact in rural areas. Members have expressed concerns about the matter and I want to assure them that we will address those issues through our development programme, just as we aim to address the land issue in terms of access to land and for building. That was a key issue raised by Mike Rumbles and is a common concern of the Parliament.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP): Is it not true that the situation arises because, in many parts of the Highlands—not least in Badenoch and Strathspey in my constituency—there are no council houses left? They have all been bought. In many areas, there are more holiday homes than council homes. If new Labour is going to create any more homes in the Highlands, those Wendy homes will be holiday homes.

Mr McAveety: Although I would welcome that point at the detailed committee stage, I should point out that our information and the models that we have examined do not support what Fergus Ewing has said. The situation that he describes was created by the old right-to-buy legislation, where the cost floor rules were different. I want to point out that 83 per cent of those who have bought their council house have stayed in the area. The fundamental drive is about creating stability in terms of housing choice and allowing people to stay in their communities. Even in some of the schemes in Glasgow, the policies, I would argue, have been stabilising influences, because they have kept people in communities who might otherwise have left. We need to get the balance right.

I want to touch on what George Lyon said about low-cost home ownership. The right-to-buy extension does not impact in any way on the low-cost home ownership models that have been pioneered by many authorities across Scotland. We want to extend the opportunity to members in

the chamber to work with our people to examine the models that we have considered in terms of the impact of right to buy. That opportunity is genuinely available.

Fiona Hyslop: I have two specific questions. First, what impact will the extension to right to buy have on the empty homes initiative? I have been told that many councils will no longer be able to pursue that initiative because of Government policy. Secondly, the minister's comments seemed to imply that the Executive wants to take away the protection for charitable status for some housing associations. Given the options offered by the review of charity law, will he, at the earliest opportunity, extend the right to buy to charitable housing associations?

Mr McAveety: I think that Fiona Hyslop has interpreted my comments wrongly. There was no suggestion in my statement that I wanted to look at charity law at the moment—that is a separate matter relating to the different way in which charitable institutions are assessed. It is important that we have that debate in an appropriate context, rather than in this context.

As Wendy Alexander said, the modelling that we have considered indicates that we want to build 6,000 houses a year. Of those, 1,500 would be in rural areas. We want to work with the agencies in those areas to ensure that the houses are targeted on the most appropriate places. Our modelling indicates that no more than 120 houses could be lost in rural areas because of the right to buy. I accept that members are concerned about that; the issue can be addressed at the committee stage. Some members accuse us of not looking at things. However, I sincerely assure members that we have arrived at those figures after considering the modelling.

I welcome this debate and I want to talk about the language that has been used. This morning, Brian Adam said that it was important that the language of the debate should not be unfair, but within two sentences he had used the word "blackmail", which I would have thought a fairly emotive piece of language. However, I welcome his sincerity—it lasted for two sentences, which is a good record for a Scottish National party member. I, however, will engage in the language of debate.

Neither I nor members of the Labour party, have been using words such as "privatisation" in relation to stock transfer—it has been members of the SNP from across the country who have been using such scare words. It has not been me who has, in north-west Glasgow, been using words such as "clearances" in an emotional way to try to terrify people and undermine any idea of stock transfer. It has not been me who has been claiming—I heard this again today from Kenny

Gibson—that there are going to be massive rent increases. Whichever model is looked at, the stock transfer proposals are underpinned by rent guarantees—something that cannot be done at present within the model for local authorities.

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP) *rose*—

Mr McAveety: I will take an intervention in a moment, Linda.

It is important that we do not rubbish serious issues. I felt that the language of Lloyd Quinan's contribution was self-righteous in the extreme. I checked the facts with West Dunbartonshire today. I know that he quoted an individual from an exemplary Clydebank newspaper—what a scientific assessment that is in the context of the information available in the modern world.

Mr Lloyd Quinan (West of Scotland) (SNP) *rose*—

Mr McAveety: I will finish my point, and then I will let Lloyd—who did not give way to me—respond.

Mr Quinan: Does the minister want to see the report?

Mr McAveety: The report was written by an individual; its publication was not authorised or supported by the institution that originally asked for it. The individual is no longer there, and the whole report has been found to be deeply flawed. I am sorry to have to reveal that to the chamber, but it is important to get the facts out. Lloyd Quinan, unfortunately, has made predictions today, but his record in making predictions in previous jobs is poor.

Linda Fabiani *rose*—

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP): Will the minister give way?

Mr McAveety: I am sorry, I want to continue, but I will touch on some of the points that Tommy raised this morning—ever so eloquently and powerfully, which is why I have moved one seat further away from him.

We want to guarantee that we will engage with funders and with the major agencies to discuss the best model for approaching stock transfer proposals. We will also engage with tenants across Scotland.

Linda Fabiani: Will the minister give way?

Tommy Sheridan: When will he engage with tenants?

The Presiding Officer: The minister is in his last minute now.

Mr McAveety: We will engage with tenants when there is a serious stock transfer proposal

that they can examine and scrutinise in detail. I guarantee that we will do that.

More fundamentally, I predict that I will abide by any decision that the tenants in Glasgow—my city—make on the future of their housing stock. I hope that Mr Sheridan will give the same commitment today instead of assuming that he knows best for tenants across Scotland.

Tommy Sheridan *rose*—

Mr McAveety: I have to conclude because the Presiding Officer has said that I am in my final minute. It is important for Mr Sheridan to listen to the rules of the chamber.

Tommy Sheridan: If Mr McAveety wants to become a real minister, he will have to learn the rules.

Mr McAveety: Thanks. Obviously I will depend on Mr Sheridan's support if ever I become a real minister. I will wait a long time—in fact, I might as well wait for the revolution that he has been waiting for all his adult life.

Wendy Alexander said that we had chance to change the nature of housing in Scotland. We can all make a contribution to that aim. I do not believe that I am a singular visionary, but I want to share my experience of housing and how people live in poor conditions. The minister mentioned the Booker prize. I am a reasonably literate individual myself. Although "Angela's Ashes" by Frank McCourt is not a particularly well-written novel, it is beautiful. Interestingly, the great character in the novel is Angela McCourt, who believes in making change; the father, Malachy McCourt, promises much, but delivers nothing. The SNP is Malachy McCourt; we will be Angela McCourt, and we will make a difference. I hope that the chamber will support our position.

Representation of the People Bill

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): The next item of business is consideration of S1M-405, in the name of Ms Wendy Alexander, on the Representation of the People Bill.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament endorses the principle of ensuring consistency of absent voting provisions for parliamentary and local elections in Scotland as set out in the Representation of the People Bill and agrees that the relevant provision to achieve this end in the Bill should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[*Ms Alexander.*]

Membership of Committees

The Minister for Parliament (Mr Tom McCabe): Presiding Officer, I seek permission to move a motion without notice on the membership of committees.

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): I am happy to accept that motion. Is it agreed that Mr McCabe can move a motion without notice?

Members: Yes.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that Michael Matheson be appointed to the Justice and Home Affairs Committee and that Tricia Marwick be appointed to the Equal Opportunities Committee.—[*Mr McCabe.*]

Decision Time

17:03

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): There are six questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is that amendment S1M-408.2, in the name of Fiona Hyslop, which seeks to amend motion S1M-408, in the name of Ms Wendy Alexander, on housing, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Adam, Brian (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Campbell, Colin (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Elder, Dorothy-Grace (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Dr Winnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Ms Margo (Lothians) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Mr Gil (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Quinan, Mr Lloyd (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Reid, Mr George (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmund, Mr Alex (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Ullrich, Kay (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Andrew (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Davidson, Mr David (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Dewar, Donald (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)

Fergusson, Alex (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Galbraith, Mr Sam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Lab)
 Harding, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 MacKay, Angus (Edinburgh South) (Lab)
 MacLean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAllion, Mr John (Dundee East) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Lothians) (Con)
 McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Munro, Mr John (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Ms Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)
 Tosh, Mr Murray (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Wallace, Ben (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 32, Against 81, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The second question is that amendment S1M-408.1, in the name of Bill Aitken, which seeks to amend motion S1M-408, in the name of Ms Wendy Alexander, on housing, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Davidson, Mr David (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Fergusson, Alex (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Harding, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Lothians) (Con)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Tosh, Mr Murray (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Wallace, Ben (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

AGAINST

Adam, Brian (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Campbell, Colin (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Dewar, Donald (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Elder, Dorothy-Grace (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Dr Winnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Galbraith, Mr Sam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Lab)
 Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)

Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 MacDonald, Ms Margo (Lothians) (SNP)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 MacKay, Angus (Edinburgh South) (Lab)
 MacLean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McAllion, Mr John (Dundee East) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Morgan, Alasdair (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Munro, Mr John (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Oldfather, Ms Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Paterson, Mr Gil (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Quinan, Mr Lloyd (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Reid, Mr George (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Salmond, Mr Alex (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)
 Ullrich, Kay (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Wilson, Andrew (Central Scotland) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 17, Against 95, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The third question is, that motion S1M-408, in the name of Ms Wendy Alexander, on housing, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

FOR

Aitken, Bill (Glasgow) (Con)
 Alexander, Ms Wendy (Paisley North) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Barrie, Scott (Dunfermline West) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Edinburgh Central) (Lab)
 Brankin, Rhona (Midlothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Robert (Glasgow) (LD)
 Canavan, Dennis (Falkirk West)
 Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)
 Craigie, Cathie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (Lab)
 Curran, Ms Margaret (Glasgow Baillieston) (Lab)
 Davidson, Mr David (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Deacon, Susan (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab)
 Dewar, Donald (Glasgow Anniesland) (Lab)
 Douglas-Hamilton, Lord James (Lothians) (Con)
 Eadie, Helen (Dunfermline East) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill) (Lab)
 Fergusson, Alex (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Finnie, Ross (West of Scotland) (LD)
 Galbraith, Mr Sam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (Lab)
 Gallie, Phil (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Gillon, Karen (Clydesdale) (Lab)
 Godman, Trish (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)
 Goldie, Miss Annabel (West of Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (Edinburgh Pentlands) (Lab)
 Harding, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Henry, Hugh (Paisley South) (Lab)
 Home Robertson, Mr John (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Hughes, Janis (Glasgow Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Jackson, Dr Sylvia (Stirling) (Lab)
 Jackson, Gordon (Glasgow Govan) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Cathy (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (Lab)
 Jamieson, Margaret (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab)
 Jenkins, Ian (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
 Johnstone, Alex (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Mr Andy (East Kilbride) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Macdonald, Lewis (Aberdeen Central) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Mr Kenneth (Eastwood) (Lab)
 MacKay, Angus (Edinburgh South) (Lab)
 MacLean, Kate (Dundee West) (Lab)
 Macmillan, Maureen (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Springburn) (Lab)
 McAllion, Mr John (Dundee East) (Lab)
 McAveety, Mr Frank (Glasgow Shettleston) (Lab)
 McCabe, Mr Tom (Hamilton South) (Lab)
 McConnell, Mr Jack (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 McGrigor, Mr Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 McIntosh, Mrs Lyndsay (Central Scotland) (Con)
 McLetchie, David (Lothians) (Con)
 McMahon, Mr Michael (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)
 McNulty, Des (Clydebank and Milngavie) (Lab)
 Monteith, Mr Brian (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Morrison, Mr Alasdair (Western Isles) (Lab)
 Muldoon, Bristow (Livingston) (Lab)
 Mulligan, Mrs Mary (Linlithgow) (Lab)
 Mundell, David (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Munro, Mr John (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)
 Murray, Dr Elaine (Dumfries) (Lab)
 Oldfather, Ms Irene (Cunninghame South) (Lab)
 Peacock, Peter (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Peattie, Cathy (Falkirk East) (Lab)
 Radcliffe, Nora (Gordon) (LD)
 Raffan, Mr Keith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)

Robson, Euan (Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (LD)
 Rumbles, Mr Mike (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Ochil) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Smith, Iain (North-East Fife) (LD)
 Smith, Margaret (Edinburgh West) (LD)
 Stone, Mr Jamie (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)
 Thomson, Elaine (Aberdeen North) (Lab)
 Tosh, Mr Murray (South of Scotland) (Con)
 Wallace, Ben (North-East Scotland) (Con)
 Wallace, Mr Jim (Orkney) (LD)
 Watson, Mike (Glasgow Cathcart) (Lab)
 Whitefield, Karen (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)
 Young, John (West of Scotland) (Con)

AGAINST

Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green)
 MacDonald, Ms Margo (Lothians) (SNP)
 McNeil, Mr Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 Sheridan, Tommy (Glasgow) (SSP)

ABSTENTIONS

Adam, Brian (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Campbell, Colin (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Cunningham, Roseanna (Perth) (SNP)
 Elder, Dorothy-Grace (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Ewing, Dr Winnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness East, Nairn and Lochaber) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Gibson, Mr Kenneth (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (South of Scotland) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Lothians) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Mr Kenny (Lothians) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 McGugan, Irene (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Morgan, Alasdair (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (SNP)
 Neil, Alex (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Paterson, Mr Gil (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Quinan, Mr Lloyd (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Reid, Mr George (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (North-East Scotland) (SNP)
 Salmond, Mr Alex (Banff and Buchan) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Swinney, Mr John (North Tayside) (SNP)
 Ullrich, Kay (West of Scotland) (SNP)
 Welsh, Mr Andrew (Angus) (SNP)
 White, Ms Sandra (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Wilson, Andrew (Central Scotland) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 82, Against 4, Abstentions 28.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament acknowledges the need for action to provide good quality and accessible housing and strong and secure communities; welcomes the Executive's proposals to achieve this through a range of measures including the introduction of a single social tenancy, the development of a single regulatory framework for social housing, the promotion of a stronger strategic role in housing for local authorities, and a new role and status for

Scottish Homes, and notes that the Executive will bring forward a Housing Bill to deliver these objectives.

The Presiding Officer: The fourth question is, that motion S1M-409, which was moved this morning in the name of Mr Tom McCabe, on the designation of a lead committee, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees the following designation of Lead Committee—

The Health and Community Care Committee to consider The Beef Bones (Scotland) Regulations 1999, SSI 1999/186.

The Presiding Officer: The fifth question is, that motion S1M-405, in the name of Ms Wendy Alexander, on the Representation of the People Bill, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament endorses the principle of ensuring consistency of absent voting provisions for parliamentary and local elections in Scotland as set out in the Representation of the People Bill and agrees that the relevant provision to achieve this end in the Bill should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: The sixth question is, that motion S1M-422, moved without notice by Mr Tom McCabe, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees that Michael Matheson be appointed to the Justice and Home Affairs Committee and that Tricia Marwick be appointed to the Equal Opportunities Committee.

Social Workers and Violence

The Presiding Officer (Sir David Steel): I appeal to members who are not staying for members' business to leave quickly and quietly.

Members' business today is a debate on motion S1M-283, in the name of Mrs Margaret Smith, on social workers and violence. [*Interruption.*] I ask Mr Gallie, Mr Galbraith and the other members in the corner to have their discussion outside.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament deplores the escalating levels of violence visited upon social workers in Edinburgh in the course of their duties; recognises that this is a national problem, and calls upon the Scottish Executive to promote the view that having to face the threat of violence is not an acceptable feature of any profession.

17:08

Mrs Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): Most politicians face a certain amount of abuse, written or verbal, in their working lives, whether from the public, the press, political opponents or, indeed, political colleagues. However, I hope that none of us will ever have to live day to day with fear for our personal safety, because we have chosen to be public figures and public servants. Yet, as politicians, we are the employers of many public servants who know the real fear of violence and abuse—nurses, police officers, fire officers, teachers and benefit workers are just a few of those who suffer problems as they go about their daily job of caring for the welfare of the people of Scotland.

Welfare workers and nurses are four times more likely to be physically attacked than other workers. Last year's Royal College of Nursing and *Nursing Times* Stamp Out Violence campaign showed that almost half of nurses had been assaulted. The campaign received the backing of the national health service and improvements have been made.

However, I want to draw attention to the escalating violence against social workers—the welfare workers in the front line of care. More than three quarters of social workers have experienced violence or abuse while doing their job. Nearly 90 per cent of them have experienced the risk of violence while at work. Those figures are shocking and I hope that, by highlighting them in the Parliament, we will send a clear message that the situation is totally unacceptable to all of us. The general public, social work managers and clients must also agree that it is unacceptable.

Make no mistake, some people think that social workers deserve what they get, although they would never feel the same way about nurses.

Many members of the public have little or no experience of social workers, and their perceptions are formed from a diet of tabloid headlines that are only too quick to blame social workers and are never anything other than slow to praise them. The good work done every day throughout Scotland by social workers in day care centres, adult training centres, young people's centres, primary care joint working teams and elsewhere tends to be ignored, to the extent that 82 per cent of social workers believe that negative press attacks hinder them in doing their job and in the fight against violence.

I have secured the debate to highlight that, and to support other work elsewhere to highlight this important issue. Some of that work has been done through *Community Care* magazine's "no fear" campaign, which aims to reduce the violence and stress in social work throughout Britain.

Liberal Democrats in City of Edinburgh Council, led by our social work spokesperson in the council, Paul Edie, have also contributed: in response to a motion by Lib Dems in the council, a social work committee report showed that reported violent incidents had increased by 10 per cent every year since 1996. That figure was for Edinburgh, but I do not think that Edinburgh is any different from other parts of the country—it is just that one of its council departments has examined the matter.

The likelihood of violence has increased for social workers in young people's centres and for those working in day care units with people with learning difficulties. It seems that female employees are under particular threat.

I am pleased that the council's social work department is now undertaking a review of its departmental guidelines on arrangements for dealing with violence at work, paying particular attention to the security of units, communication between staff, developing procedures to deal with violent and potentially violent situations and developing an essential training strategy on violence.

Social workers are under a high risk of violence for several reasons. They often deal with people at crisis point, who are facing terrible personal situations, be it related to drug or alcohol addiction, mental health problems, crime, abuse or a family break-up. Because of the nature of their job, they often work with those people in their own homes, not in social work offices or at a more neutral venue. It is essential that all social work departments undertake compulsory risk assessment, give social work staff formal training to deal with violent individuals and teach them techniques for calming situations down. Nearly half the social workers surveyed by *Community Care* magazine said that they had received no

formal training on how to defuse potentially violent situations.

Departments must start asking key questions. Are staff expected to deliver services to potentially violent clients alone? Is there a call-in system for the period after visits? Do managers know where staff are at any time? Has the environment, as well as the person being visited, been risk-assessed? Are mobile phones and alarms issued to staff?

Social work departments have a legal duty under health and safety legislation to protect their employees, and to provide safe working conditions as far as reasonably practicable. Councils that fail to do so may face costly compensation claims, yet some councils still do not have systems for violent incidents.

It is clear that assaults on an individual member of staff have a stressful and demoralising impact, not only on that individual, but throughout the work force. Any management or Government that fails to recognise the seriousness of the situation, possibly out of some sense that violence is just part of the job of being a social worker, might have to face low morale, rising absenteeism, recruitment problems and loss of productivity. That shapes the overall effectiveness of the service and the delivery of services to the people whom we all serve.

It is essential that local managers take the matter seriously from day one to improve on the present situation, in which two thirds of social workers who have been attacked do not feel sufficiently supported by senior staff in dealing with their attack. Employees must look out for their own and their colleagues' safety. That means moving away from a culture of acceptance of verbal abuse.

More social workers would report a case of physical abuse or assault, but how many are failing to report being sworn at, threatened or called names, which can be the start of a process of violence towards social workers by clients? Their reasons for not reporting abuse include cultural acceptance that it is par for the course, and powerlessness, feeling that nothing will happen even if an incident is reported. Although 26 per cent of the incidents in Edinburgh were serious enough to be reported to the police, few violent clients are prosecuted.

Greater preventive measures and a clear message that violence against workers will not be tolerated are needed. Social workers and their employers should be prepared to follow through to prosecution; to do otherwise is to allow the profession to slip into a mire of hopelessness—with a shrug, platitude, sigh of resignation and little else. The Parliament must give a clear signal that it will do more than that. Can the Deputy Minister

for Community Care tell us why, although violence against social workers is a UK-wide problem, Scottish social workers are twice as likely to suffer assaults as social workers in England?

That is one reason why, rather than lagging behind Westminster, the Parliament ought to take the lead. I know that the Executive has taken steps to promote the view that the threat of violence is unacceptable. In May 1998, Sam Galbraith asked the Association of Directors of Social Work to produce a guidance pack on supporting front-line staff, which included the issues of violence and stress. The report fell short of recommending compulsory risk assessment, as called for by the British Association of Social Workers. However, it recommended other things—measures that must be taken further. We would do well to follow Frank Dobson, who last September announced a Government task force to tackle violence against social work staff in England.

I thank colleagues from all parties who signed my motion, allowing us to have the debate. I call on the Executive to consider the following actions: a multidisciplinary task force similar to the English model, including people from the voluntary sector, to look at the issues, rather than relying on a management-only review; compulsory risk assessment and anti-violence policies in all social work departments; and more consultation with social workers before the Scottish social services council introduces changes.

Social workers help the most vulnerable members of society. In doing so, they make themselves vulnerable. For their sake and to provide top-quality social work services in Scotland, we must stem the rising tide of violence against them and support public service workers.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Mr George Reid): Seven members have indicated a wish to speak. I am not minded to entertain a motion for extension, but if speeches are kept under three minutes, we might manage five speeches.

17:17

Scott Barrie (Dunfermline West) (Lab): Thank you. I will keep my remarks brief.

I welcome the debate and congratulate Margaret Smith on lodging the motion. She is right in what she said, particularly on the tabloid image that social work has. When I went to the University of Stirling in 1984 to train in social work, someone quipped that it would be the central qualification in stealing weans that I would be studying for. Unfortunately, that is still the image that social workers have. Because of that, violence and swearing are too often accepted by social workers, almost on a daily basis. Often workers feel that violence towards them is somehow their fault or

responsibility, so it is better, particularly if they have recently qualified, not to report it, as it might be held against them.

When I joined Fife social work department, I became a National Union of Public Employees shop steward, and then a Unison shop steward, and I seemed to spend most of my time encouraging people to report incidents of violence against them. Some that were quite serious went unreported for the reasons that I have given. Also, managers often do not offer the support needed. I hope that as a social work manager I was not guilty of that, but one would have to ask the staff I supervised.

Social workers, particularly field workers, often visit people alone, and there are good practice reasons why it can be better to have only one person going into someone's house, but thorough risk assessments should be carried out. Field social workers can be their own worst enemies because they are not very good at saying where they are going, and when they are in an area, they might nip in and see someone else whom they were unable to see the previous week.

It is not that people want to have to account for all their actions, but they need to take some responsibility for their actions and for their safety. However, it is up to senior management in our social work departments to ensure that they are able to do that, and that they are encouraged to see that as a legitimate practice.

I have no easy answers to the question of how violence against social workers can be avoided. However, having the debate in the chamber today highlights the issue. Violence against social workers should not be singled out. We should make it clear that it is unacceptable for violence, particularly physical violence, to be used against anybody who is carrying out their day-to-day job. Although we are discussing social workers today, the principle could easily apply to many other professions, and we should hold on to that idea.

17:22

Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP):

Most social workers enter the profession because they care about people and what happens to them. We must not allow the situation to continue in which there are almost daily instances of violence towards social workers as they go about their work.

The survey that was conducted last year, which was referred to by Margaret Smith, highlighted the fact that 56 per cent of social workers had been the victims of violence at work, that the average number of violent incidents that people experienced was six, and that 20 per cent of those who were assaulted required medical treatment.

None of that is beneficial to the worker, the service users, the local authority or society.

Violence towards social workers is unacceptable, but it is not unexpected, as we have heard. Most people would rather not have involvement with the social work departments. If and when they do, the circumstances are generally stressful. Depending on the issues or crises, people can be extremely upset, angry or frustrated—and a lot more besides. More often than not, social workers are the full-time staff who must deal with those raw emotions.

Social work practice is all about minimising risk and ensuring that people are safe. However, like Scott Barrie, I know of examples of ways in which we are not very good at looking after ourselves. Too many times, because of the pressure of work, the shortage of staff, or general under-resourcing, sensible, precautionary, good practice measures are not taken. One worker goes out on a visit instead of two, workers fail to ensure that a mobile phone is available, no one checks whether the workers come back at 5 o'clock, or only young and inexperienced care staff are left to look after a group of troubled young people.

Like others today, I speak from experience. I worked in residential care and field work, which are acknowledged to be areas in which staff are in danger of violence at work. My own worst experience happened after I had removed two young children from the care of their parents. Their father openly threatened to kill me with a Kalashnikov. Not being able to put his hands on one of those, he came back later with a shotgun. Fortunately, with police assistance, the situation was resolved without injury.

Many social workers, as we have heard, have felt that, even in such circumstances, they did not want to bring charges against users of the service, for several reasons: those individuals have enough problems in their lives; they acted in a moment of high stress; and the relationship has to be kept open, to address problems in the future. That is the wrong message to give to people. Whatever the circumstances, people need to be held accountable for their actions. I would not go to the extremes that were seemingly suggested by Frank Dobson, who has talked about establishing a new criminal offence. That is unhelpful and unnecessary, and it could be counterproductive and further alienate some of the people with whom social workers work. Implementation of the law as it stands is all that is needed by the profession.

I strongly support the recommendation that employers in all sectors should take seriously their responsibilities towards the health and safety of staff, but everyone—social workers, employers and society—must play their part to resolve this unacceptable situation.

17:24

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): Margaret Smith is to be congratulated on raising this very important matter. There is general acceptance that the risk of violence and the episodes that have arisen are much too widespread, and that their level is far too high—as it is in relation to firefighters, whose position is also a source of concern.

I have four questions for the minister to address. First, the British Association of Social Workers has stated that, in the code of conduct for employers, there should be a requirement for employers

“to take their responsibilities in respect of the health and safety of their staff seriously in the prevention . . . of violence”.

That should be examined; perhaps it could be incorporated in legislation to be introduced in the summer.

The second question that I would like to ask the minister is on provision of training that emphasises prevention of violence. The British Association of Social Workers says that risk assessment and measures for the prevention of possible violence must be developed for the training of social care staff, and for inclusion in the delivery of services.

It is impossible not to be full of admiration for the expertise of social workers—Irene McGugan has had considerable experience. More protection must be provided, and I am glad to see that City of Edinburgh Council is working up a risk management strategy. That, of course, will have resource implications, so my third question to the minister is: will the Executive examine practice such as that being developed in Edinburgh, with a view to ensuring that best practice is adopted throughout Scotland’s local authorities to reduce risks to staff?

Finally, will the minister ensure that the necessary resources are made available to councils, to implement the measures that are necessary to secure staff safety, and so that the measures do not rob councils of funding for other front-line services? Perhaps it would be helpful to provide mobile telephones for staff. Sufficient resources should, in any case, be made available to achieve the aims of the campaign to reduce the level of violent incidents—a level that is far too high.

I am glad to support Margaret Smith’s recommendations.

17:26

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): Facts are chieftains that winna ding, and the facts about the violence to social workers and other public servants are well documented. However, many of the issues

around the facts are affected by people’s perceptions, of which I would like to mention three.

First, there is a tacit acceptance of violence by perpetrators, victims and bystanders—which includes all of us. Violence must be challenged at all levels and on all occasions.

Secondly, there is a feeling that asking for help is wimpish behaviour. Any request for help should be treated seriously and there should be recognition that a request for help shows that there is an underlying problem that deserves serious consideration. There is a corollary to that—if there is a problem, help should be asked for. In other words, the avenue for recognition that there is a problem and how it should be dealt with must be opened up.

The third perception has been touched on by other members. After years of denigration of social workers by the press when things have not gone well, there is a perception that social workers are “low-status workers”. That description is emphatically in inverted commas, and I used it as a shorthand description. It is long past the time when social work should have been given the credit that it deserves as a profession that requires a high level of professional training. It is a profession that picks up and deals with many of the difficult, awkward and sometimes downright nasty problems in our society. It does that along with all its other good work in an extremely wide range of services.

I would like to refer to a suggestion that Margaret Smith made, because I want to emphasise how important it is. That suggestion is the setting up of a multidisciplinary task force to address how we should set about tackling violence against social workers. Such a task force should include representation from the voluntary sector, but it is essential that it draws on the experience of staff in the front line. Managers will not necessarily have a full picture of the current situation.

Incidents of violence might not be reported for various reasons—that was also touched on by previous speakers. The reasons can range from tacit or even overt discouragement from head-in-the-sand management, to fear of blame, simple embarrassment, or a lack of confidence that anything will be done when incidents are reported.

I will digress to note how important it is—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I do not think that there is much time for digression.

Nora Radcliffe: As I do not have time, I will not digress.

We must tackle the issue head on, challenge various perceptions and involve fully the front-line staff whose safety and well-being are ultimately our responsibility.

17:30

Ms Margo MacDonald (Lothians) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to a debate on a subject on which I am not an expert—having heard some of the speeches, I feel quite ashamed.

I take small issue with the motion, which says that

“having to face the threat of violence is not an acceptable feature of any profession.”

As Lord James Douglas-Hamilton pointed out, firemen and many other public servants who work on our behalf face the same hazards in the course of their duties. Would it be acceptable to Margaret Smith that the multidisciplinary task force should consider public sector workers, such as social workers, firemen and so on? The principle is agreed by everyone in the chamber, which is a development.

We have hardly touched on the issue of resources. I accept that Scottish National party members are accused of whistling for resources that we cannot possibly afford, unless, of course, we cancel Trident—but we will not go into that now.

However, I think that, in November, the Deputy Minister for Community Care admitted to my colleague Michael Matheson that there was a cut in resources of up to 26 per cent in expenditure and services for physically disabled people across Scotland. I suggest that that cut might contribute to the feelings of frustration and so on that can build up, not necessarily for the client but for their family, relatives and friends, when they realise that the client has to wait for up to a year for an assessment. Once that assessment has taken place, the client has to go on to a waiting list before the service can be delivered, because of such cuts and the lack of resources. I will not lecture people who know better than I do how frustrations build up, which can bring about the sort of violence of which we are too well aware.

I make a plea to the minister to re-examine the resources and to pay heed to Lord James Douglas-Hamilton's point about the excellent practice being developed in City of Edinburgh Council on the management of risk. Does it have implications for resources, and can those resources be fed into social work budgets? As much as the establishment of the Scottish social services council will encourage people to feel that their professionalism is being judged worthy of acknowledgement, they also need resources. If they need resources so that they can carry out their jobs more effectively, it is down to the minister to provide them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I offer my regrets to the two members who were not called to speak.

17:32

The Deputy Minister for Community Care (Iain Gray): I thank Margaret Smith for drawing the Parliament's attention to this important and difficult subject. I also take the opportunity afforded by the debate to acknowledge the efforts of the social work profession over the millennium and winter period. We have heard about the efforts of national health service staff a number of times, but we should not forget that it is also a time of particular pressure for social work departments in their work in community and social care.

I agree with Margaret Smith that it is an unacceptable state of affairs that committed and dedicated social workers should be subject to verbal abuse, the threat of violence or even violent attack by some of the people for whom they provide services. As Margaret said, it is unacceptable that social workers are also sometimes undermined by ill-judged and sensationalist reporting of cases in which they have been involved.

However, we need to acknowledge—as a number of members have done—that this is not an easy problem to resolve. The origins of that violent behaviour are many and complex, and we must recognise that the perpetrators are among the most damaged and excluded members of our society. Their behaviour may be fuelled by drink or drugs, which is not to excuse such behaviour. We simply need to realise, as I think we have done during this short debate, that a considerable level of understanding is required so that managers and staff can work together to reduce and eliminate the unacceptable attacks on a key group of public sector workers.

The responsibility for supporting staff who may be subject to abuse or attack rests clearly and most directly with their employers, whether they be local authorities, or voluntary or private agencies. However, we are happy to accept that the Scottish Executive also has a responsibility—we have been active in supporting those employers in fulfilling their responsibilities.

I would like to give three or four examples of the initiatives that are under way, many of which have already been mentioned by members. Margaret Smith, for example, pointed out that a year before the launch of *Community Care* magazine's “no fear” campaign in July 1999, Sam Galbraith—who was then the Scottish Office minister with responsibility for social work—highlighted the problem in a seven-point plan that he outlined in a speech to the annual conference of the Association of Directors of Social Work. It is good to report that the ADSW took up that challenge, consulted the local authorities and the social work services inspectorate and has now published the resource pack, “Supporting Front Line Staff”, the

publication and distribution of which was funded by the Scottish Executive.

The pack gives guidance on a number of the points that have to be addressed to improve safety for staff: practical procedures to avoid risk situations; management practices; staff training; and a comprehensive monitoring system. It also points towards examples of good practice by local authorities. It is important to acknowledge that there are such examples, not least in Edinburgh. Several members have acknowledged that City of Edinburgh Council is currently revising and improving its guidelines in response to the motion that was lodged there, but there are other examples.

I would not want to suggest for a moment that we believe that the problem will be resolved simply by producing a resource pack. The ADSW is well aware of that and has set up a task force that is currently considering what the second stage of the campaign should be. We will collaborate with the association as it decides which direction we should take. I believe that that puts us ahead of Frank Dobson's task force and maintains ownership by the profession in a very direct way. That addresses a point that was made from the Scottish National party benches.

The other key initiative that is under way is the consultation paper on "Regulating Care and the Social Services Workforce" that came out last December. It proposes the establishment of the Scottish social services council, which will regulate the work force and its education. It will also provide leadership for the profession and the recognition that it deserves, as several members have said.

The council will be required to prepare, publish and keep under review employers' codes of conduct and practice. That will include a code of practice for all employers of social services staff, whether local authority, voluntary or private. The code will include management responsibilities concerning the reduction of abuse and violence towards the work force. The Scottish commission for the regulation of care, proposed in the same document, will regulate the delivery of care in care settings. Part of that will involve ensuring that properly trained staff are in place and that there are proper procedures such as recording of incidents, to meet the requirements of commission inspection.

Unhappily, the statistics that have been quoted throughout the debate show that a significant group of perpetrators of abuse and violence towards staff are children who are looked after by the local authority, particularly those in residential care. Staff in that setting need to be particularly skilful and sensitive when providing care, as they are particularly at risk. That is why the Scottish

Executive has recently awarded a major grant to a partnership of agencies, led by the University of Strathclyde, to enhance and develop the education and training of all staff providing residential child care services. That is aimed at ensuring proper and continuing training for all residential children's care staff in Scotland—exactly the kind of measure referred to, quite correctly, by Lord James Douglas-Hamilton in his speech. We need to train people in ways of ensuring that they minimise risk to themselves in their work setting.

This has been a short debate, in which a number of issues have been raised that will return to the chamber, for example, as the legislation to set up the council and commission develops.

There is a Vietnamese proverb that translates as:

"Those who bring light suffer burning".

The truth is that we ask our social workers to work in some dark and difficult corners of society. It is too often a thankless and dangerous task. We will not accept that, tacitly or otherwise, and will continue to work with the profession to ensure that we minimise the risks that social workers face.

Meeting closed at 17:40.

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