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Official Report

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Tuesday 6 May 2014

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Gary McLelland, the education officer for the Humanist Society Scotland.

Gary McLelland (Humanist Society Scotland): Members of the Scottish Parliament, I would like to tell you a story about a wee boy from a land far, far away. It was a wonderful land, made rich by the many different cultures and practices that had developed over its ancient history. This wee boy, though, was born into one particular clan that was marred by division and differences, so much so that its people largely kept to themselves, and even the children of that clan played only with other children of the same clan.

The wee boy loved his clan, but eventually he decided to go out into the world to explore, and he was astounded to discover that there were people of different clans, and some people with no clan at all. They believed different things and they believed them with just the same passion as his own clan did.

Even stranger, he met some people who said that they did not belong to any clan at all. They also spoke in a strange language, and there was a phrase they used that stuck in his mind. They said:

"For a' that, and a' that,
Its comin yet for a' that,
That Man to Man the world o'er,
Shall brothers be for a' that."

The wee boy, now a young man, liked that idea a lot. He saw that it could be a way of uniting the clans by telling them that they were all part of a greater clan, the clan called humanity, in which everyone was equal—men and women, black and white, gay and straight, able and disabled. He began to tell people about his big idea but, to his surprise, some people were not interested. They said that the old ways were the best and that, anyway, the man who had written that poem that he cared so much about was a scoundrel and rogue, and they werenae gonnae be telt to behave by the likes of him.

The young man was frustrated, but he decided that when he grew up he would do everything in his power to ensure that the children of his land grew up to look for the things that made them similar to one another, not different, to challenge

and question things for themselves, and to wonder what the words "fairness", "equality" and "democracy" really mean. What they mean to me is secularism—the guarantee that everybody will be treated fairly and equally, whatever they believe.

As only the fourth humanist to address the Parliament, and as part of an organisation that works to promote secularism in Scotland and reflects the views of the millions of Scots who value fairness, equality and democracy, I leave you with those questions, and thank you for listening.

Topical Question Time

14:03

National Review of Asthma Deaths

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

To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on the national review of asthma deaths, which suggests that some deaths from the condition arise because of complacency among both medical staff and patients. (S4T-00686)

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): I call the health secretary, Michael Matheson. I beg your pardon, Mr Matheson. I meant to say the Minister for Public Health.

The Minister for Public Health (Michael Matheson): I am grateful for the promotion, Presiding Officer.

The Scottish Government is committed to providing the best-quality care and treatment for people living with asthma in Scotland. We welcome the publication of the national review of asthma deaths, which is the first major investigation of its kind. We will look closely at the key findings of the report to ensure that actions and learning are taken forward at board level where appropriate. That will be part of a wider programme of work to develop and deliver local improvements, including asking boards to review asthma deaths as part of their mortality review process.

The Scottish Government continues to work closely with and support a number of initiatives in partnership with our third sector partners, including work in primary care, to drive forward the national improvements in asthma services.

Willie Rennie: Even though I have had a direct interest in asthma all my life, I was shocked by the report. For so many people to die for avoidable reasons will, I am sure, worry the minister. I want the Government today to make a clear commitment to step up its work on asthma in light of the report. The Government produced a good set of standards in "Asthma priorities: influencing the agenda", which was published well over a year ago, in February 2013, but the implementation of its recommendations is patchy. In light of the report that has been published today, will the minister ask every health board to publish a report locally on the progress that it is making on the implementation of the standards that were set out in "Asthma priorities"?

Michael Matheson: I recognise the member's long interest in the issue. I will address the points that he made. First, we will consider what we can learn from the national review. One of the areas of

work that we will now take forward is to ask our national advisory group on respiratory managed clinical networks to consider each of the report's recommendations and consider what action has to be taken forward at a local level. Part of that will be about what local plans need to be developed by individual health boards to respond to the recommendations locally. The member is right that the report highlights a number of areas where patients and individuals with asthma are clearly not receiving the services that they deserve and require. There is clear learning there for both patients and clinicians to take forward.

I assure the member that we will continue to drive forward the implementation of the national priorities. Alongside that, we will ensure that the learning that comes from the national review is applied at a local level and that there is national oversight of that through our national advisory group on respiratory conditions.

Willie Rennie: I do not doubt the minister's absolute commitment to the issue. As I said, some of the work that the Government has done in the area has been good, but implementation is patchy. I have received reports from health professionals, including those who are closely involved in the managed clinical networks, who say that they are frustrated that health boards are not treating the issue with sufficient priority. All that I am asking for is a bit of transparency. I recognise that the minister will drive the local health boards to make improvements, but will he publish the results so that local campaigners can press for improvements in delivery?

Michael Matheson: As I said, the principal delivery body is our national advisory group on respiratory managed clinical networks. The MCNs have a key role to play in making sure that our boards are undertaking the work at a local level that is necessary for the services that have to be delivered at both primary and secondary care level. We are considering reviewing the managed clinical network establishment, to look at whether we have to change how it is operating and to ensure that the guidance is implemented much more effectively at a local level. Part of that will be to look at how we can ensure that boards are much more transparent in their actions. I am open to that coming in the form of a formal published report so that patients and individuals can see the progress that individual boards are making.

However, we need to consider the detail in the report that was published today to see how it can feed into the way in which the managed clinical networks are operating at present. We also need to consider whether we should review the whole process to ensure that the system is robust and transparent in the way that the member has suggested. We want to ensure that, ultimately, it

delivers the services on the ground that patients with asthma deserve.

Dr Richard Simpson (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The Government's circulation of a benchmark reporting template last year was welcome. I hope that, as Willie Rennie said, the results of that will now be published so that we can see what is happening. However, will the minister immediately ensure that every patient who is prescribed more than 12 reliever inhalers in a year is reviewed? That is something that can be done immediately, but it should also be done as a matter of course, because the report shows very clearly that that group is one of those that are most at risk.

Michael Matheson: The member raises an important issue for the quality of the clinical care that is provided to patients with asthma. Interestingly, the report highlights that there is evidence of excessive prescribing of reliever medication as well as of underprescribing of preventative medication. There are issues there in terms of clinical practice. That is why it is important for the national advisory group to look at the report's recommendations and consider what is necessary at a local level to address the issues.

I am sure that the member will recognise that for me to do something immediately while a clinical decision is being made on it would not be appropriate. However, the point that the member is driving at is one that we need to address to ensure that clinicians prescribe the right medication at the right time, whether that is preventative or reliever medication, and that they review that on a regular basis, because the report also highlights the lack of such review.

We have an opportunity to use the review as a way of helping to drive forward clinical standards and standards of service delivery.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): The report is very worrying. Specifically in relation to childhood asthma, what implications does it have for how the national health service and schools work together to help pupils to manage their condition?

Michael Matheson: The report focused on how care is delivered in primary and secondary care in the NHS. I am aware that the ability of children with asthma to receive their inhaler while they are in school has been an on-going issue. There is an inconsistency in how local authorities are applying the relevant policy, which they are responsible for implementing.

That is an issue of concern. We are carrying out a review of the guidance to local authorities on the matter. What should happen is that, if a child requires medication, a healthcare plan should be put in place for that child in their school and arrangements should be made for their medication

to be provided for them. There are some legal complications to do with the ability of teachers and support staff to do that. Because of the inconsistency of approach among local authorities, we are reviewing the guidance, which goes back to 2001, to look at what we can do to ensure that local authorities adopt a much more consistent approach in this area.

National Youth Work Strategy

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-09915, in the name of Aileen Campbell, on the national youth work strategy, “Our ambitions for improving the life chances of young people in Scotland”.

The Presiding Officers can be fairly generous in relation to the amount of time that members take. If members wish to take interventions, we will support them in doing so by ensuring that they get the time back.

14:12

The Minister for Children and Young People (Aileen Campbell): Today’s debate is primarily about welcoming the publication of the national youth work strategy. Importantly, it also gives us an opportunity to recognise and celebrate the contribution that youth work and community learning and development make to young people’s lives and to meeting the Scottish Government’s broader aim of making Scotland the best place in the world to grow up in.

The strategy, which is called, “Our ambitions for improving the life chances of young people in Scotland”, was developed in deep collaboration and partnership with YouthLink Scotland and Education Scotland, in particular, but its development also involved input from a variety of youth work organisations the length and breadth of Scotland. That process culminated in the strategy’s publication on 3 April. I put on record my thanks to all those who worked tirelessly to develop the strategy, who will have a key role to play in shaping and delivering its implementation.

We developed a strategy because, as a Government, we attach great value to the significant contribution that youth work and community learning and development make in helping us to realise our ambition and our vision for our country: we want to improve outcomes and to build a nation that is full of opportunity and aspiration for our young people.

Youth work is going on everywhere. Translated into real life, that means that youth work and community learning and development are under way across all our communities, in almost every village, town and city. Such work is helping young people to make positive choices as they emerge into adulthood and is building their confidence, their skills and their capacity for further learning and employability. It is empowering young people to take control of their lives by building on their assets, helping them to deal with the challenges and the adverse circumstances that they can often

face in their lives, and enabling them to build on what is positive to make their lives better.

All that is being delivered thanks to the talents and skills of thousands of youth workers, many of whom are volunteers who give up their time to support and nurture our young people. Indeed, some of those volunteers are young people themselves. By helping their peers to be all that they can be, they are giving back to their communities.

I have said many times before, but it is well worth repeating, that youth work represents the ultimate form of preventative spend. As Professor Howard Sercombe suggests, it provides the scaffolding of support for young people as they prepare to enter the adult world and it allows that entry to be positive and fulfilling.

One of the fantastic parts of my post is getting to see examples of youth work in action up and down the country. Over the past few months, I have been privileged to attend a number of youth work projects and events across the country. I have seen real-life examples that better capture the importance of youth work and its transformative abilities.

I have been impressed and humbled by the commitment, passion and dedication that many youth workers show. Each is motivated by the desire to improve our young people’s wellbeing and life chances. I acknowledge that Kezia Dugdale’s amendment tries to recognise that in the debate.

Earlier today, I visited the green shoots programme, which works with young people in East Lothian. On top of meeting modern apprentices, seeing primary 7s building dens and doing environmental art, and clearing ditches with a young guy called Anthony, we announced that YouthLink Scotland will administer more than £2 million of cashback for communities funding to support the life-changing work that youth work delivers through organisations across Scotland. There is a lovely, nice and neat narrative to the cashback scheme. It seizes the proceeds of crime and reinvests them in opportunities for our young people.

At the recent youth work awards, the stories of all the finalists were an inspiration. Many people do tireless work to support our young people. Youth work includes intergenerational work, volunteering, music, arts and drama—the variety that is on offer is phenomenal. It is right to celebrate youth work at YouthLink’s annual awards.

At the 25th anniversary celebration of LGBT Youth Scotland, I listened to young people’s emotional stories about how LGBT youth workers had positively impacted on their lives over the

years and provided them with the support and the nurture that they required when coming out or just looking for a helping hand to cope.

I am aware of the breadth of activities for young people in my constituency. I was pleased to see in this weekend's *Sunday Herald* a positive story about the scouting movement, whose membership numbers and diversity are growing. If members have not had a chance to read that article, I thoroughly recommend that they do.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I did not read the *Sunday Herald* this week.

Aileen Campbell: Ken Macintosh seems to have missed the *Sunday Herald*; I have no idea how he could have done that. I think that the publication was sold out across the country, which I am sure was because of the scouting article that he—unfortunately—missed.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I have had various conversations with scout groups in my constituency of Orkney. They are active and they are grateful for the funding that is available, but most of it concentrates on providing equipment and less is available for travel costs, which can be considerable in getting from Orkney to national events in the central belt or going overseas to meet scout groups from across Europe. Can the Government look at opportunities for expanding access to such events to scouts in my constituency?

Aileen Campbell: We support the uniformed groups through the strategic funding partnerships. I am happy to meet Liam McArthur to discuss the issue that he raises for groups in his constituency.

Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): The minister mentioned strategic funding partnerships. Will she comment on the funding arrangements for youth work? I understand that, in 2013, she operated two pots of money, which caused some confusion in the sector. Does she have any plans to bring together those pots in the next financial year?

Aileen Campbell: We have held a number of events to support groups further, whether they are funded through the third sector early intervention fund or through the strategic funding partnerships. Those events have been welcomed by groups that receive funding from both sources. We will have a period of review, and the funds include a period of self-evaluation of support. We will listen carefully to the groups that have been involved in both funding mechanisms.

In my constituency, Biggar Youth Project, the universal connections programme and the Duke of Edinburgh's award scheme are some of the services that are delivered in a positive way to contribute to young people's wellbeing, confidence and life chances.

At the launch of the youth strategy, we heard articulate and confident young people talk about how they had been supported through youth work. One young man described how his confidence had grown, how he had avoided a negative path and how he now wanted to work in youth work. A girl described how her confidence had increased through being a member of the guides. The words that she used when she told us that she joined the guides as a girl and would leave as a woman were incredibly powerful.

The common thread in all the young people's stories that I heard that day and have witnessed through my visits is that youth work provides young people with opportunities to be with friends and peers and to have fun while learning and being active. Whatever the activity, the purpose of youth work is to build young people's self-esteem, confidence and sense of wellbeing; to develop their ability to manage relationships; to help them to learn new skills and solve problems; and to improve their life chances. In thousands of instances, young people themselves are youth work volunteers who take the lead, think creatively and support their peers to be all that they can be and make positive life choices.

Through our funding for youth work and community learning and development, we have invested tens of millions of pounds in projects and facilities for young people and the communities in which they live. We also continue to work with the youth work sector to deliver programmes such as active girls, stand up to sectarianism and no knives, better lives, and activity agreements. Through those projects, the Government seeks to empower young people as well as improve their life chances and wellbeing. That all fits with our aim of recognising, respecting and promoting children's rights and of getting it right for every child.

Youth work at its best recognises young people as equal partners in a learning process. It links them to their communities and engages them in local and national activities and decision-making processes. It helps young people to navigate the challenges of adolescence and recognises that some young people might need more help than others at particular times in their lives. Ultimately, youth work empowers young people, widens their horizons and builds their resilience and capacity to make the transition into further learning.

To return to the theme of partnership working, the Christie commission challenged Government to deliver services that people and communities deserve. It challenged us to do so by working in partnership and with mutual respect. The development of the strategy is very much in keeping with the Christie principles. It is very easy to talk about partnership working; it is much harder

to work in partnership effectively. Quite simply, the youth work strategy would not have been possible without everyone involved having a shared commitment to making it a reality. That includes the strategic partners, YouthLink Scotland, the Government, which facilitated the national discussions that took place throughout the country, and the hundreds of people who are involved in voluntary and third sector organisations and who took part in the national discussion that shaped the final strategy document.

I am pleased that the youth work strategy has been very well received across the sector. The feedback from the workshops and discussions that took place across the country has been incredibly positive.

However, the launch is only the beginning. In a sense, the real work starts now; indeed, it has already started. Our ambitions for young people in Scotland are to

“Put young people at the heart of policy ... Recognise the value of youth work ... Build workforce capacity ... Ensure we measure our impact”

and

“Ensure Scotland is the best place to be young and grow up in”.

To realise those ambitions, YouthLink Scotland, working in partnership with Education Scotland, the Government and key partners, including the Standards Council for Community Learning and Development for Scotland, will implement the action plan that underpins the strategy, which includes raising the profile and promoting the benefits of youth work; developing strategies in which young people’s voices are heard and listened to; developing the youth work workforce to build a sustainable learning culture; and improving performance to demonstrate more effectively how youth work improves young people’s wellbeing and life chances.

There is a lot to do, but, together, we can properly articulate the importance of the sector and illustrate the benefits that it brings not only to young people but to wider society, our communities and, of course, our country.

Again, I thank everyone who has been involved in the strategy’s development, and I look forward to continuing the open relationship. I look forward to working with each and every MSP across the chamber—I know that members equally value the contribution of youth work—to drive further forward our youth work and our youth workers to help more young people to emerge into adulthood with confidence and the ability to contribute to the future of our country.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the contribution of youth

work and community learning and development to making Scotland the best place to grow up and learn; agrees that early intervention assists young people in making positive choices in their lives; acknowledges the publication of the new national youth work strategy, *Our ambitions for improving the life chances of young people in Scotland*, and endorses the collaborative and partnership approach at the heart of the youth work strategy and its implementation plan in taking forward youth work in Scotland.

14:23

Kezia Dugdale (Lothian) (Lab): I welcome the strategy, the opportunity to debate it and the cash announcement from the minister. That is three welcomes right at the outset. We are looking forward to a positive afternoon.

I chair the cross-party group on children and young people with Marco Biagi, and we are very reliant on the help and support of YouthLink Scotland to operate the group’s secretariat. The advantage of having YouthLink so involved in that work is that that enables us to get youth work’s perspective on the whole education and children and young people agenda at all stages. I make that important point to get across to the minister the fact that perhaps the youth work sector’s contribution to public policy does not always get the recognition that it deserves. At least today, we can mark that contribution ourselves.

What does youth work mean? What does it deliver? What does it do? It delivers four things: skills, self-confidence, resilience and a sense of community. Every day, I see all those in practice in the part of east Edinburgh where I live, such as at the youth bus group. Known locally in Lochend and Restalrig as the buzz, it is a mobile youth work bus that goes around different parts of the east of Edinburgh. I encourage the minister to see its work, because there is a direct correlation between where the youth bus is and a dip in antisocial behaviour calls to the police—wherever the youth bus is, whether it is in Lochend, Restalrig or other parts of the east end of Edinburgh, calls to the police dip because young people are actively engaged. The bus provides not only Xboxes and computer games, but employability support, with young people helped to develop their CVs, and access to sexual health advice and a number of other services that I will come on to shortly.

I move on to discuss projects elsewhere in the east end of Edinburgh. The work of kids in the street, which is a project that is run by Kevin Finlay and the team in Craigmillar, is worthy of recognition. When they take out their mobile football unit, they provide other services to the community at the same time. Sport plays a particularly valuable role in youth work—I am sure that we will hear more about that from Liz Smith.

Those are just two examples of the tremendous dedication that the staff and volunteers who are involved in youth work show every day—hence the wording of the Labour amendment, which I sense the minister is looking to accept.

Aileen Campbell: Yes, I am.

Kezia Dugdale: That is good to hear; I thank the minister for that.

It is worth recognising that volunteers—obviously—but staff, in particular, are not motivated by pay but by a much higher reward. The individuals I know in the east end of Edinburgh have a driving passion for their community, but they also see the good in every single young person—they see that young people have the ability to fulfil their potential with help and support. We underestimate youth workers' contribution to our communities at our peril.

I say that youth workers are not motivated by money, but that does not mean that we should disregard pay as an issue. I have come across a lot of youth workers who are very reliant on sessional pay, but who do not know how many hours they will get from one week to the next and who do not have a tremendous amount of job security, with much of their work tied to the funding bids on which youth work organisations rely. That short-term funding can come from multiple sources, which means that even the smallest organisations need the brightest of accountants and the best people working on the books to ensure that they get enough money, year in, year out.

Nigel Don (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): This takes me back a bit, but when I was involved in such work, I recall that it was possible for those involved to spend far too much of their time raising money. Indeed, that could almost become a separate activity at the cost of working with the youngsters. Has anything changed in the past few years?

Kezia Dugdale: Progress has been made, but not enough. Charities and third sector organisations right across different policy portfolios look to the Government to address the funding challenges and to find mechanisms through which long-term funding can be provided. Increasingly, I hear people talk about wanting not three-year but five-year funding, so that they have at least one year in the middle when they can get on with the business that they should be doing, rather than setting up or closing down accounts. All Government ministers face the challenge of providing more sustainable funding options for groups that do such critical work.

The Government's motion focuses on positive choices, which is the issue that I will focus on during my remaining time. Liam McArthur

mentioned the scouts, and I will talk about the particular campaigning work that the girl guides have done over the past couple of years. The guides have developed a campaigning badge and are doing some tremendous work on the no more page 3 campaign. I am particularly drawn to their work on body confidence and their body confidence revolution.

A recent girl guides attitude survey pointed to the fact that one in five primary school kids has been on a diet; 38 per cent of all 11 to 21-year-olds have skipped a meal to lose weight; and 87 per cent of young women think that they are judged more on their looks than on their abilities. We must recognise the work that youth work, the girl guides and other organisations play in tackling those endemic issues by promoting a better sense of wellbeing and a more positive body image outlook. That would go a long way towards addressing our country's body image crisis.

Sexual health is another part of that agenda and I encourage the minister to look very carefully at the relationship between youth work and sexual health services. I am quite disturbed by what is happening in Edinburgh, where dedicated sexual health services for young people are being removed—or at least the funding for them is being removed by the national health service because it is looking to mainstream those services into its core services. I think that, if we are not careful, that will put young people off accessing sexual health services and advice, which might lead to an increase in sexually transmitted infection.

We need to recognise the importance of dedicated services for young people. As I said, youth work services often integrate sexual health services into all the work that they do. I ask the minister to consider how she and her Government department can work with the health department to ensure that young people can access the services that they need.

Organisations such as Caledonia Youth also receive money to provide sex education in schools. That money is under threat as local authorities look to save the cash and deliver the work themselves. I do not know whether the minister remembers her experience of sex education in school—I think that getting it from the teacher was not the greatest thing and it is probably better if someone from outwith the school environment who has the expertise comes in to talk about sex and relationships in the way that young people do. If such services were lost, they would be sorely missed. I encourage the minister to look at trends in that direction.

We need to be careful that we do not turn people off accessing sexual health services. We must value the work that youth work plays in that

regard, because ultimately it is the duty of youth workers to minimise risk-taking behaviour.

I see the Presiding Officer giving me the nod, so I will keep talking.

Although Caledonia Youth is losing out on core services in health and in education, it continues to do important work in our prisons. I do not know whether the minister is aware of the education work that it does in a number of prisons across the country. It provides one-to-one dedicated advice for young people who have experience of the criminal justice system. Such intensive work can substantially change lives.

Aileen Campbell: Will the member give way?

Kezia Dugdale: Caledonia Youth would like to roll that work out; perhaps the minister can comment on that.

Aileen Campbell: I am not aware of the specifics, but I am interested in considering what more we can do for young people who are in prison. The work on parenting that Families Outside, the Scottish Pre-school Play Association and others have done has had similar outcomes, in that it has built confidence and ensured that when people leave prison they can lead much more positive lives and are much less likely to go back to prison. Such work can end the vicious cycle of reoffending.

Kezia Dugdale: I agree entirely with the minister on that. It is about the transition to adulthood and the roles and responsibilities that go with it, whether we are talking about sexual health, parenting or drug taking and other risky behaviour, all of which can be affected if the right approach is taken. I repeat my call to the minister to work with her colleagues in justice, health and other departments to ensure that the approach is joined up.

Members will hear from three Labour members this afternoon. Graeme Pearson will talk more about youth work and the link with youth justice; Ken Macintosh will ask hard questions about the strategy and the degree to which there is a framework for monitoring and evaluation; and Siobhan McMahon will ask hard questions about whether the money matches the mission that has been set out today. That said, we very much welcome the strategy and look forward to the rest of the debate.

I move amendment S4M-09915.1, to insert at end:

“, and recognises the dedication of countless volunteers and hardworking but often low-paid staff who deliver youth work services across the country”.

The Presiding Officer: I call Mary Scanlon. Ms Scanlon, you have at least five minutes.

14:32

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Thank you, Presiding Officer.

During a discussion about a petition at this morning's meeting of the Education and Culture Committee, I said that I supported the Government, and Scottish National Party members said that they agreed with something that I had said. Such consensus is very unusual in the run-up to 18 September, but this afternoon's debate is also consensual and I thank the two previous speakers for their positive and constructive approach. We will support the Government's motion and the amendment from the Labour Party, which is valuable and worth while.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to put on record the Scottish Conservatives' support for the national youth work strategy that was recently published by the Scottish Government, along with Education Scotland, YouthLink Scotland and many others. There can be no disagreement with the aims and objectives that are set out in the strategy. Youth work has a hugely important role to play in improving social and health outcomes, understanding communities, deepening community involvement and developing core skills.

As I said in December during George Adam's members' business debate on YouthLink Scotland, the terms “youth worker” and “unsung hero” have gone hand in hand for too long. We had a good debate, in which we put on record the value that we place on youth work. I therefore particularly welcome the strategy's emphasis on promoting the value of youth work and developing the skills of the workforce.

We often get caught up in thinking about skills in terms of qualifications. However, I think that one of the great benefits of youth work for young people is that it is about working in a team; it is about timekeeping; it is about getting on with people who are older than they are; and it is about work experience. It is much simpler than saying that there has to be a tick box and a qualification at the end of the experience. A national communications strategy would not only boost the appeal of the sector but alert more young people to the range of opportunities that are on offer.

The national youth worker awards are a good example of alerting people to the opportunities in the sector but—as the strategy recognises—we can and we should do more to extol the virtues of the sector and make clear its potential to develop and benefit our young people. Liam McArthur made a very good point about young people from the Highlands and Islands. If we want members of the scouts or the Boys Brigade from that area to meet people in other areas, additional costs are

involved. A stronger evidence base would certainly help to show the value of youth work so I fully support the ambition that is articulated in the strategy for a research project that would establish how youth work helps to deliver strategic policy objectives.

As I listened to the minister, I thought about the importance of aligning youth work as much as possible to the Government economic strategy, given the concerns that were raised in the Auditor General's recent report on modern apprenticeships. The report noted that modern apprenticeships were not aligned to the Government economic strategy. I make that point as a positive suggestion.

That is particularly true when it comes to those who have perhaps begun to disengage from mainstream society. YouthLink Scotland, for instance, provided evidence to the Parliament's Finance Committee that cited research on the disadvantaged young people who, as others have said, engage with youth work services. The research found that school attendance improved, temporary exclusions reduced and antisocial behaviour fell. Those are hugely encouraging signs, which point to the societal value of youth work initiatives. We are constantly being asked about school exclusions, and youth work is something positive that can be done to bring people back into engagement with society. Of course, to function, such initiatives depend on a large number of volunteers. It is to that group that I now turn.

Volunteers, it seems, are frequently taken for granted, as Kezia Dugdale mentioned, and are not afforded the same opportunities to develop as workers in other sectors. To address that issue, the strategy appears to envisage a broader role for the Standards Council for Community Learning and Development for Scotland, with particular emphasis on work with YouthLink Scotland to develop support and training for volunteers.

I welcome that focus and the drive towards establishing national standards for youth work. Those standards are due to be developed and implemented over the two years to March 2016, and—if done with due care—there is undoubtedly potential to bring more rigour to the organisation and delivery of youth work. That can only be a good thing, especially if it convinces more young people to give up their time to become involved with youth work projects. Such initiatives form a core part of community learning and development, with the potential to improve life opportunities for young people, their families and the wider communities that they are part of.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott): Could you draw to a close, please?

Mary Scanlon: In summing up, I welcome the strategy and support its key goals. I look forward to perhaps digging deeper into disengagement and exclusion from school. I trust that we will look at such education issues in future, in particular the attainment gap and the dips in performance—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I really must invite you to close, please.

Mary Scanlon: I will close now.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you. We move to open debate. George Adam has a generous four minutes.

14:39

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I welcome the publication of the national youth work strategy, and I agree with the minister when she says that the opportunities that youth work can offer our young people can make a massive difference in their lives. Youth work makes a significant contribution to realising our vision of Scotland being the best place in the world for children to grow up.

Early intervention, which other members have mentioned, is extremely important. If we manage to reach individuals at a certain time, it can make a difference in their lives. I will probably return to that point later.

Many youth workers continue to do fantastic work in all our communities. Members of Paisley & District Boys Brigade made Derek Mackay and me honorary vice-presidents. That is not bad for two boys who were never in the BB to begin with. I was a scout. I was in the Bushes cubs, but only because I was freakishly tall at the time and they needed a centre-half for their football team, which is why I ended up there. That is the kind of activity that draws people into youth organisations. During my time in the scouts, there were people from all sorts of backgrounds, and they have done all types of different things with their lives since then. Thanks to the power of social media, we still manage to keep in touch with one another.

It is important to consider some of the things that have been made available in our own areas. In Paisley, the St Mirren street stuff project has been extremely successful, so much so that I have mentioned it in various previous debates. The project has probably won more trophies than the football club has—although we did manage to win one last year.

St Mirren street stuff attracts more than 15,000 young people each year. It is run in partnership with Renfrewshire Council, Police Scotland, Engage Renfrewshire, St Mirren Football Club and West College Scotland. It works in a similar way to what Kezia Dugdale was describing in Edinburgh.

Hotspots for youth disorder have been identified and the project has gone into those areas. In some areas of Paisley, in particular Paisley South, my old council ward, disorder has been reduced by up to 25 per cent. That is an incredible difference.

The community coaches are from St Mirren FC and, when they are talking to young people, they have the credibility that a lot of workers who work for the local authority or other organisations do not have. They can approach the young people and talk to them about various things. The beauty of the programme is that it gives young people access to various other things. A fitness bus is available. The project is all about health and wellbeing. St Mirren has done more than that. It has also facilitated a music partnership, which gives young people an opportunity to get involved in music.

St Mirren has taken the whole idea of being a community football club to the next level. People would rather go to the football club. I heard about another example the other day. There were some fathers in Ferguslie Park in Paisley who could not cook. They went to St Mirren together with their children and while the children played football for a while, the dads were taken up to the hospitality area and taught how to cook a meal. Then the children came back and they all sat together and had a meal. That might seem a strange thing for people to do, but there are record numbers of parents who are unable to cook a fresh meal, so it can make a difference.

How do we take such ideas, which have been developed in local communities, to the next level? If we are working on employability and training, why do we not consider the club as a potential hub? We have the opportunity to use the credibility of that local asset to make a difference in young people's lives.

Ferguslie Park in my area, where St Mirren FC is located, is an area of multiple deprivation—one of the most deprived in the whole of Scotland. We could work together with the club to take these ideas about access to education, health and wellbeing and employability to the next level.

I am working with all the partner groups and if I can get it all together locally, it is important for all of us to consider how we can do that. This is not all about national Government putting money down the way; it is about us trying to find other ways to make such ideas work and to take them to the next level, as Kezia Dugdale has already said. Some groups are seeking funding on a yearly basis. Why do we not consider how to make local projects larger? It is up to me and other elected members in our area to work together to get to our ideal.

An awful lot of great work is going on, including youth work. Now we must take that to the next level, and we should consider how we can all work together to make a difference to the lives of young people in our communities.

14:44

Graeme Pearson (South Scotland) (Lab): I congratulate the Government and the minister on being able to bring to the chamber such a positive motion, which has achieved the support of my party, as has the amendment in the name of Kezia Dugdale.

Like others, I think that it is right that we acknowledge YouthLink Scotland, Education Scotland, the Scottish Youth Parliament, together with Caledonia Youth and the many unnamed third sector and voluntary groups that work tirelessly with young people day in, day out; week in, week out; and year in, year out.

I support all that has been said today about the need for youth support in relation to youth work. I do not suggest that the particular issue that I will focus on is more or less significant than the issues that others have mentioned, but my experience in a previous life with Polmont young offenders institution and Cornton Vale prison meant that I thought that it was right that I should focus particularly on the youth work that is done in those establishments.

Only this morning, completely coincidentally, I received a letter from a mother whom I have not seen in seven years. I met her and her son at Polmont. The son was involved in voluntary work at the prison in connection with a drugs education programme called choices for life. Her son and 20 other prisoners organised themselves into three shifts—including a night shift—to organise the provision of goody bags to be given to all the children who attended an event. They created 70,000 packs in three weeks, all elegantly packed and properly delivered. The pride that the young man took in his involvement in that event, along with much other work in the prison, has meant that, in the seven years since our meeting, he has not been involved in crime again, he has not been back in prison again and he has a sense of self.

That example leads me to believe that the outside in service—previously known as the Scottish Prison Service youth work service—is absolutely necessary in adding to the quality of work that can be done in prisons.

Young men and young women in our prisons suffer from low self-esteem and lack confidence, knowledge of where they fit into the world and ideas about how they can have a future. The youth work that is conducted in those establishments helps to deal with issues around skills, confidence,

bullying, health and sexual health, peer group pressure, equality, diversity and racism. All of those issues need to be tackled, but particularly when, for any number of reasons, no one else is there to provide that kind of support. The kind of work that those who engage in youth work do is vital in enabling young people to get the opportunity to participate in their future. To that extent, only a fool would want to resist Aileen Campbell's motion or would fail to acknowledge Kezia Dugdale's amendment—I hope that I am not a fool.

The stresses that young people face, particularly when the economic environment that we live in makes life tough for us all, are such that we need to invest in the future. To that extent, I acknowledge the key role of youth work. I want all of our young people to be able to access the support of youth workers, because we do not know when or in what circumstances they will need it, no matter their social background or the circumstances that they face.

The strategy is enormously positive but, as members would expect, I want it to be more ambitious so that it provides the bridge to bring young people into the main stream. The issue of long-term funding has been commented on already.

Finally, we need measurable outcomes, so that we know that the money that is invested in these circumstances is used positively.

I am happy to support the motion and the amendment, and I am pleased to have been part of this discussion.

14:49

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I thank the Scottish Government for bringing forward this debate. I know that the minister is driven by her ambition to make Scotland the best place in the world in which to grow up, which is surely an ambition that is shared throughout the chamber. The formal structures of the state, and education and health services in particular, have a huge role to play in that regard. Clearly, those bringing up children have the greatest role. The most important role that I have in life is as a father to my children. The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 is a hugely important step in the direction of improving the lives of Scotland's young people, particularly with regard to early intervention to improve outcomes for youngsters.

In that regard, and in light of the ambition to make our country the best that it can be for young people, the work done by those involved in youth work, often through informal and third sector organisations, is vital. We know that the

development, learning and experiences that young people gain can have a positive, lifelong impact. Youth work can offer young people the option to make positive changes in their lives, through initiatives such as training; youth award programmes; literacy and numeracy projects; anti-violence initiatives; and information, participation, and citizenship services and programmes.

The publication of the national youth work strategy is very welcome; particularly welcome is its partnership approach and the fact that it has been developed jointly by the Scottish Government, Education Scotland and YouthLink Scotland. Graeme Pearson was right to place on record our thanks to those organisations for having worked together to devise the strategy.

It is vital that organisations involved in youth work are also involved in delivering the strategy. One of those is the Boys Brigade. Unlike George Adam, I was once a member of the BB. Perhaps that is why, unlike George Adam, I have not been offered an honorific role. However, I have been happy to work with the Boys Brigade in sponsoring events here in Parliament to enable the BB to showcase its work. The BB helpfully provided me with a bit of background information in advance of the debate. Akin to the position of scouting organisations, the BB's membership has increased. Since the beginning of 2013, 10 new groups have started. There is a clear growth in activity and in demand for the services offered by the Boys Brigade.

The BB wanted to place on record the fact that it has benefited from cashback for communities. Last year, small grants of some £40,000 were awarded to 48 local BB groups. In my area, I have been able to see first hand the positive role that the BB plays. There are a number of BB companies in Cumbernauld and Kilsyth, with active participation and engagement for young people in schemes such as the King George VI youth leadership training and the young people taking the lead scheme. The BB offers other developmental opportunities and provides the youngsters that it works with locally the ability to make decisions, take responsibility and make a difference to the lives of others through initiatives such as the Queen's badge. In 2013, some 410 youngsters had their efforts recognised through the award of a Queen's badge.

I want to mention a few other organisations in my local area that are engaged in youth work. We have a local squadron of the air cadets, led very ably by flight lieutenant Stevie Cairns. I have been very impressed whenever I have been to see the air cadets. They are equipping young people with skills and confidence that will see them through the rest of their lives. They are also very engaged with the local community. There are also

Cumbernauld YMCA and YWCA, which undertake a range of good work, including providing decent after-school care, which is invaluable to many families in the area.

Recently, I was privileged to be asked to hand out the awards at the Duke of Edinburgh's award ceremony at New College Lanarkshire's Cumbernauld campus. It was positively inspirational to see young people who had given so much to bettering themselves and their community having that commitment rewarded. Indeed, there was one really positive case of a youngster having had a placement at a local employer and ending up getting a job out of that placement.

There are many other good examples of local youth work. All of the organisations rely on those who volunteer their time. I place on record my thanks to those who do so in Cumbernauld and Kilsyth and I very much welcome Kezia Dugdale's amendment in that regard. I hope that the main message that emerges from today's debate goes back to those who volunteer their time to support youth work. I hope that that can be one of the strongest messages that comes from today's debate. I very much welcome it.

14:55

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I, like Kezia Dugdale, start by welcoming the debate, the strategy and the money. I am happy to confirm that we will support the motion and the amendment, which, as the minister rightly suggested, lays particular emphasis on the role of volunteers and others in supporting youth work.

Every speaker so far has articulated the benefits of youth work—and I would not disagree with any of them. In its briefing, YouthLink Scotland points to the way in which it equips young people to deal with what life throws at them for better or worse. It changes lives overall for the better and it delivers across a wide range of public policy objectives in health, education, culture, youth justice et cetera. The briefing also points to some of the challenges. It suggests that it is necessary to change structures to take account of young people's needs. I have been told on many occasions by John Loughton, the former chair of the Scottish Youth Parliament and the inspiration behind Dare2Lead, that young people are not the future but the present and that their voices, views and needs must be taken into account now.

YouthLink Scotland also points to the need to link funding to the meeting of objectives. Kezia Dugdale said that the long-term nature of funding helps decisions to be taken about how to develop and sustain youth work over a period.

It also points to the need to win hearts and minds, which I have to say I found slightly odd. The tone and content of the debate suggest that there is no need to win hearts and minds, certainly in this chamber. We have heard examples of good work right across the country, all of which echo my experience in Orkney, where volunteering goes from strength to strength.

I was invited to present awards at the Orkney youth awards recently and, like the minister, found it a very humbling experience. The volume, variety and quality of what goes on in my constituency were laid out. I presented 228 Saltire certificates, from challenge certificates right up to certificates for doing 500 hours of volunteering. I also presented summit awards to two young volunteers for outstanding contributions to volunteering. I do not think that there is any need to sell volunteering to young constituents in Orkney.

That is borne out by the Scottish household survey of 2012, which suggests that 55 per cent of people aged between 16 and 39 had volunteered over the past 12 months in Orkney, compared with a Scottish national figure of 29 per cent, which struck me as surprisingly low, not least given what other members have suggested is going on in their constituencies and regions. I certainly take a great deal of encouragement and no little pride from what the Scottish household survey says about what is happening in my constituency.

Voluntary Action Orkney has provided some examples of the work that is going on. The Friday friends project, for example, brings together young people from Kirkwall grammar school with older residents in the Eunson Kloss sheltered housing scheme, pulling together an intergenerational approach, to which other members have alluded, breaking down barriers between young and old and challenging some of their preconceptions. When I visited the project, it was evident to me that the benefits of the project were felt on both sides.

Similarly, the memories project, which involves pupils from Stromness academy, allows young people to interview older members of the community, recording their experience of the war, their work and their family life. The young people record it, edit it and then present a copy to the individual concerned, as well as placing copies in the Orkney Library and Archive, which will be hugely beneficial going forward.

There are other opportunities for volunteering around the Orkney folk festival later this month and the St Magnus festival next month. The strength of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award in Orkney is one of the idiosyncrasies that pop up from time to time.

Kezia Dugdale referred to Girlguiding. Some of its campaigning work in relation to young women and mental health issues has been truly phenomenal. I should declare an interest as a guiding ambassador. Like George Adam, I make it clear that that was not borne out of my membership of the girl guides back in the day.

However, voluntary groups and those who work in the sector in Orkney face issues. The cost of protecting vulnerable groups schemes can act as an obstacle to placing volunteers. I also understand that partnerships need to be developed, so that young people's achievements are recognised and recorded, and I made the point earlier that funding is needed for the additional costs of travel.

I welcome the debate and I pay tribute to those involved in youth work—both the young people and those who support them—which has undoubted benefits for young people. As other members have said about their areas, it is hard to imagine what Orkney would look like without the work of those people.

15:00

Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP):

I am delighted to take part in the debate and to recognise, promote and celebrate the value of our fantastic youth workers, who improve young people's life chances across Scotland.

We have much to learn from each other's expertise and experience, as we must value not only our achievements, but young people's achievements too. I want Scotland to be the best place in the world for my children, my grandchildren and all young people to grow up—just like the minister said earlier.

The role of public and voluntary services is pivotal in achieving that and we must ensure that our services for young people are fit for 21st-century Scotland. The youth work strategy is the best way to build a fairer society. We already have a strong youth work sector, which empowers young people to improve their own wellbeing and life chances, although that needs funding, of course—as some members have alluded to.

I welcome the announcement today of the £2.1 million cashback funding for Scotland's youth projects. YouthLink Scotland administers that fund to build the capacity of young people and the youth work organisations who work to support them.

In North East Scotland, the region that I represent, cashback for communities' youth work awards made a real difference last year. Aberdeenshire received a total of £30,530, of which Aberdeenshire Youth Council received

£2,580. Although the work of Aberdeenshire Youth Council is different from what we are talking about today, a lot of people who joined the youth council started in youth work, in voluntary organisations where they were given great help from youth workers.

In Inverurie on 14 September 2013, a lot of organisations came together to support Aberdeenshire Youth Council's anti-bullying awareness parade. The parade was very important as it gave the community in Inverurie the opportunity to stand up to bullying and provided an occasion to showcase services that are available to young people for support and advice.

We should always remember that youth work is about empowering young people and making them the focus of what can be done, how it can be done and how it can be delivered.

Cashback for communities' youth work awards were very important for Aberdeen as well, which won £21,000. Of that money, a sum just short of £3,000 went to the Youth Outreach Bus Trust, which we have talked about. Buses are important and can help youth workers to reach young people. Such trusts are great places for youth workers to work in. I visited one in Aberdeen, which was quite fantastic. I really enjoyed using some of the devices that it had.

Angus received a total of £9,000 last year and Dundee received £13,000.

As a past member of the Westhill community development group, in my community in Aberdeenshire, I witnessed at first hand the invaluable contribution of our youth workers, past and present. I recall how pivotal they were in involving our young people in the making it real planning exercise, which was a community effort to plan for the future of our community. It is important to have young people very much involved in our future, contributing to how we should build up our communities. That effort saw generations working together for the benefit of all.

I welcome the fact that Westhill volunteers, youth workers and young people visited other communities across Aberdeenshire, including in Peterhead, where we visited the Hot Spot, which is a community hub for all. I have just noticed that young people from primary 7 at Peterhead central school have joined us today. I am sure that they know the Hot Spot very well.

The Government's vision is clear: early intervention and preventative spending deliver better outcomes for our young people, and we want all young people to have the skills for lifelong learning and work.

There is another aspect to the vision: greater integration and partnership at a local level are

bringing our communities together. There are many examples of community groups opening up to our young people and helping generations to work together for the common good and the development of individuals, like those that Liam McArthur talked about.

Every day, an army of youth workers and dedicated volunteers throughout Scotland helps our young people to be the successful, confident, effective and responsible individuals that Scotland needs to flourish.

15:05

Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate on the national youth work strategy 2014 to 2019. Although the strategy has many good examples of youth work in practice and many warm and friendly ambitions for the future—incidentally, I agree with them all—there is very little in it that sets out clear objectives for those ambitions. It does not set out a clear strategy for how they will be achieved and there is no mention of how we will measure the implementation of the strategy or, indeed, success against the ambitions.

For instance, I was surprised that there is not one reference in the 36-page document to the strategy's financial implications. I am not the only one to be surprised, as YouthLink Scotland stated in its briefing for the debate that there has been some movement on the funding front and that it is working hard with the Scottish Government to make funding more sustainable. YouthLink Scotland wants core funding, as opposed to short-term project funding, to be made available so that the plan's ambitions and those of other services that meet local needs over the long term can be achieved. I ask the minister in her closing speech to comment on what funding will be available or whether it is already up to local authorities and their partners to deliver the funding to enable the strategy's ambitions to be achieved.

The minister will be aware that the first national youth strategy was published in 2007 and the financial package to support it was published at the same time. The money that accompanied that strategy helped to support its ambitions, particularly by supporting those who were in charge of the vision, volunteers and the capital investment projects that were needed for the strategy to be implemented.

The report "Youth Work Sector: Distance Travelled", which commented on what was done between 2007 and 2011, said that all targets had been met and many of them surpassed. I do not doubt that many of the targets were met due to the hard work and determination of the individuals leading the projects, the volunteers and the

communities that wished for the projects to succeed. However, I also do not doubt that the funding that was made available at the start of the process played a major part. Therefore, I repeat my request for the Scottish Government to come up with a financial package and plan to support the ambitions of the current strategy.

The strategy sets out five ambitions with which I agree entirely. However, it does not give a lot of detail on how the ambitions will be achieved. Will the Scottish Government publish an accompanying document that sets out a more detailed plan for how the five key ambitions will be achieved? I understand that some of them will be implemented through curriculum for excellence and getting it right for every child. However, no further details have been given on how that will happen. Who will be responsible for the implementation of the ambitions through those policy areas? Will it be the Government, local authorities, teachers, social workers or all of them, or will a lead person be appointed?

Will Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People have a role in the development of the strategy? I presume that that will be the case but I seek clarification, as there is no mention of him in the document.

I also ask that a more detailed timeframe that measures the strategy's ambitions be published. There is already a timeframe in the strategy, but it only sets out what the partners aim to do over the next few years. It does not say how the strategy will be measured or how we will know whether the ambitions will be achieved in the timeframe given.

I understand that 2018 will be the year of young people in Scotland. Like many members, I would like the ambitions contained in the strategy to be achieved and surpassed by then. We all want our young people to achieve their potential and want to remove all the barriers that might be in their way at present. The strategy that we are debating will go some way towards achieving that vision, but we should go further than that. I hope that the Scottish Government will address the real concerns that I and others have about the strategy so that we can all work together to achieve the ambitions that are set out before us.

15:09

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP): I start by apologising for missing the first few minutes of the minister's speech at the start of the debate, and I assure Ms Campbell that I will go back and read every word in the *Official Report*.

I want to begin by mentioning a local youth group in north Glasgow and some of the good work that it does, and then I will tease out some of the wider issues in relation to youth work.

The minister visited North United Communities in a visit to Wyndford a few years ago. North United Communities also works in Maryhill, Ruchill, Summerston, Cadder, and Milton. Indeed, the group's name used to be the Ruchill Youth Project, but in order to get away from territorialism and to bring communities together, the group widened out its work across north Glasgow.

Members might ask me whether the group uses football, drama, art or computer games as media for its youth work, and I would answer that it uses none of those. It uses relationships, which are the key to any good youth work. Getting young people to play football is fine, but talking to a young male before and after the game, or noticing that he has a particular problem and having a word with a family member is proper youth work. Youth work is not about activities; it is about relationships. The activities are the media in which to develop relationships and help young people. That needs to be put on the record here today.

I will give a couple of examples. When an issue arose with young people in the lane behind the John Paul academy, which is a large secondary school in Summerston, North United Communities did not get the police to go round and see what was going on. Its approach was to hang out with the young people and chat with them. A few weeks later, the group developed a programme of activities to engage with those young people. The group was not particularly welcomed by the young people in the first few weeks, but it persevered and gained their respect. It did something similar in Milton in Glasgow.

The key is to build relationships with the young people who are hardest to reach and not to give up on them. Local grass-roots organisations are best placed to do that. I am sure that the youth strategy will develop that.

Liam McArthur: Does Bob Doris agree that what he has said underscores the point about getting whatever long-term funding we can in order to allow those relationships to be built and sustained over time?

Bob Doris: There is a bit of a dichotomy around long-term funding. Some organisations apply for grants for long-term funding and are unsuccessful and then sometimes feel that they are locked out of it for a long time. There is a balance to be struck in relation to long-term funding, and it can go awry when discussions are held about it. However, I take on board Liam McArthur's point.

I will mention a couple of problems that North United Communities has. When it bids for projects in these straitened financial times, the local community planning partnership no longer gives a budget line for management costs for the youth organisation and merely wants to recover costs for

youth work hours for sessional work in the community. I understand why the CPP does that, but it is rather short-sighted. I am talking about the local CPP only because I have direct experience of it; I am sure that the themes and issues are replicated in other areas.

Due to the success of North United Communities, in Cadder there have been reduced rates of crime and vandalism, but once a youth group has success in an area it is deprioritised, which means that all the successful activities that were taking the community forward stop. We need long-term commitment to communities after they have seen successes, and not to remove funding for work that has been successful.

I will finish on a positive note. There is a huge opportunity for European funding for youth work in the Erasmus+ programme, of which some members might not be aware. That programme will operate between 2014 and 2020 and will offer €14.7 billion, which represents a 40 per cent increase in Erasmus funding. It is a new way of looking at Erasmus exchanges, which in the past have perhaps wrongly been stereotyped as being for very able middle-class young people from comfortable backgrounds, but

"Erasmus+ grants will more strongly target specific needs ... such as the living cost in the destination country"

and will target those who come from "less privileged backgrounds". It is long-term funding of billions of euros for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and it mentions youth work and sport specifically. I wonder whether that is something on which the minister would be keen to engage with me in order to develop a way of maximising the chances of youth groups from deprived areas across Scotland accessing the funding, which would be a major opportunity for our deprived communities.

15:15

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): As all members so far have, I welcome today's debate and the launch of the new national youth work strategy. I have no doubt whatever that it is well intentioned. The sector is full of good people who are doing good work—in some cases it is inspirational work—but I have to admit that I find the strategy to be a bit on the vague side and a little lacking in specifics. Without wishing to be overly critical or to break the consensus, it is written in the kind of opaque managementspeak that I find drains any real sense of drive or purpose. Although today's funding announcement is welcome, there are few challenging targets.

We all want Scotland to be the best place for young people to grow up, and for many it will be. Unfortunately, for too many others it is also the

most likely place to get stabbed, to develop a drink problem, to become obese or to start smoking. There are many areas that we should be tackling directly, but in the limited time that is available today, I want to focus on smoking—or, rather, vaping. Vaping is the new term for use of e-cigarettes, which give off a cloud of vapour rather than tarry smoke. It is a term that has been coined by advertisers that are promoting a new and, they hope, attractive product.

I cannot say that I had paid a great deal of attention to e-cigarettes until I had a helpful discussion with the Royal Pharmaceutical Society last week. If anything, I thought that they were a safer alternative to smoking and a way of encouraging smokers to give up the habit. That is probably still true for the majority of adult smokers, but there is also a real danger that e-cigarettes are quite the reverse and could be a way of encouraging young people to take up the habit.

So far, that does not seem to be the case in the United Kingdom, but evidence from the United States, where their use is more widespread, points in that direction. The most recent study of 40,000 young people revealed that e-cigarette use among high school pupils doubled between 2011 and 2012, from about 3.1 per cent to 6.5 per cent.

Some members will have read the briefing from the anti-smoking group, ASH Scotland, which makes the point that the ages that are covered by youth work services are crucial because 90 per cent of adult smokers begin while in their teens or earlier, and only a tiny minority of smokers start after the age of 24. In a separate survey that was published last week, ASH highlights the fact that use of e-cigarettes in the adult population has increased fivefold in the past four years, with an even more dramatic rise in the number of people who have tried them.

However, vaping, unlike smoking, is unregulated and is not covered by the ban on smoking in public places. Perhaps most worrying of all is the fact that there are no age restrictions on the sale of the products. In fact, vaping is now being advertised on the telly, in cinemas and through social media.

I cannot speak for other members, but my main motivation in voting for and supporting the ban on smoking in public places in Scotland was that it would help us to denormalise smoking, so that we would no longer see people smoking in our pubs or cafes or in most other workaday or social situations, and so that we and our children would no longer see smoking as a normal activity. I believe that the ban has been successful in doing exactly that, but I worry that we are about to undo some of that good work.

The Advertising Standards Authority has just finished its consultation on advertising of e-

cigarettes, and I hope that it will treat them as it would any other cigarette, but there are steps that we can take here in Scotland. The UK Government has announced that it intends to ban the sale of e-cigarettes to under-18s, and the Welsh Government has said that it will restrict their use in enclosed public spaces. Here in Scotland, the minister is undoubtedly making the right noises, and seems to be indicating her intention to follow suit, but announcements have so far been limited to saying that the Government is considering the next steps.

ASH is clear. It says that

“To minimise the risk of drawing the next generation into nicotine addiction, we also want an under-18 age restriction on the sale of e-cigarettes in Scotland, as is already being planned for England and Wales, and we need restrictions on how these products are promoted.”

The Royal Pharmaceutical Society is equally strong. It has said:

“In order not to undermine recent advances in public health policy, e-cigarettes should be treated in exactly the same way as any other form of smoking, including the same age restrictions as applied to tobacco products and restrictions on their use in public spaces, advertising and displays.”

The danger signs are here, and we need to act quickly—as quickly as those who are promoting such products.

I, too, want to conclude on a positive note and on what I consider to be a real success story for young people in Scotland. I am quoting from ASH once more:

“From the high smoking prevalence of around 30% when surveys began in the mid-1990s, there has now been a reduction to around 3% for 13-year-olds and 13% for 15-year-olds now. Among young adults, aged 16-24, there is also a declining trend, with smoker numbers now at a record low of 22%. So past initiatives such as bans on tobacco advertising, smoke-free public places and raising the age for purchasing tobacco to 18 are working.”

Let us build on that progress rather than undermine it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We come to closing speeches. I call Liz Smith. You have up to five minutes, please.

15:20

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I will continue the positive theme by reiterating the Conservatives' support for the Government motion and the Labour Party's amendment.

It has been a good debate, and we are supportive of the national youth work strategy and its stated aims of raising the profile of the sector and building workforce capacity, providing that the strategy pays very careful attention to the views of those who are most involved. That point was

made very strongly in the excellent briefing that YouthLink Scotland provided us with, which has made us think very carefully about the role of a strategy and the clarity of its objectives. I will pick up on the interesting point that Bob Doris made; it is about building relationships rather than just establishing specific projects. However, although that is true, it makes things even more difficult because that aspect is unmeasurable. We have to be very careful when we are setting the strategy's objectives. I share the concerns of Siobhan McMahon and Ken Macintosh in that regard; we need to do a little bit more to focus on the strategy's objectives.

We have heard this afternoon several excellent presentations of members' constituency work and their personal work. Graeme Pearson, Kezia Dugdale, Bob Doris, Jamie Hepburn and George Adam all spoke about excellent work that is done, and it is very clear that we would not survive without all the volunteers who are involved. Anything that promotes volunteering has to be good.

I want to highlight two of the principles that I think underpin the Scottish Government's strategy document. The first is about the wider issue of breaking down barriers. We are very conscious in Scottish education of the barriers and the focus that needs to be put on them. Youth work should be integrated much more closely with elements of curriculum for excellence. The second principle, to which I will come in a minute and which the minister mentioned, is preventative spend. Both are laudable objectives.

When it comes to breaking down barriers, the document outlines plans to strengthen the links between volunteers, school staff and youth work practitioners. That has particular resonance for many of the teachers and volunteers who are just now considering development of the senior phase of curriculum for excellence, so it is important in that wider context. As I see it, Scottish education and youth development in Scotland are at an interesting stage; that has been brought up by Ian Wood in his consultations. Perhaps the subject is seen very much in terms of employability skills, but that has to be viewed in connection with a lot of the volunteering that goes on. A lot of what is taught by volunteers, particularly the soft skills, can be helpful and—if we are honest—complements everything else that is required for the labour market.

The clear embodiment of that is the desire for greater flexibility in this country's institutions that work with young people, because they have a much better interrelationship than ever. We must take cognisance of that when it comes to developing the youth strategy. There is closer collaboration, which commands a lot of support

across the Parliament, but YouthLink Scotland has made the point that it is about ensuring that the people on the ground are committed to the strategy and are aware of where and how the financing and timetabling will come into play. We had some interesting debates in Parliament during the progress of the Public Bodies (Joint Working) (Scotland) Bill about the difficulties of integrating health and social care, and I think that there will be similar discussions about issues in education and youth work.

I turn to preventative spend. Policy-wise, it is not a new idea. It is laudable, and the Government has tried hard to bring it to the forefront with many of its policy ideas. However, as my colleague Mary Scanlon noted, there is evidence that suggests that, if there is a risk of young people disengaging from youth work and education, such services can increase school exclusions and affect attendance. Therefore, when it comes to preventative spend, I would like to see the hard and fast evidence on what works. If we are to spend a great deal of money on developing youth work, it would be preferable if hard evidence could be provided of cases in which it works.

I commend the Government for bringing the debate to the chamber. We are fully supportive of the strategy.

15:25

Kezia Dugdale: I agree with Liz Smith that it has been a positive and good-natured debate. I think that we have all learned something, whether it is about the dangers of vaping or the fact that Liam McArthur used to be a girl guide.

I acknowledge Jim Sweeney and his colleagues from YouthLink Scotland in the public gallery, and I invite members to read his article in this week's *Third Force News*, in which he points to the fact that every £1 that is spent on youth work services saves £13.

We have learned a lot about the requirement for more sustainable funding options. The message has been sent loud and clear to the Government that youth work organisations would very much like to be on a firmer financial footing and that youth workers' jobs would become considerably easier if that were the case. Many of the youth work organisations that I work with would benefit from that. They do not necessarily all have accountants; it tends to be the case that there is one youth worker who is good at doing the books who gets the job of ensuring that the sums add up, but they would much rather do the day job of being a youth worker than sit in front of an Excel spreadsheet. We could ease their job by giving that just a bit more thought.

Of course, the issue is not just about financial savings. As has been touched on, some young people go on an educational journey through their involvement in youth work. I mentioned earlier the work of the cross-party group on children and young people. Two Prince's Trust young ambassadors sit on that group on a permanent basis, and they make a valuable contribution week in, week out. Both those young people have extensive experience of youth work services and both are on their way to becoming youth workers. I am surprised by the number of young people I have met who have had a very positive experience of youth work and who want to go on to give back by becoming youth workers. They recognise what a transformational effect youth work has had on their lives and they want others to benefit from that, too. They see it as a career.

However, youth work does not have to be a career. Some members have touched on the peer education that is done through youth work, which is all about giving young people the interpersonal skills to teach what they know to other young people. They appreciate the strength that comes from that.

I thank the minister for highlighting the work of LGBT Youth Scotland. Although it would be possible to highlight a number of groups that provide targeted youth work support, we cannot overstate how important dedicated services for young LGBT people are. They are particularly important for young people who feel extremely isolated when they are coming out and who are desperate to meet more young people who are like them. In many ways, LGBT Youth Scotland provides the sense of community that they need. For some young people, the service that is provided is a lifeline; for others, it is just a place to meet and hang out. We must recognise that a broad spectrum of services are provided, from ones that deal with crisis situations to ones that address the social need of young people to get together in a room.

We must also recognise how often youth work services are on the front line when it comes to some of the big social challenges that we face. In my opening speech, I spoke at length about sexual health services. In addition, it is important to recognise the role that youth work plays in the drugs agenda. I am sure that the minister will be aware of the activities of Crew 2000 in Edinburgh in young people's attitudes towards drugs. She might also be aware that, at the weekend, a number of music festivals across Scotland, including T in the Park, said that they will not allow legal highs to be sold at their events this summer. That is an important move, which all of us should welcome. However, it does not address the fact that many young people buy legal highs online;

that such products will not be sold at T in the Park does not mean that they will not be taken there.

We should acknowledge the role that youth work plays in helping young people to "know the score", to use the phrase that is often mentioned in that context. It gives young people the skills to enable them to reduce the risk in taking drugs, if that is what they insist on doing. It ensures that they know not to mix drugs with alcohol, that they know how much water to drink and that they think about who they are buying from and the dangers that are associated with that. Youth work is at the front line of that work. That is not the only public health agenda on which it does such work; Ken Macintosh talked about vaping, which is another example.

Youth work is not just about education; it goes into health, justice and communities. The minister mentioned the Christie commission and breaking down silos. I challenge her again to think about how we can break down every barrier to participation and help youth work to fulfil its potential.

As George Adam said, breaking down barriers is not the only issue; we must find mechanisms for youth work organisations to collaborate so that they can widen the types of work that they do. That can reduce costs, but it would also allow them to provide more imaginative and varied services.

Bob Doris nailed it when he said that youth work is about not activities but relationships. I cannot think of any youth worker whom I know in the country who would disagree with that statement. The value of those relationships is critical.

The minister knows that I have a strong interest in care leavers and the care-leaving agenda. In relation to that, we did good work together on the Children and Young People (Scotland) Bill, and we could do a lot more on the agenda. I called Who Cares? Scotland this morning to ask what it thinks of the youth work strategy and whether it wanted to contribute anything. The organisation had a lot of strong and positive words to offer the minister on the strategy. It wishes that many other Government services had at their heart the same principles of partnership, collaboration, co-design and co-production. It believes that, if social work and education departments and the police were to work in the same way, we would all be better off. Who Cares? Scotland had nothing but good words.

I congratulate all the staff who are involved in youth work organisations and all the volunteers on whom the organisations very much rely week in and week out. I thank the minister for the opportunity to debate the issues and I look forward to the cabinet secretary's closing speech. I am

sure that he will address in great depth some of the points that we have made about long-term sustainable funding.

15:31

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): This has been a debate of reasonable consensus, which is sometimes remarkable in this chamber. We will, of course, accept the Labour Party's amendment.

MSPs particularly enjoy such debates, which offer an opportunity to blend the local and the national—to talk about their constituencies and their concerns, as well as national concerns. In my constituency of Argyll and Bute, the HELP project in Dunoon, with which I recently sponsored a jobs fair, does a great deal of work with young people who are moving from school or other activities to employment.

I echo Kezia Dugdale's welcome of Jim Sweeney and his colleagues to the gallery. I am sure that even they realise that they have heard an unusually united chamber—a chamber of positivity about the work that organisations such as theirs do. As Mary Scanlon pointed out, this is not what we do every day or every afternoon, but it is good that we do it sometimes.

I will talk about some of the contributions before widening out my speech to the key issues, including funding. George Adam was right to say that we are talking about making a difference to lives and communities—that is exactly what we are engaged in. There are key roles for volunteering and community support, but there is also a key role for young people, themselves, so the strategy focuses on how young people can lead the process of making a difference to their lives and communities.

I am not a patron of any youth organisation. I was not in the scouts or the BB and I have not even heard of the woodcraft folk, which Labour members talked about and which I also was not in. However, I was active in a number of church groups when I was young. We need to recognise and celebrate the great variety in provision and the many ways in which youth work is undertaken. Bob Doris described how that variety can work in informal and formal settings.

There is a rich landscape and a rich tapestry. It is important to recognise that no single piece of work or help would make all the difference. The strategy must be varied and broad reaching, and it must have an implementation plan attached to it, as ours does.

This is about individuals as well as organisations. As Graeme Pearson's touching story showed, youth work is about what individuals

want to do, and feel that they can do, to make a difference. The issue is therefore not just about resources. In a minute, I will address the resources question that Siobhan McMahon raised, and I will talk about how the Government is bringing forward resources and will continue to do so. Resources are always important, but the strategy is about how we work together. The implementation plan is clear on how we will do that, but we need new ideas, as well. Bob Doris's idea about Erasmus+ funding is an interesting thought that we can take further.

This is not about what we cannot do. Sometimes in Scotland when we start to talk about money, we end up talking about the things that we feel we cannot do. This is about what we can do and about finding imaginative ways of doing them. Kezia Dugdale was right to link that to the key issues in individual lives, such as legal and illegal highs, sexual health, alcohol and tobacco. It was also right for Mr Macintosh to discuss vaping. I am quite sure that the health ministers will bring forward their plans and will have noted his contribution. His speech illustrated, as other members' speeches illustrated, that this is about taking an holistic view of individuals and how they learn and change.

The final point that I will make about the speeches that have been made relates to something that Liz Smith said. She linked what we are talking about to the Wood report. Others linked it to the curriculum for excellence. The youth strategy does not stand on its own; it integrates with all other aspects of education and, indeed, with the personal learner journeys that the Government has been keen to support in every part of its legislation and activities in education.

I turn to funding. The Government values the significant role that youth work agencies and organisations play, and has shown that with funding support. Over the years 2013 to 2015, the children's rights and wellbeing division is providing around £6.9 million directly to national voluntary youth work and youth citizenship organisations through the third sector early intervention fund, through strategic partnership funding, through the national voluntary organisations support fund and through programme grants. Since the inception of cashback for communities, we have invested or committed over £70 million in projects and facilities for young people and the communities that they live in. As Aileen Campbell mentioned in her opening remarks, today we announced that a further £2.1 million has been awarded to YouthLink Scotland for the cashback programme.

The cashback programme has been extraordinarily successful in helping the country's and the Government's ambitions. We see the results through programmes such as the Green

Team (Edinburgh and Lothians) Ltd project in East Lothian. That project, which is funded by the cashback programme, identifies young people from areas of multiple deprivation who are at risk of becoming involved in antisocial behaviour or of becoming dependent on drugs and alcohol. I refer to the points that Kezia Dugdale raised on the learning experience of avoiding as well as being involved in other things. The project provides opportunities for young people to take part in community-based environmental volunteering and outdoor activities, and to develop new skills. That is just one example of how cashback flows into the system and continues to sustain an enormous variety of activity. That is underpinned by the regular funding from the Government that makes a difference.

There could always be more funding, of course. No organisation in Scotland says that there should not be more, and there are, of course, ways in which it can sometimes be found over time, but we are committed to supporting national youth work agencies, organisations and projects, and we continue to work with strategic funding partnerships, the Big Lottery Fund and YouthLink Scotland to support funded organisations to measure and demonstrate the outcomes from the grants that have been provided—that was a key point in the debate—which allows us to build on best practice.

Liam McArthur: I return to the point that I raised with the minister earlier on. I think that the complaint from the scout group that I spoke to was not that there is a lack of funding; rather, it was about what it is able to do with the funding that is available. It could buy any number of tents, which it had plenty of, but it could not support sending members of the troop away to events in the central belt or, indeed, further afield.

Michael Russell: I think that we and organisations are still sometimes guilty of overprescription. I go back to the start of what I said. If we are encouraging young people to lead their own activities and essentially to be the guides in those activities, they should also be saying what funding would be most useful for, and we should learn from that experience. I have particular sympathy with what Mr McArthur said about travel to the central belt. That is an issue for all of us who represent rural and island constituencies.

There are synergies across Government in these matters. We are bringing together things such as the initial Wood report and activities that include the new statement of ambition for adult learning, which will be launched on 21 May. That sees adult learning as being lifelong, life wide and life centred, just as the curriculum for excellence is personalised, deep, linked and progressive.

All the Government's initiatives are joined together in the view that learning is not something that we do just once. We want the country to be the best place to grow up; we also want Scotland to be the best place where one goes on learning in various ways and contexts, no matter where one is.

The debate has been a unifying event; it has shown that Parliament at its best can come together and look very carefully at what is best for Scotland. By taking forward the strategy and by agreeing the motion with Labour's amendment on volunteering, which I hope will be endorsed unanimously, we are doing something that will help young people in Scotland. We will help them even more if we go on—and we will—funding and supporting them to ensure that the strategy becomes reality.

Wildlife Crime (Raptors)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-09916, in the name of Paul Wheelhouse, on wildlife crime—eradicating raptor persecution from Scotland.

15:41

The Minister for Environment and Climate Change (Paul Wheelhouse):

The debate offers Parliament the opportunity to unite in condemnation of all forms of raptor persecution and to show our resolve to eradicate it. I hope that I speak for us all in conveying my feelings of anger, revulsion and utter frustration that these and other wildlife crimes persist in 21st century Scotland. I hope that, today, we will send the clearest possible message to those involved that what they are doing has no place in Scotland and that they should expect to be pursued with the full weight of the law.

Persecution of raptors must stop. It is cruel, barbaric and outdated; it is selfish and dangerous. It threatens the survival of some of our rarest wildlife, and poisons risk livestock, domestic pets and, conceivably, children too. Wildlife crime stains Scotland's reputation as a country that values and respects its nature and wildlife—we are, after all, the land of John Muir—and, through its impact on wildlife tourism and Scotland's brand, wildlife crime threatens our economic prosperity. It is certainly against the law, but it is also true that the vast majority of Scots, in both rural and urban Scotland, detest the practice and have contempt for those who carry it out.

I acknowledge the sincere views of Opposition members and, in the spirit of unity, we will support the Labour amendment. I hope that members appreciate that we will need to consider how best to undertake such a review and that we do not want to deflect effort from the measures and reviews that are under way.

I will recap briefly on some of the steps that have been taken since 2007 by the Scottish Government. In 2007, in this Parliament's first debate on wildlife crime following the poisoning of a golden eagle near Peebles, the then Solicitor General for Scotland and now Lord Advocate, Frank Mulholland QC, who opened the debate, gave a strong signal when he said:

"It is essential for the economic health and successful biodiversity of our nation that we have protected, thriving wildlife. Wildlife is an inheritance to be cherished and the criminal law has an important part to play in its protection."—[*Official Report*, 4 October 2007; c 2497.]

In 2008, a review of how we tackle wildlife crime led to the "Natural Justice" report and the setting

up of a new and strengthened partnership for action against wildlife crime in Scotland, which I am honoured to chair.

The Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011 strengthened our existing wildlife legislation and introduced the new concept of vicarious liability into the protection of wildlife, including birds of prey. The WANE act, as it is known, also triggered the first-ever annual report on wildlife crime, which was laid before the Parliament last year.

Law enforcement agencies have strengthened their resourcing of wildlife crime prosecutions, with a dedicated Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service wildlife and environmental crime unit with experienced fiscals who provide consistency and focus to a complex and diverse area of law.

The new Police Scotland structure has maintained and improved the wildlife crime officer network. It has added new central co-ordination roles, as well as more senior officer oversight to ensure consistent professional standards of investigation of wildlife crime.

We have internationally recognised and outstanding support services for law enforcement. We have committed a further two years of funding to the national wildlife crime unit, which is based in West Lothian.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I am grateful to the minister for the strength of his words so far. When Police Scotland was approached about incidents in South Lanarkshire, it was suggested that its response was to say that that was not a police matter. The minister is aware of those concerns. Has he investigated and got to the bottom of the matter?

Paul Wheelhouse: I have had a discussion with officials about the matter and we think that the proper procedures were followed, but I am happy to consider the matter further.

Science and Advice for Scottish Agriculture—SASA, as most of us know it—has a state-of-the-art facility and a hugely respected team who carry out post mortems and undertake toxicology testing in suspected poisoned wildlife cases. SASA provides undisputed data on the extent of the abuse of pesticides and other poisons that are used to kill wildlife in Scotland.

Evidential trails are often hard to develop. We are fortunate that SASA is also home to the development of a world-leading wildlife-DNA forensic laboratory, which provides services in advanced forensic techniques for wildlife crime investigators here in Scotland and around the world.

Robust laws are in place and we have professional and determined investigators.

However, more needs to be done, as recent events clearly demonstrate. Last year, given early signs that criminals were changing their modus operandi, I announced three new measures in response to continued evidence of raptor persecution.

First, Professor Mark Poustie, from the University of Strathclyde, has agreed to lead a review of wildlife crime penalties. We need to be assured that the penalties that are available to the courts are a sufficient deterrent, amid concern that they are insufficient. Professor Poustie will report in December.

Secondly, I charged Scottish Natural Heritage with initiating a measure to restrict the use of general licences in areas where there is good reason to believe that wildlife crimes might be taking place. The general licence has been, in practice, a very light-touch piece of regulation. It allows a user to shoot or trap certain bird species, such as crows, without further reference to or control by SNH. The general licence is based on trust. We know that it can be used as a cover for committing wildlife crimes, and it would be utterly wrong to allow its continued use in circumstances in which SNH judges, on the balance of probabilities, that wildlife crime is taking place. SNH has introduced an enabling paragraph into the general licence and will soon bring forward a scheme to allow for a restriction to be implemented.

On the third measure, I recognise that it appears that people who kill raptors very often do so in a determined and organised fashion, taking advantage of the fact that they are operating in remote areas, often at night, with little chance of being spotted by witnesses. Modern policing has tools to address that issue, and although we cannot interfere in police operational matters, as I am sure that members agree, I am grateful to have the clear and explicit support of the Lord Advocate and senior police officers in encouraging the police to use all the investigative techniques that are at their disposal, including video surveillance, where appropriate.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Will the minister give way?

Paul Wheelhouse: I will do so if the member can keep it brief.

Christine Grahame: I shall definitely keep it brief.

A concern that has been raised with me is that specialised wildlife policing is pretty thin on the ground in Scotland. Does the minister share that concern, and if so, will he intimate to Police Scotland that he does so?

Paul Wheelhouse: Christine Grahame raises an important issue; similar concerns have been expressed to me. We have expanded the number of trained wildlife crime officers from eight to 14, and we are undertaking a consultation on investigatory powers for the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, to which I will refer in my closing speech.

I want to say a few words about the recent and appalling events that prompted this debate. Members will appreciate that I cannot go into any detail that runs the remotest risk of prejudicing criminal investigations or prosecutions.

The poisoning incident in Ross-shire has seen the loss of 16 red kites and six buzzards. That is a horrendous loss. The death of so many red kites in a single incident is very likely to have a significant impact on the population, in an area in which huge efforts have been made to reintroduce red kites. Many of the dead kites were established breeding birds, which would have contributed to the population around the Black Isle. The incident's significance is reflected in the very welcome unity of all local stakeholders in condemning the incident and in the joint reward of £26,000.

The incident is only part of the story. Members might be aware that the red kite population in the area was reintroduced at the same time as a similar number of red kites were released in the Chilterns, in England. Now, though, there are roughly six times as many birds there as there are in the north of Scotland. I accept that there might be other factors, but the difference is most likely if not entirely due to illegal killing here in Scotland. If toxicology confirms the suspected poisonings, I regret to say that we will probably have passed a shameful landmark: the recording of 100 illegally killed red kites in northern Scotland since 1989.

We have had reports of separate incidents, involving peregrine falcons in Stirlingshire and Lanarkshire and, most recent, a missing satellite-tagged sea eagle in Aberdeenshire. The missing sea eagle was the first chick to be born to the sea eagles that were recently reintroduced to the east coast—something that we all celebrated last year. It is frustrating that we might never know what happened to the sea eagle, but it is perhaps highly significant that the bird and its transmitter disappeared in an area where other raptors have disappeared in suspicious circumstances.

In that context, I can understand why some people are calling for further legislation now. However, although in due course that might prove to be the end game—and frustrating as the current situation is—I sound a note of parliamentary caution. I will explain why.

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Will the minister take an intervention?

Paul Wheelhouse: I am sorry, but I am running out of time.

The three measures that I mentioned have not been fully implemented and have not yet taken effect. As I stated, we are yet to see the effect of restricting the use of general licences or of any increase in penalties. Similarly, although proceedings have commenced in the first vicarious liability case in Stranraer sheriff court, we have not yet seen what impact such a case will have on the actions of owners and managers in the areas where these problems occur.

However, let me make it absolutely clear that the Scottish Government is determined to stamp out this deeply unpleasant and pernicious criminal behaviour. If and when we judge it necessary, I am committed to taking further action. If that involves licensing certain types of businesses, we will do so. Although I am not committed to licensing of that kind, it is not unreasonable for us to undertake a desk study of measures that are deployed elsewhere, particularly in the European Union. I will ask officials to advise on the next steps.

All those who might be affected by tougher regulation should take note that it is they who are unnecessarily bringing down a threat on their whole sector. They must hear that these crimes have gone much too far and that Parliament's patience is rapidly running out.

In my closing speech, I will address the current important consultation on Scottish SPCA investigatory powers and I will cover the wider work of PAW Scotland. I will also address what additional steps we propose to remove toxic substances from our countryside.

We are implementing measures that I believe will have an impact, but our patience and that of Parliament are not infinite. This Government and this Parliament are determined to rid Scotland of a blight on her reputation. I hope that we will stand together for Scotland's wildlife, and I look forward to hearing members' speeches.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises the impact of wildlife crime in Scotland and the potential strain that this places on Scotland's reputation; welcomes the Scottish Government's determination to tackle wildlife crime in Scotland; supports the work of the Partnership for Action against Wildlife Crime; welcomes the introduction of vicarious liability in wildlife crime in 2011 and the announcement in July 2013 of the review of wildlife crime penalties, the introduction of restrictions on general licences and the enforcement work being taken forward by Police Scotland; unreservedly condemns the appalling poisoning incident in Ross-shire that has killed at least 20 red kites and buzzards; recognises that these birds are a critical part of Scotland's biodiversity and a key element in the growing wildlife tourism sector; expresses concern about the very worrying disappearance of the first sea eagle chick born from the

reintroduced sea eagles on the east coast; considers that an update on the fight against wildlife crime is now timely, and welcomes agencies redoubling efforts to work together to protect Scotland's remarkable wildlife.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith): We have a little bit of time in hand for interventions at this stage in the proceedings.

15:51

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I commend the minister for bringing the debate to the chamber. I have tried to have the subject selected for topical questions over the past few weeks, so I am glad that the minister has recognised the seriousness of the situation and has used Government time to debate it. It is an emotive subject that has gathered a significant amount of attention from organisations and the wider public. I am pleased that we have the opportunity today to discuss wildlife crime and how we can work together to ensure that we do not continue to be faced with the unacceptable deaths of our iconic birds. I fully support the minister's comments in his opening speech.

The reaction to the latest raptor deaths, from the demonstration in Inverness to the donations that have been received by RSPB Scotland, should make everyone within the chamber pause and reflect on the impact that the deaths are having not just on our wildlife, but on the image of Scotland and the value that we place on our environment. Nature-based tourism is worth some £1.4 billion a year to our economy, and SNH has said that the recent deaths

"detract from that value and diminish Scotland's appeal as a major wildlife tourism destination."

It is vulnerable raptors that are being targeted. Therefore, although overall numbers might be small, the impact on the populations can be significant.

I appreciate that such crime is difficult to tackle because of the remote locations, the length of time that it can take for a crime to be detected and the lack of witnesses. We have recently passed legislation and the Government has announced some welcome additional measures, but the lack of prosecution in recent cases—the poisoning of a golden eagle in December 2013, the poisoning of a peregrine falcon in February 2014 and the killing of a peregrine falcon in April 2014—shows that the crime is evading the law. If we can identify areas of legislation that can be strengthened or reviewed, we must give serious consideration to pursuing that option. We must also look critically at the resources that are being deployed, and we must challenge the culture in which such crimes are considered acceptable.

I am confident that everyone in the chamber today believes that the abhorrent deaths of the 22 raptors last month are unacceptable and that the perpetrators should be found and prosecuted. However, again and again we come back to the difficulty of detection and evidence gathering, and I believe that more can be done in those areas.

I am pleased that the Government is now consulting on greater powers for Scottish SPCA officers. The consultation was due last year, and in the light of delays I would be interested in hearing the reasons why we are having such a long consultation process, which will run from March to September. The minister will speak about that in his closing speech; perhaps he can tell us when any extra powers will be granted to the Scottish SPCA.

A proposal to increase penalties is very welcome. They must be fixed at a level that will provide a strong deterrent. However, deterrents will work only if there is a realistic prospect of prosecution. That is why the Scottish SPCA consultation is so important. RSPB Scotland's briefing states that

"the expertise, specialist equipment and facilities of the SSPCA benefit the work of the police."

We must ensure that the powers that are granted to inspectors are sufficient to contribute to the securing of convictions.

I have previously raised concerns over the role of wildlife crime officers in Police Scotland. Having spoken to people who work in that area, I know that there are concerns that it is often a part-time role or that officers are frequently moved around and changed. There is also an issue around commitment and expertise. The effectiveness of the role depends on the commitment and knowledge of the officer. There is a need for officers to gain the trust of the community, to know the community well, to be able to gather intelligence and to work in partnership with others. What discussions has the minister had with Police Scotland over operational matters on wildlife crime? Christine Grahame raised that issue.

Our amendment acknowledges the work that the Government is undertaking in relation to the Scottish SPCA and wildlife crime penalties, but it also calls for further action. I know that the Government recognises that need, and that it has given a commitment that, if such action needs to be taken, it will take it.

I appreciate that is not long since the passing of the WANE act, but there was a rise in confirmed raptor poisonings last year. There is a danger that this year's incidents, combined with a lack of convictions, could encourage others to think that it is acceptable to carry out such crimes and that they are likely to get away with them. That

suggests that there is a need for us to go back to the legislation, to scrutinise its measures and to consider additional action.

There is a belief that the detected crimes are perhaps not the complete picture. There will be undetected and unreported crime, so the true figures could be more significant. When the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill was passed, there was an indication that the Government would be prepared to go back and consider other options if the legislation was not successful. Although the introduction of vicarious liability was welcomed—there is a belief that it led initially to a reduction in poisonings—it has not yet been tested in a Scottish court, notwithstanding the current case at Stranraer. The lack of convictions for wildlife crimes seems to indicate that the 2011 act is failing to work as a vehicle for holding those responsible to account.

That is why, in our amendment, we propose that the Government should conduct a study of wildlife legislation from outwith Scotland, particularly of licensing and game-bird legislation in other countries. I am pleased that the minister has indicated that he will support our amendment.

The RSPB briefing highlights the fact that Scotland lacks any regulation of game shooting. My colleague Peter Peacock lodged amendments to the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill on that area at stage 3.

We cannot eradicate this type of crime without changing the culture. It seems to come from a place where there is a single focus on what one sector believes suits its needs, regardless of the consequences on other interests. That places a huge responsibility on land managers. I fully accept that a small minority is involved in any kind of criminal activity, and I fully acknowledge the contribution that NFU Scotland and Scottish Land & Estates have made to the reward fund that was established by RSPB Scotland. However, there are still elements of land management that think that such activity is acceptable, perhaps even necessary, and we must all work together to challenge and change that culture. That challenge must come not just from politicians and conservationists, but from land managers themselves. As I say, it is a small minority but, when such acts are perpetrated, the subsequent negative press and public reaction impact on all landowners and land users across Scotland, on their businesses and on tourism as a whole.

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Does the member accept that, at this point, there is not one shred of evidence that links the appalling losses in Ross-shire to land management or land ownership?

Claire Baker: That is an on-going police investigation. The minister said that we need to consider the science and where the bird population has been affected. We need to be honest: there are people involved in land management who think that such practices are acceptable. I fully accept that it is a minority, but we need to change that culture and make it clear that the practice is unacceptable.

I spoke to representatives of Scottish Land & Estates last week. I recognise the work that it is doing to address the matter. Some people are perhaps not involved in any of the structures or big organisations, and we need to reach those people. As well as having robust legislation and an effective wildlife crime unit, we need to resource education and training opportunities properly. As I said, not every landowner or manager is a member of a formal organisation, and we need to ensure that they still have the opportunity to interrogate their practice and ensure that they are compliant with the law.

I looked back at the passage of the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill. Peter Peacock closed his speech by saying:

"The issue has not gone away; it will come back."—
[*Official Report*, 2 March 2011; c 33708-09.]

We should all be hugely disappointed that those words have come to pass. We must continue to strive to create a culture where raptor persecution is unacceptable and where the practice will not be tolerated by anyone who has an interest in our countryside and wildlife. We must be prepared to take measures to ensure that that happens.

I move amendment S4M-09916.3, to leave out from first "welcomes" to "Police Scotland" and insert:

"believes that the commitment to tackle wildlife crime is shared across the Parliament; acknowledges the work undertaken by the Scottish Government and its relevant bodies and partners in working to tackle wildlife crime, including the review of wildlife crime penalties and the consultation for increased powers for the Scottish SPCA; however believes that the latest wildlife crimes show the urgent need for further action in Scotland; calls on the Scottish Government to conduct a study of licensing and game bird legislation in other countries with a view to working with other parties to review wildlife crime legislation in Scotland;"

15:59

Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate and I thank the organisations that have provided briefings. I emphasise that the Scottish Conservatives, along with other parties across the chamber, condemn, without hesitation, the recent poisoning incident in Ross-shire, as we condemn any illegal poisoning of any animal or bird. It is

important that we are united in sending out that strong message.

The Scottish Conservatives are clear that there is enough legislation in place to enable the police to investigate wildlife crime, catch those responsible and bring them to justice. Proper enforcement of the legislation is vital. The rule of law must be upheld. That is what we must focus on.

We support Police Scotland in its efforts to investigate and find those responsible for the Ross-shire incident. There has been much side-briefing by many organisations, which is not necessarily a good thing, as it can cloud a straightforward issue. Many rumours are now circulating among local inhabitants in Ross-shire about how this disaster might have come about. I am reliably told that the red kites are hand-fed in that area at the Tollie feed station on the Brahan estate. It has been mooted that such a sudden mass death might have been caused by some contamination in what they were fed. I repeat that that is only rumour and speculation but I imagine that the first thing that anyone investigating an incident of this kind would do is check the food source for possible contamination. I ask the minister to confirm whether that was done in the early stages of the investigation.

Police Scotland should have adequate resources to allow it to investigate all wildlife crime in the appropriate way, so is there any reason why the public still do not know what type of poisoning the birds died from? An answer to that would surely establish possible sources, but it seems that we are all in the dark on this, unless the minister can now enlighten us.

Paul Wheelhouse: I hope that the member will forgive me for pointing out that there are sound reasons for why details of what substance might have affected the birds and how the investigation is proceeding have not been revealed. I am afraid that I therefore cannot enlighten him any further on the detail, although I know some of it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I, too, urge caution, Mr McGrigor.

Jamie McGrigor: I am sure that those reasons are sound, but I am sorry that the minister cannot share those details. We would like to know what they are.

We support the good work of PAWS and congratulate all the participants. A partnership approach is necessary to resolve all types of wildlife crime. We, too, recognise the significant economic importance of wildlife and ornithological tourism to the Scottish economy. That involves all birds that ornithologists come to see, from song birds to the golden eagle.

I warmly welcome the Scottish Gamekeepers Association's new conservation project, the year of the wader, which aims to help halt the alarming decline of wading bird species such as the curlew, the lapwing and the golden plover. As a farmer for a long time, I can remember when all those birds were plentiful in large flocks at certain times of the year in the Highlands. Now, however, they have become scarce in most places, and we must know the reasons why.

I commend the Scottish Gamekeepers Association's briefing for today's debate. It calls on the Scottish Government to seek to tackle wildlife crime at its root, by dealing with some of its possible causes, and to act to ensure that people understand that they have genuine legal alternatives to taking the law into their own hands when they are faced with conflicts that might affect their livelihoods. The SGA has repeated its call for proper guidance to be published in relation to a functional, science-based licensing system for businesses that might be affected by the impact of raptor species. I ask the minister to respond to that in his closing speech.

The motion mentions sea eagles. The impact of sea eagles on crofters' and farmers' livelihoods is another genuine issue of concern that has been widely publicised lately, and is one on which I have spoken out for a number of years. It was discussed at a recent meeting of our cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on crofting, which I chair. I welcome the NFUS's recently published sea eagle action plan and look forward to ministers responding positively to it. I am clear that Government agencies in future must do more in terms of environmental impact studies before the reintroduction of raptors or predators, in order that damage to livestock and the existing indigenous wild bird population is minimised.

On Labour's amendment, we are not convinced, because we think that there is already enough legislation. However, we will not vote against the motion.

Today's debate is useful as it sends out a unified message from Parliament that we condemn illegal raptor persecution and all wildlife crime. However, it is important, in this instance, that we rapidly find out whether the poisoning of a huge number of hand-fed red kites was in fact a crime and not an awful accident. We look to the Government and its agencies to enforce existing legislation to bring those responsible to justice and to work constructively with all stakeholders to tackle some of the underlying reasons why some people say that they may commit wildlife crime.

The minister says that he is growing impatient and he proposes further legislation. I suggest that wildlife crime is being perpetrated by a very few

individuals, rather than by any particular section of the Scottish countryside.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We come to the open debate; speeches should be up to five minutes, including interventions. I also urge caution if any of the matters is sub judice.

16:06

Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): I welcome the briefing from Scottish Land & Estates, which states that it attempts

"to keep a record of all recorded confirmed raptor incidents, but believe there is only information on just over half of these officially confirmed incidents in the public domain. Very few of these raptor investigations lead to charges being brought, let alone convictions. This makes it difficult for anyone to draw reasonable and informed conclusions, but it is likely that there are a wide range of causes including protection of game, sheep, poultry, racing pigeons and recreational disturbance."

That points at land managers to a great extent, but not entirely. It seems that the 19th century culture of killing all game and livestock predators has not passed into history. More's the pity. The reasons for bird poisonings need to be better understood in today's land management climate. Motives for grouse moor protection are adduced by RSPB Scotland. What motives would prompt poisonings on farmland and forest properties? Can ministers analyse motives from convictions secured? That is very difficult because, as we know, the statistics make few links between convictions and bird deaths. That is why the list of bird deaths ought to be combined with a map of the estates and farms in the area where the carcasses were found. That is not in order to blame people there, but to see whether people other than members of the NFUS and Scottish Land & Estates are in fact in the firing line, as the birds have been. The birds have been shot, poisoned, trapped, disturbed and have had their nests destroyed. All that suggests that land management in particular is at the root of the problem.

The 2012 survey showed that there were 52 breeding pairs of red kites in the Black Isle. However, we should not forget the destruction of 166 red kites in the Black Isle between 1999 and 2006. There is a pattern of behaviour there that we need to see on paper and on maps, to find out exactly where those birds have been picked up.

I am disappointed in those who suggest that tourists will be put off coming to our beautiful countryside because of the news about the raptors. Tourism is on the rise—it is strong. Weather plays a far bigger part in tourists' decisions about where they will go than anything else. We should take that into account.

I have far greater concerns about the ill-informed and the malcontents in our communities,

perhaps on farms, forests and estates, who practice or condone the poisonings. Someone, somewhere knows the culprits. This wall of silence must be broken down.

Proof of intent is essential. An amnesty for chemicals raises questions about cross-compliance and good practice. Vicarious liability has yet to be applied. Perhaps once we have seen a case in which it is, we will know whether the law goes far enough.

Biodiversity and support for its application through the Scottish rural development programme need to be appropriate and well publicised and leave land managers and users in no doubt about their duties in respect of raptors.

While sheep farmers and crofters claim that sea eagles predate their flocks, financial compensation should be based on proof that such attacks have been happening. There needs to be a much more credible evidence base than has been provided so far.

The default position in our countryside and communities should be to do no harm and to live and let live, but a clearer picture is needed across Scotland for MSPs to be sure that a culture change is truly embedded in terms of respect for raptors and their place in our ecosystem.

I support the Government motion.

16:11

Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab): I was privileged back in 2001 to be asked by the then environment minister, Rhona Brankin, to stand in for her when the first cohort of red kites was reintroduced into the Galloway forest. It really was an extremely exciting event to see those beautiful birds at close quarters and to see them gain their liberty. They had come from up north and from colonies in England. I know that there was quite a lot of anxiety at the time that, given the history of persecution of those beautiful birds, they might not survive and thrive and that they might become victims of the sort of persecution that we are hearing about.

I visited the red kite trail in Galloway on Good Friday this year on a beautiful sunny day. I observed pairs of kites riding the thermals above the roads in several locations. We stopped outside Bellymack Hill Farm near Laurieston just after 2 o'clock when the kites are fed and observed dozens of red kites circling and swooping to pick up food. It really was one of the most spectacular wildlife sights that I have ever witnessed. To pick up on Mr McGrigor's point, from what I could see of the feeding at that location, it is very doubtful that any kind of contamination would be likely to

take place, because the feeding seemed to be extremely well organised.

A report by the RSPB in 2010 estimated that at that time the red kite trail in Galloway had brought £21 million of new spend into the area in six years. Certainly, on the occasion when I observed the kites feeding from the side of the road, the viewing gallery on the farm was absolutely packed with bird watchers. The kite trail is clearly an established tourist attraction in the area.

The visit really drove home to me the shocking nature of the recent poisonings in the Highlands, with 16 red kites and six buzzards poisoned. We have discussed and debated wildlife crime in this Parliament on many occasions and it is so disappointing that this illegal and disgraceful activity is still going on.

When the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill was passing through the Parliament in 2010-11, my colleague Peter Peacock suggested that perhaps a licensing scheme could be introduced for sporting estates, which would mean that estates where raptor persecution persisted could lose their licence and the source of their income. At the time, it was not felt that that was appropriate and, as far as I recall, Scottish Land & Estates was progressing some form of voluntary code. I am not sure how that has progressed since then.

The then environment minister, Roseanna Cunningham, introduced into the bill provisions for vicarious liability, which would enable landowners to be prosecuted for poisoning on their estates. Labour fully supported that measure and was happy to do so. However, we have always believed that if it did not work—perhaps the jury is out on that—we should consider whether further measures were necessary. One of the measures that I promoted at the time of the bill was the extension of the powers of the SSPCA, to enable officers to retrieve evidence relating to wildlife crime. The Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 conferred powers on SSPCA officers to search and enter homes to retrieve evidence relating to animal cruelty. Those powers were deployed in 2011 when the first conviction for dog fighting was secured under that act. That is a possible parallel in terms of powers. When the WANE bill was under consideration, it was believed that there had not been enough consultation on the proposals for them to be taken forward in the bill.

In 2012 I asked the Scottish Government whether it would consider extending the Scottish SPCA's powers. A consultation on that was supposed to be launched in the first half of 2012. That did not happen, so I asked again in 2013, and at that point the consultation was supposed to come out in 2013. It is a wee bit disappointing that

the consultation did not appear until the end of March this year, but I am glad that it is under way and I look forward to the responses to it.

A lot of us agree that the issue needs to be tackled urgently, because, as the minister said, the fact that we do not seem to respect our wildlife is a stain on Scotland. When you see these beautiful animals up close, as I did recently in Galloway, it is such a privilege. I totally condemn anybody who takes part in the poisoning and persecution of these creatures. We should value and treasure them. They are becoming part of our heritage; they are back in our countryside again, and it is tremendous to see them.

16:06

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): When the Minister appeared before the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee back in November last year, he was able to report a downturn in incidents of recorded raptor poisonings, noting that the figures had improved from 30 in 2009 to three in 2012. Interestingly, however, he added:

"It goes without saying that we cannot afford to be complacent."—[*Official Report, Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee, 27 November 2013; c 3063.*]

How prophetic those comments have proven to be, for it seems hostilities have been resumed in big style. In 2013 there was a doubling of the number to six and this year has been even more depressing. Other criminal non-poisoning recorded incidents involving raptors have been on the increase as well, going up from 10 in 2012 to 17 last year.

Ironically, that comes against the backdrop of a marked increase in police resources being deployed across Scotland for the purposes of tackling wildlife crime. It is worth noting that in an area such as Angus, which sadly is a hotspot, those dedicated resources are further supplemented by community police officers who operate to assist the work of the designated wildlife crime officer, police constable Blair Wilkie.

As we all recognise, getting on top of an issue such as raptor poisoning is, by its nature, hugely challenging. The Scottish Wildlife Trust and the RSPB both want penalties for such offences to be toughened up. I think that we all have some sympathy with that view, along with a desire—where relevant to the case and where convictions have been made—to implement the vicarious liability provisions of the WANE act and send a message to landowners that they are responsible for the actions of those whom they employ.

First, we have to catch these criminals, and the difficulty is that their barbaric practices are

mostly—although not always—carried out in remote rural parts when it is unlikely that anyone will be around. In addition, is it not the case that they will continue down the path they are on, not because of the nature of the punishment that they risk, but because they believe that there is little chance they will ever be caught? A £26,000 reward is on offer for information that leads to a successful prosecution of those responsible for the Black Isle incident. The fact that thus far the police have failed to charge anyone perhaps illustrates the fundamental difficulty in catching these criminals.

That said, when hotspots emerge—and there are one or two in the north-east of Scotland—surely they should become the focus of intensive attention. General licence arrangements should also be considered, as the minister mentioned.

In the interests of fairness and balance, we also need to acknowledge that we are not talking about every estate being involved or there being a sizeable number of gamekeepers caught up in these barbaric practices. The reality is nothing like that. There is undoubtedly an unacceptable problem out there, but is important to get it in appropriate perspective. The Scottish Gamekeepers Association has demonstrated that when its members are found guilty of this sort of behaviour it will act. Three SGA members have been expelled from the organisation for wildlife crime involving raptors in the past 18 months. Scottish Land & Estates has made it crystal clear to its members that there is no place for raptor killing within its ranks.

Of course, this is a serious matter and we need to find a way to catch the perpetrators and make an example of them. I therefore welcome the measures that the minister announced today. I wonder whether we also need to consider the introduction of a brief amnesty on the chemical Carbofuran. Over the past eight years, some 28 eagles have been found dead on or have disappeared from Scottish grouse moors. I understand that, of those, 15 were poisoned either by Carbofuran or through a lethal concoction involving Carbofuran, which is of course illegal in Scotland and highly dangerous to humans as well.

Such a measure would undoubtedly prove controversial and perhaps it is naive to think that people who have gathered such a poison would be prepared to hand it over. However, we have reached the point at which any measure that has the potential to reduce the threat to Scotland's birds of prey must be considered. I suggest that once we have had such an amnesty, we could greatly increase the penalties for possessing Carbofuran, let alone using it.

16:20

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

The debate is timely, as we are in the grip of what appears to be a serial bird poisoner in a small area of Ross-shire. It appears to be an overt act of cruelty. The perpetrator needs to be caught and to feel the full force of the law. The poisoning is even more destructive in light of the work that has taken place to reintroduce the magnificent birds into the area. The reintroduction has provided many people with a great deal of pleasure—I, for one, have really enjoyed watching the birds in Easter Ross. I ask the Scottish Government to assess the barriers to detection and prosecution in the case and, if need be, amend the law.

I also ask that the Government consider an amnesty for pesticides and poisons. In his opening remarks, the minister talked about removing toxic substances from our countryside, and I look forward to hearing what he has to say about that in his closing speech. Many of those substances could have been lying about in outhouses and barns undisturbed for many years. While they are there, they could fall into the wrong hands or the packaging could disintegrate and the poison become accessible to birds and animals. An amnesty would ensure the removal of poisons from circulation altogether.

I have the privilege of being the species champion for the golden eagle. Through my work with that species, I have been given an insight into the value of those birds to not only our tourism industry but local people.

We can trace the history of raptor killings in Scotland back to the 18th century, when landowners and farmers deemed the birds to be vermin. Around that period, game hunting became really fashionable and birds became victims of that sport. Displaying them as stuffed ornamental pieces was also fashionable during the Victorian era. As a result, many became extinct.

The poisoning, trapping and shooting of raptors was not made illegal until the introduction of the Protection of Birds Act 1954. The vast majority of people now recognise the beauty of such birds and really appreciate the protection that they are given.

In recent years, the police have set up wildlife crime units and worked in partnership with organisations such as the RSPB, the SSPCA and the NFUS to try to address the issue.

The main difficulty in identifying offenders is that the crimes take place in isolated and remote areas. Usually, hillwalkers and others engaged in outdoor activity uncover poisonings by pure chance. That is why the fact that a huge number of birds have been found in the poisonings in Easter Ross is rare.

Donald Dewar said that raptor killing in Scotland was a national disgrace. We should all be ashamed of it and do our utmost to stop a horrible crime.

Wildlife is a key element of our tourism industry. With it comes an obvious boost to the economy in sparsely populated parts of the country where scattered communities live. Wildlife tourism is on the increase, as television programmes such as “Hebrides—Islands on the Edge” portray our wildlife at its best and encourage people to come and visit the area.

We desperately need to come up with a strategy that stops wildlife crime in our hills and glens. If we do not, Scotland’s image as a land of wildlife, tranquillity and beauty will be damaged beyond repair. We have to protect our iconic birds for their own survival, but we must also act for the good of our wildlife tourism and the natural heritage of our countryside.

As a few members have mentioned, the offence of vicarious liability in relation to the persecution of wildlife should have provided additional protection for birds. However, it too is a difficult crime to prosecute. There is a defence that the accused did not know that an employee was engaging in such activity. Another defence is that the individual took all reasonable steps to prevent an offence from being committed. The legislation on that should be reviewed to ensure that it provides maximum protection.

People involved in wildlife crime are criminals plain and simple. They are seldom people who farm or care for livestock, because such people have a natural affinity for living creatures—although I recognise that a minority are involved in wildlife crime. Others act out of badness, conducting activities such as egg collecting, badger baiting and the like. We should all be deeply ashamed of those things and do everything that we can to stop them. The people who commit those crimes also break down working relationships, because they cause suspicion among land managers, conservationists and the community as a whole. There is a duty on us all to stop those crimes and work together to bring the criminals to book.

16:25

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): I am sure that all members are disappointed and saddened by recent wildlife crimes, especially those in Ross-shire.

I begin by endorsing every sentence that Rob Gibson spoke this afternoon. In some respects, his speech is difficult to follow because everything has been said. However, the crime is not new and it has not gone away, and the criminals are

sometimes fairly innovative in their attempts to deceive.

Only last year, a golden eagle was trapped in the Angus glens, which is a hotspot for the birds, as Graeme Dey mentioned. We know that the bird was then transported—it had to have been transported because its transmitter was on and it was moving at night, and golden eagles do not fly at night—and then dumped near Aboyne in my constituency of Aberdeenshire West. Its legs had been broken and it was left to die. I cannot for one minute think why someone would do such a thing, and why they would take a bird from one area to another to dispose of it.

We have recently heard that a sea eagle chick has disappeared without trace from my constituency. We have no idea what has happened to it, but we do know that there has been activity in that area in the past. The minister is quite right to say that we should not presume when investigations are on-going, but we have to ask why. What has happened to that chick?

Last year, a red kite was shot near Aboyne, again in my constituency. It was a female bird that had successfully reared three chicks the year before. It was shot deliberately.

I have read the many briefings for the debate, including the one from the Scottish Gamekeepers Association to which Jamie McGrigor referred. Yes, it says that it is doing all that it can to encourage its members to act within the law, but why should we have to encourage people to act within the law? Surely we know to act within the law. The SGA has also said that three quarters of the time at its meetings is dedicated to the issue, but its briefing also talks about general licensing. That makes me ask whether the SGA is taking more time to talk about licensing and how to obtain it rather than talking about how to eradicate wildlife crime. Is it talking to its members to ensure that they are acting within the law and that everyone knows about the consequences if they do not?

Scottish Land & Estates has done a fantastic job of trying to ensure that its members are aware of what is going on. The partnership agreements between the RSPB, NFUS and others is testament to the fact that we want to eradicate this abhorrent crime against our wildlife.

There might be a case for new legislation but the consultation on the proposal for the SSPCA to have new enforcement powers will probably lead to better detection. With DNA detection, we will probably catch more criminals, but we need to be as innovative as the people committing these crimes. We need to ensure that, where crimes are being committed—and where there are hotspots, as Graeme Dey suggested—we have closed-

circuit television. We must ensure that we can get the information that we need and that the information is recorded to effect prosecution.

I support the Government motion and I endorse the Labour amendment.

16:30

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): This is a timely debate and the mood throughout has been fairly sombre. I welcome the minister's motion and the unequivocal words of condemnation in his opening speech, and also his acceptance of Claire Baker's amendment, all of which enjoy the whole-hearted support of the Scottish Liberal Democrats.

I perfectly understand why the minister cannot comment in detail on the case in Ross-shire that has prompted today's debate but, as he acknowledged, the incident has provoked revulsion and anger from the public, including members of Scottish Land & Estates, the NFUS and the SGA, as others have said. It has also tested the patience of the Parliament. As the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds points out in its briefing, it is an example of wildlife crime on an unprecedented scale, but it is far from unusual. What we are seeing is an emerging map of hotspots around the country, which leaves us asking what more can be done.

I firmly believe that the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011 was a significant step in the right direction. It introduced a range of measures that will prove beneficial over time. Much consideration has been given in this debate and previously to the introduction of vicarious liability and, although I understand that it has not yet been fully tested in law, I whole-heartedly welcome the move. It was made by the minister's predecessor, Roseanna Cunningham, who acknowledged that the act was not a panacea and would not make prosecution straightforward, but I still think that it was a move in the right direction.

The act left open opportunities to consider other areas in which Parliament was not yet ready to take a view and wanted further work to be done—for example, making penalties available to the courts. There are three areas that I would like to address in which we suspended judgment. One relates to licensing, one to the SSPCA's role, which is now subject to a consultation, and one to the capacity and expertise in Police Scotland, to which Christine Grahame alluded.

On licensing—although not the general licence that is currently subject to review, which I very much welcome—last time round I was of the opinion that the concerns about bureaucracy and penalising good estates were well expressed. I was not persuaded at that stage that we should go

down the licensing route, but I recall the words of Peter Peacock at stage 3, and my own conclusion was that such a move should not be made then but if we debated the matter again, the point of departure would be that some form of licensing would almost inevitably be required. The minister appears to have come to a similar conclusion.

On the SSPCA's role, other members have pointed to the potential benefit of increasing resources and improving the chances both of detection and of bringing successful cases. During consideration of the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill, it was pointed out that the SSPCA was able to be involved up to the point of death but not thereafter. Although I saw difficulties with extending that role back then, I am increasingly of the view that it is probably now essential.

Finally, I turn to Police Scotland. We heard evidence when the bill was passed that there were areas of good practice, and the north-east was often referred to as one such example. Ministers promised that the creation of Police Scotland would deliver better targeted resources and expertise, but I share the concerns that Christine Grahame raised, because there does not seem to be any evidence of that. The example that I cited in relation to South Lanarkshire is but one case, and I could cite others from my own constituency. A pattern is building up that suggests that wildlife crime does not necessarily have the priority within Police Scotland that we might hope.

As Graeme Dey suggested, there were signs of improvement in the situation recently, but that position appears to have been reversed. Police Scotland is either struggling to cope with the issue or failing to prioritise, and the disincentives that are in place for wildlife crime appear to be inadequate. Meanwhile, public anger is rising and I think that the reputational damage is increasing. I acknowledge the steps that the Scottish Government has taken to date and the strength of the minister's remarks this afternoon. However, we need to up the pace and intensity and ensure that the worthwhile work that is under way is brought to a conclusion and that changes are implemented without delay.

16:35

Dave Thompson (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): The persecution and killing of raptors in Scotland is, as we know, a crime punishable at law, but it is also a crime against God's law. Those beautiful creatures are innocents that God requires us to nurture, support and steward, and it ill behoves anyone to do them damage.

This debate is timely. Although the Government is doing much to support wildlife, we must consider what additional measures and resources are required to eradicate, for good, these moronic crimes. However, before taking any action, we must look carefully at what has happened. The mass killing that has prompted this debate is very close to home for me as it occurred exclusively around Conon Bridge in Seaforth, which is in the east of my constituency of Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch.

The news of the killings, which broke over several days as more bodies were discovered, prompted a meeting on Monday 21 April at the Dingwall mart, where I and Rob Gibson MSP met the NFUS Highland region chairman, Jim Whiteford, senior officers from Police Scotland and farmers from the Conon Bridge area to discuss the deaths around the village. As with the minister, the police were not able to tell us too much about their investigation or how the birds died. As a former animal health inspector, I can fully understand why that is the case. Nevertheless, it was a very useful meeting.

I am pleased that a group of local farmers and landowners have come together and pledged more than £12,000 towards the reward fund for information about the deaths of the birds of prey, which shows just how seriously they, too, view the matter. It is important to note that all the birds appear to have died around the same time. Although bodies were discovered days and weeks afterwards, there was no on-going poisoning. Although the bodies were found gradually, they seem to have been the result of only one incident.

I am pleased that the minister put out to consultation on 31 March whether it would be wise to extend the SSPCA's investigative authority. However, has the minister considered—he may well have done—using Government and local authority animal health inspectors? There is not a huge number of them, but local authorities have responsibilities under the animal health laws, mainly in relation to animal disease and so on.

Jamie McGrigor: When the member was at the meeting in Dingwall, was it considered odd that although 16 red kites and six buzzards were found dead, apparently there were no such fatalities among crows and seagulls?

Dave Thompson: All sorts of stories, rumours and suggestions about what has happened are flying around. The member mentioned another one earlier. I think that we are better to let the police and the authorities get on with their investigation without our speculating on matters. Good information has been passed on to the police, so it is best to let them carry out their investigation.

I hope that the minister will consider my suggestion about animal health inspectors. During the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease back in 2001, I was in charge of co-ordination at Highland Council—we co-ordinated the work of all the various bodies. There is a resource there that we could use. Perhaps we need to think about consolidating enforcement by the police and local authorities. Consideration is being given to bringing in the SSPCA. The approach needs to be broadened slightly.

I must disagree with my colleague Rob Gibson on tourism. The Tollie centre on the Brahan estate near Conon Bridge, which I opened a year or two ago, hosts several thousand visitors a year, who watch the red kites being fed.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Could you draw to a close, please?

Dave Thompson: There should not be a knee-jerk reaction to recent events. We need to find out exactly what happened before we come to any conclusions about what we need to do.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We come to the closing speeches.

16:40

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I very much welcome the debate, just as I welcome anything that highlights the utter iniquity of wildlife crime, but I am clear about the fact that wildlife crime is the result of the actions of just a very few people. That in no way justifies their actions, and I join all those who totally condemn those actions, especially when poisoning is involved, but we must keep such crimes in perspective. In general, I think that we have done that during the debate.

There are some people in the wider country who are engaged in the debate whose comments do not keep such crimes in perspective. For instance, I do not think that the recent comment by an RSPB spokesman that levels of wildlife crime are in danger of returning to Victorian levels has done the debate any favours, because nothing could be further from the truth. In Victorian times, we completely eradicated some species, the reintroduction of which we are now—in general—strongly supportive of, along with the subsequent rebalancing of nature, which man has done so much to destroy in the past. The Victorian era and the present day do not bear comparison and, in my view, to make such a comparison is simply to whip up feelings, often against the landowning and gamekeeping fraternity in general, in a way that is totally unjustified and which is completely contrary to the partnership working that is exemplified in the workings of PAWS, as the motion recognises. I totally endorse that partnership approach.

When it comes to wildlife crime of any sort, surely we are all in it together. The approach should not—indeed, must not—become one of us and them, between specific sectors or organisations. Surely this is an issue on which it is all of us against just a few individuals, as Rob Gibson and Graeme Dey said. The individuals in question have no respect for the law and even less respect for the wildlife that the vast majority of us seek to protect and enhance.

As has been pointed out, up until 2013 we had quite a success story, as the number of raptor poisonings reduced steadily from 30 in 2009 to three in 2012. Sadly, there has been a slight increase since then, which almost pales into insignificance when it is placed alongside the truly shocking incident in Ross-shire in which at least 20 red kites and buzzards were killed. I am sure that we all hope that that incident will be the one-off that Dave Thompson indicated that it was, but it is imperative that the cause and the culprit or culprits, if there are such, are identified, because there will be many valuable lessons to be learned.

It is easy to become a bit despondent on the issue, but I do not think that we should be too hard on ourselves. Scotland's approach to wildlife crime has a really good record and there is considerable evidence to suggest that its approach has been working. All trends suffer an occasional blip, and we should not lose sight of the encouraging downward trend that was evident up to and including 2012.

It is for that reason that we cannot fully support the Labour amendment to the motion. We believe that existing legislation, especially as it was strengthened through the WANE act, contains appropriate measures, which still have to be tested to their fullest extent. We support increased penalties for people who are found guilty of wildlife crimes and we will support any measures that help to identify the perpetrators and bring them to justice, including increased powers for existing organisations.

In short, we support the Government motion that is before us and will do so even if it is amended. We believe that the work that PAWS is undertaking is immensely worth while and we encourage the continuation of partnership working to ensure that the downward trend that existed up to and including 2012 is first re-established and then maintained.

As the motion says, Scotland's wildlife is remarkable. The mindless actions of a very few individuals will not change that. Like Rob Gibson, I do not believe that their actions will have a major impact on tourism, because our wildlife is still remarkable, despite the unpleasant actions.

Let us use the existing powers and ensure that individuals get the message once and for all that their crimes are against not just wildlife but Scotland. As first Donald Dewar and now Rhoda Grant said, they are a national disgrace.

16:45

Claudia Beamish (South Scotland) (Lab): The consensus on the eradication of raptor persecution and the strong words from the Parliament send a clear message to Scotland. It was a positive step when the Scottish Government produced the first "Wildlife Crime in Scotland" report in 2012. As the minister said in the foreword, the aim

"is to establish a baseline of what is happening in Scotland",

which can be built on in future years.

Like today's debate, the report sent a clear message about the importance of tackling wildlife crime. It provided a clear focus for the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee's questioning of stakeholders and of the minister. However, as we have heard from Rhoda Grant, Dennis Robertson, Dave Thompson and many other members, all is far from well, given the foul catalogue of recent attacks on raptors.

As has been stressed, partnership is essential in preventing and detecting wildlife crime. OneKind has asked for genuine partnership working and for the police and the Crown Office to be prepared to accept evidence from non-governmental organisations such as OneKind and the RSPB rather than to rule it inadmissible before it even gets to court. As we have heard, wildlife crime is so hard to detect and evidence is so hard to come by that such crime should be followed up vigorously whenever possible. OneKind suggests that one way of approaching that would be for PAWS to issue guidance and give encouragement to NGOs, as it already does to the public.

Volunteers play a part in partnership and the prognosis would be bleaker without their commitment to what is often round-the-clock vigilance. To see peregrines nesting in cliff crevices across the Clyde and soaring high above is a thrill. They are protected by volunteers. The Falls of Clyde peregrine watch, which the Scottish Wildlife Trust set up to prevent egg thieves from stealing eggs during the nesting season, has been oversubscribed this year. That shows that the public have a strong interest in getting involved.

Other partnerships are also significant. There are moorland projects such as Langholm moor demonstration project, which I recently visited. The project, which is supported by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, the Buccleuch Estates and the RSPB, involves scientific monitoring that

is paid for. It takes account of biodiversity as well as protecting hen harriers and other birds. Diversionary feeding is keeping more grouse chicks alive, along with other species, such as lapwings. Game have not been shot during the project, to enable grouse to return to a sustainable number. That is an interesting voluntary model; I know that the minister has visited the project, too. However, the Scottish Government should explore further the need to consider the statutory regulation of game shooting for conservation purposes or, if estates are named under vicarious liability in the future—we hope that they will not be—because of prosecution.

The culture has changed radically. Continuing education is essential, but there is no excuse for persecution for any reason. Raptor protection and the detection of despicable attacks on raptors can happen in remote and rural Scotland only if the partnerships that are already having success are further developed. Sadly, the birds that have been discovered are unlikely to be the only fatalities, as NGOs have stressed in their briefings.

Partnerships must be adequately funded. I ask the minister to reassure the Parliament that wildlife crime officers have the resources to do their jobs consistently. Christine Grahame and other members raised that issue.

In that context, the consultation on increased powers for the Scottish SPCA, which Elaine Murray highlighted, is welcome. The RSPB suggests that the bird-of-prey crime hotspot maps, which Scottish Land & Estates has piloted, are invaluable in targeting efforts to expose repeat perpetrators in my own South Lanarkshire, as well as in Angus, Inverness-shire and other hotspot areas.

It is right that the Scottish Government is reviewing the wildlife crime penalties so that they are more robust and send a clear message.

Since vicarious liability, which was supported by Scottish Land & Estates, has been on the statute book, there have indeed been no prosecutions. My colleague Claire Baker has called for a review. The Scottish Wildlife Trust rightly argues that, with any proven crime, the vicarious liability provision can be used to send a clear signal to landowners that they must take responsibility for their staff. Apart from the current case in Stranraer, can the minister shed any light on why there have been no prosecutions under that law? Will he also comment on the suggestion that Rhoda Grant, Graeme Dey and others have made about a chemicals amnesty and whether that would help in future?

Arguments have been put forward that changes to protection arrangements for some species in some areas might be a way forward. Buzzards in

England are a case in point. However, I understand from the Scottish Wildlife Trust that a third of pheasant fatalities take place on our roads, and only 1 to 2 per cent have been recorded as having been taken by buzzards.

It is significant that the minister has agreed

“to conduct a study of licensing and game bird legislation in other countries”.

I am sure that we will all be able to work together with him on that.

Finally, our international reputation is at stake to a degree, particularly at the moment. We really have to push forward on eradicating raptor persecution because of that.

The sight of the vast wingspan of a red kite overhead at the Loch Ken RSPB reserve in my region is exciting and breathtaking. The support of the feeding station is essential. We must not allow Scotland's reputation as a wildlife destination with iconic species to be ruined and become tarnished by such crimes. The raptors deserve our protection, and we must all work on that together.

16:51

Paul Wheelhouse: I thank very much my fellow MSPs for attending and taking part in this important debate, and for the quality of their speeches and the thought that they put into them. It was good to hear so many personal experiences. I think that Elaine Murray's will stick with me. I look forward to seeing red kites in the field at some point in the future.

It is important that Parliament is able to send a clear and unambiguous message that there is no excuse for the persecution of our birds. I strongly welcome the broad support from all parties in the chamber and the condemnation of the crimes that have been committed recently. Obviously, we still await the outcomes of incident investigations. As Dave Thompson fairly said, we need to let the police do that work and give us the truth about what happened.

I certainly agree with those who say that Scotland has much to offer. Alex Fergusson and Rob Gibson were first to raise the fact that Scotland has a lot of offer as a tourism destination. However, if such persecution goes unchecked, we run the risk of damaging our country's reputation, particularly for those who value coming to Scotland to see our wildlife. We all revelled in the programme about the Hebrides last year, which was a fantastic tribute to the quality of the environment in Scotland. Let us not see that tainted by things such as raptor persecution.

Illegal killings potentially affect Scotland's reputation as a brand, and we need to send the message to all those who are involved in

conducting them that we will not tolerate that. Recent events that have involved red kites, buzzards, peregrines and sea eagles show that a range of species are at risk, including some of the rarest birds in Scotland.

We have introduced vicarious liability—I have already gone through that, but I will recap. The Parliament endorsed the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011, and we will see what comes of it in due course. We have asked Scottish Natural Heritage to examine how it can restrict the use of general licences where we have reason to believe that a wildlife crime has been conducted, as I said, and with the Lord Advocate's support, we have signalled to the police our encouragement to them to use the full range of investigative techniques to tackle wildlife crime. I look forward to receiving Professor Poustie's deliberations on wildlife crime penalties. I detect a strong sense in the chamber that people support strengthening action where that is deemed to be necessary. I am sure that Professor Poustie will have reflected on that, too.

I promised to come back to the public consultation on extending the powers of the Scottish SPCA. I will address a couple of points that Claire Baker and others have raised.

The length of the consultation period is genuinely an attempt to allow the maximum possible scrutiny, given the complexity of the issue, the strong feelings on both sides and the strong public interest in the subject. I have borne criticism in the past for not consulting adequately on previous bills and processes—I am not sure whether it was Mr Fergusson who made that point; it may have been another member. It is important that we provide the public and stakeholders with an opportunity to have their say on this important issue.

Dennis Robertson: Does the minister agree that, with the start of the agricultural show season upon us, we have an opportunity to promote the consultation, to highlight wildlife crime and to specify how people can get involved?

Paul Wheelhouse: Mr Robertson asks a very sensible question. We want a strong and broad-based representation of all views across the industry and stakeholders in the conservation area. I will consider his suggestion and see what the possibilities are.

A number of members mentioned a potential amnesty on the disposal of toxins—I am specifically thinking about carbofuran, the toxin that Graeme Dey identified, although members will be aware that other poisons affect wildlife. My officials have been tasked with looking at an existing scheme to do precisely that.

When I spoke about the matter last week at the wildlife crime conference at the Scottish Police College, I reiterated that it was an offence to possess such substances, which pose a risk to those who work in the vicinity and their families. I am not naive enough to think that everybody would hand over their supplies as and when we are able to put something in place. However, those that do not hand them over—I think that this is the point that Mr Dey made—need to take cognisance of the reasonable suggestion that more severe penalties might follow if they ignore the opportunity to surrender material that they are then found in possession of. We must find a means of encouraging people to surrender the material safely, without exposing police officers or others to dangerous chemicals. As I said, we will look at extending existing schemes.

Members have made a number of comments about the Scottish SPCA. Its involvement poses advantages and disadvantages, so we need to be clearer about its role. As we set out in the consultation, a broader range of situations could be opened up to the Scottish SPCA. For example, where no live animals are present, it is unable to intervene.

On the point about whether we have adequate resources to detect and prevent wildlife crime, an additional specialist resource might be made available at no cost to the public purse, and there might be quicker response times in circumstances in which police resources are restricted.

However, I point out to Liam McArthur, Christine Grahame and others that a total of 41 individuals were involved in the search of the Ross-shire farms. I will not detail what they did or did not find, but the amount of people involved gives an idea of the resource that was dedicated to the investigation. I think that the point was made that we can pull in community and non-specialist officers, and not just specialist wildlife crime officers, to support police investigations.

Dave Thompson mentioned animal health inspectors, and I will look at the issue that he raised. Staff from the rural payments and inspections directorate supported the police in the Ross-shire investigation, as did Scottish SPCA and RSPB personnel. We are trying to maximise the number of individuals involved, but I will look into the issue that he raised and see whether it has any mileage.

I strongly welcome Jamie McGrigor's support for the position that we have taken. He mentioned an important issue about the sea eagle action plan in relation to crofters and farmers. We have had a scheme in place to support farmers and crofters who can demonstrate that their livestock has been affected by sea eagles. On next steps, we are looking at continuing to provide similar support.

We need to make clear to people that there are avenues that they can use. For example, they can come to SNH for advice and support if they encounter raptor problems that impact on their livestock—there is no excuse for persecuting them.

Jamie McGrigor: Does the minister agree that it is important that, before raptors such as sea eagles are reintroduced, an impact study should be carried out on what they are likely to eat before they eat it?

Paul Wheelhouse: As Jamie McGrigor probably knows, two studies have been done. The Gairloch study looked at the impact of sea eagles and revealed that there was not the perceived impact on livestock that had been suggested.

I recommend that people visit Langholm moor to see what can be done with regard to diversionary feeding. In that case, it helps hen harriers to co-exist with a sporting estate.

The Scottish Land & Estates wildlife estate Scotland initiative also has value, in that it enables landed estates to demonstrate that they can co-exist happily with a vibrant raptor population and work with conservation interests, to ensure that their sporting interests and wildlife are protected.

I very much welcome the strong signal that the Parliament has sent today in condemnation of wildlife crime and, in particular, raptor persecution. I endorse the words of members across the Parliament and I hope that the debate sends as strong a signal as possible to those who permit such crimes to take place on their land or who carry out the crimes themselves.

Business Motion

17:00

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S4M-09940, in the name of Joe FitzPatrick, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a revision to the business programme for Wednesday 7 May.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Wednesday 7 May 2014—

after

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions
Infrastructure, Investment and Cities;
Culture and External Affairs

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Bedroom
Tax/Discretionary Housing Payments

delete

5.00 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.30 pm Decision Time—[Joe FitzPatrick].

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick): The first question is, that amendment S4M-09915.1, in the name of Kezia Dugdale, which seeks to amend motion S4M-09915, in the name of Aileen Campbell, on the national youth work strategy, “Our ambitions for improving the life chances of young people in Scotland”, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-09915, in the name of Aileen Campbell, as amended, on the national youth work strategy, “Our ambitions for improving the life chances of young people in Scotland”, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the contribution of youth work and community learning and development to making Scotland the best place to grow up and learn; agrees that early intervention assists young people in making positive choices in their lives; acknowledges the publication of the new national youth work strategy, Our ambitions for improving the life chances of young people in Scotland; endorses the collaborative and partnership approach at the heart of the youth work strategy and its implementation plan in taking forward youth work in Scotland, and recognises the dedication of countless volunteers and hardworking but often low-paid staff who deliver youth work services across the country.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S4M-09916.3, in the name of Claire Baker, which seeks to amend motion S4M-09916, in the name of Paul Wheelhouse, on wildlife crime, eradicating raptor persecution from Scotland, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For:

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Allan, Dr Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
Allard, Christian (North East Scotland) (SNP)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Beamish, Claudia (South Scotland) (Lab)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Biagi, Marco (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
Brodie, Chic (South Scotland) (SNP)
Burgess, Margaret (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Campbell, Aileen (Clydesdale) (SNP)
Campbell, Roderick (North East Fife) (SNP)
Chisholm, Malcolm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab)
Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Cunningham, Roseanna (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)

Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don, Nigel (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dugdale, Kezia (Lothian) (Lab)
 Eadie, Jim (Edinburgh Southern) (SNP)
 Fabiani, Linda (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Fee, Mary (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Ferguson, Patricia (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (Lab)
 Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
 Finnie, John (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gibson, Rob (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Iain (East Lothian) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Henry, Hugh (Renfrewshire South) (Lab)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hilton, Cara (Dunfermline) (Lab)
 Hume, Jim (South Scotland) (LD)
 Ingram, Adam (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Johnstone, Alison (Lothian) (Green)
 Keir, Colin (Edinburgh Western) (SNP)
 Kelly, James (Rutherglen) (Lab)
 Lamont, Johann (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)
 Lyle, Richard (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 MacAskill, Kenny (Edinburgh Eastern) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Angus (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 Macdonald, Lewis (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Macintosh, Ken (Eastwood) (Lab)
 Mackay, Derek (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 MacKenzie, Mike (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Malik, Hanzala (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Martin, Paul (Glasgow Provan) (Lab)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCulloch, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McDonald, Mark (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 McDougall, Margaret (West Scotland) (Lab)
 McInnes, Alison (North East Scotland) (LD)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 McLeod, Aileen (South Scotland) (SNP)
 McLeod, Fiona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 McMahan, Michael (Uddingston and Bellshill) (Lab)
 McMahan, Siobhan (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 McMillan, Stuart (West Scotland) (SNP)
 McNeil, Duncan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab)
 McTaggart, Anne (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Murray, Elaine (Dumfriesshire) (Lab)
 Neil, Alex (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Paterson, Gil (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Pearson, Graeme (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Pentland, John (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Dennis (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Rowley, Alex (Cowdenbeath) (Lab)
 Russell, Michael (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Scott, Tavish (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Simpson, Dr Richard (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Smith, Drew (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smith, Elaine (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)
 Stevenson, Stewart (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

Stewart, David (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thompson, Dave (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Urquhart, Jean (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
 Watt, Maureen (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Wheelhouse, Paul (South Scotland) (SNP)
 White, Sandra (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Wilson, John (Central Scotland) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow) (SNP)

Abstentions:

Brown, Gavin (Lothian) (Con)
 Buchanan, Cameron (Lothian) (Con)
 Davidson, Ruth (Glasgow) (Con)
 Fergusson, Alex (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Goldie, Annabel (West Scotland) (Con)
 Johnstone, Alex (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McGregor, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mitchell, Margaret (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Scanlon, Mary (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Scott, John (Ayr) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 99, Against 0, Abstentions 11.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S4M-09916, in the name of Paul Wheelhouse, as amended, on wildlife crime, eradicating raptor persecution from Scotland, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises the impact of wildlife crime in Scotland and the potential strain that this places on Scotland's reputation; believes that the commitment to tackle wildlife crime is shared across the Parliament; acknowledges the work undertaken by the Scottish Government and its relevant bodies and partners in working to tackle wildlife crime, including the review of wildlife crime penalties and the consultation for increased powers for the Scottish SPCA; however believes that the latest wildlife crimes show the urgent need for further action in Scotland; calls on the Scottish Government to conduct a study of licensing and game bird legislation in other countries with a view to working with other parties to review wildlife crime legislation in Scotland; unreservedly condemns the appalling poisoning incident in Ross-shire that has killed at least 20 red kites and buzzards; recognises that these birds are a critical part of Scotland's biodiversity and a key element in the growing wildlife tourism sector; expresses concern about the very worrying disappearance of the first sea eagle chick born from the reintroduced sea eagles on the east coast; considers that an update on the fight against wildlife crime is now timely, and welcomes agencies redoubling efforts to work together to protect Scotland's remarkable wildlife.

Responsible Dog Ownership

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):

The final item of business is a debate on motion S4M-09752, in the name of Kenneth Gibson, on microchipping and muzzling. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the importance of education and awareness in promoting responsible dog ownership in Cunninghame North and across Scotland; welcomes the recent Scottish Government consultation on responsible dog ownership, which proposes introducing compulsory microchipping for all dogs; commends the work of Dogs Trust and the other welfare organisations and local authorities that have called for the introduction of what it considers this important measure; believes that microchipping brings many welfare benefits for dogs, such as the rapid reunification of a lost or straying animal with its owner; recognises what it sees as the government's commitment to promoting responsible dog ownership, but expresses concern about certain proposals considered in the consultation, such as compulsory muzzling, which, it believes, will not bring welfare benefits or adequately tackle the problems of irresponsible ownership.

17:04

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I thank the members who signed the motion and made this debate possible. I also thank Dogs Trust, the Kennel Club and OneKind Charity for their briefings and input.

The Scottish Government recently consulted on microchipping and muzzling to promote responsible dog ownership. The welfare benefits of compulsory microchipping are manifold, but compulsory muzzling could negatively affect dogs' behaviour and welfare. Therefore, I hope that the Scottish ministers, having analysed the consultation responses, will not go down that road.

The promotion of responsible dog ownership must start by recognising the benefits of canine companionship and promoting excellent care and protection for dogs that are under human control. Humane treatment, positive training methods and an understanding of canine behaviour offer the solution to most problems with out-of-control dogs.

Microchipping is simple and effective. Its welfare benefits include the ability to rapidly identify a stray or lost dog and return it to its owner, reducing kennel time and the costs to local authorities, which can emphasise to the owner that straying is not acceptable while reinforcing their responsibilities under the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006. Puppies will be traceable to their breeder, helping to eliminate puppy farming and reducing the incidence of infectious disease and inherited defects from which many such dogs suffer. Microchipping also deters dog theft and makes it easier to identify,

and subsequently penalise, owners who mistreat their animals.

Microchipping and registration also make it more feasible to trace and hold to account the owner of a dog that is involved in an attack, particularly in a public place, when the owner is not present or leaves the scene. In time, irresponsible owners would find it more difficult to evade their responsibility and would be more careful about allowing their dogs to roam.

The problems with out-of-control dogs must be seen in proportion and must be addressed constructively. There is no blanket solution that will solve every problem, and neither the wider dog population nor the majority of owners, who are caring and responsible, should pay the price for irresponsible dog breeding and inappropriate behaviour by a minority.

Compulsory microchipping has been successfully introduced in numerous European countries, from Estonia to Ireland and from Spain to Switzerland. In the United Kingdom, it was successfully introduced in Northern Ireland in 2012, and Wales and England will follow suit in 2015 and 2016 respectively. Surely, the time is now right to do the same in Scotland. Compulsory microchipping would need only passive enforcement if the dog came to the attention of an enforcement officer due to straying or poor behaviour. The cost that would be incurred should be small and would be more than offset by savings in kennelling.

Passive enforcement would involve primarily those owners who behaved irresponsibly. Every local authority should already have access to scanners, and Dogs Trust is willing to provide additional scanners for local authorities that do not have them. I believe that responsible dog owners will take compliance to between 80 and 90 per cent. Those who do not comply are likely to come to the attention of authorities by other means—for example, through dog fouling or through their dogs being out of control in a public place. In Scotland, such owners can be issued with a dog control notice under the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010, which in any case requires the dog to be microchipped.

By contrast, a system of dog licensing would not encourage responsible dog ownership or prevent dog attacks. Dog licensing was abolished in 1987. At that point, the licence cost just 37.5p and fewer than half of owners bought one. The licensing regime was administratively expensive, cumbersome and, in essence, a tax on responsible dog owners. It did not encourage a more responsible attitude towards ownership, nor did it encourage animal welfare, and the revenue that was raised was not ring fenced for those purposes. Northern Ireland is the only part of the

UK still to have dog licensing, yet it has the highest population of stray dogs. That clearly indicates that licensing does not tackle that problem.

The permanent identification that is provided by microchipping has advantages over licensing. Licences need to be renewed, whereas microchipping has a one-off cost and is provided free by Dogs Trust and some other welfare organisations. Licensing would result in costs to local authorities and, unlike compulsory microchipping, would not intrinsically link a dog to its owner. However, updating the owners' details on the database is, of course, an essential part of a compulsory microchipping scheme.

If that important dog welfare measure is introduced, Dogs Trust will offer free chip implantation to dog owners across Scotland as well as training and advice on responsible dog ownership. Indeed, Dogs Trust has already held special microchipping events that owners could attend to get their dog chipped free without an appointment. The first Scottish event was in June last year and was held in Kilbirnie, in my constituency.

There is strong opposition from canine charities and dog owners to any proposal to introduce compulsory muzzling for all dogs in public. Such a measure would unfairly penalise all dogs because of a few and would send the message—particularly to children—that all dogs are dangerous, which is clearly untrue. Although muzzles may be necessary on occasion, muzzling all dogs at all times as a precautionary measure would restrict a dog's ability to behave naturally, could cause distress and, as the Cronin et al study showed in 2003, would not produce the desired effect. Under the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006, an animal's needs include

"its need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns".

Compulsory muzzling would inhibit that in many dogs and would, therefore, breach the act. Muzzles should only ever be seen as a safety measure in exceptional cases and should not be relied on to fix or prevent a potential problem. Muzzles should always be the right size and type for the dog and should be introduced in a way that encourages positive feelings for the animal. The Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010 already allows local authorities to muzzle dogs if their behaviour warrants such action.

Education programmes can teach dog owners of the future about responsible dog ownership through free school workshops and the provision of fun games and teaching resources. By educating young people about the responsibilities and commitment involved in dog ownership, the number of mistreated and abandoned dogs can be

reduced. Dogs Trust has held 3,526 education workshops in Scotland, representing 105,780 children who have now been educated about responsible dog ownership and safety around dogs. An additional education officer for Scotland is soon to be appointed.

Young offenders represent a key audience for responsible dog ownership messages, as many of them have a dog or are under pressure to get one. They might live in environments where status dogs, involvement in dog-related antisocial behaviour, dog abandonment and irresponsible ownership are rife.

In 2010, Dogs Trust launched the pilot of an innovative programme called taking the lead, which offered responsible dog ownership training and workshops for young offenders, both in the community and in custody. That was the first prison-based dog training programme in the United Kingdom and was based at HM Prison and Young Offenders Institution Polmont. The pioneering programme, paws for progress, involves young offenders who train rescue dogs. It aims to help address offending behaviour and to develop responsible ownership and employment skills in preparation for release.

It is essential to find a long-term solution to the horrors of dog attacks, to the nuisance that can be created by out-of-control dogs and to the suffering of neglected or abused animals. We must also be mindful of the things that dogs bring us: companionship, therapeutic and health benefits and a way to learn about care, responsibility and compassion.

I look forward to the minister's response.

17:11

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I start by thanking Kenny Gibson for securing the debate. I thank Dogs Trust for all its work campaigning for compulsory microchipping in Scotland and across the UK.

I apologise to the Parliament for having to leave the debate early this evening. I am disappointed not to be able to listen to other members' speeches; I will study the minister's reply in the *Official Report* tomorrow.

In September 2013, I held a members' business debate on microchipping. Kenny Gibson spoke then of his visit to the rehoming centre in his constituency. I have not visited that Dogs Trust centre, but I have spent time at the centre in West Calder, where I discussed microchipping and I saw how easy it is to scan a dog. For the dog owner, microchipping is quick and cheap, and it is potentially even free. The scheme provides multiple benefits, as was highlighted by Mr Gibson

in his opening speech. It should result in a reduction in the number of dogs that are abandoned or negligently allowed to stray, as well as enabling quick reunion with the owner.

Although the number of stray dogs in Scotland is reducing, which is to be welcomed, it is still at a significant level. The figures for the last year available, 2012-13, show that Scottish local authorities dealt with 3,525 stray dogs. That involves distress for the dogs and their owners, but also adds a considerable expense to the budgets of local authorities, which have to not only provide a dog warden service, but meet the kennelling costs for up to a week.

Microchipping has the advantage of being an immensely popular proposal with the public. A YouGov poll showed that 82 per cent of adults in Scotland would support its introduction. The measure has already been successfully introduced in Northern Ireland and is due to be introduced in Wales and England in the near future.

When I held my members' business debate in September 2013, the Scottish Government had yet to confirm its support for the measure: in his closing speech, the Minister for Environment and Climate Change indicated that the Government still had "some concerns" over its introduction. I am therefore delighted that the Government has overcome those concerns and is now minded towards introduction. That is to the credit of campaigners from across the country, led by charities such as Dogs Trust. I am sure that, like me, members across the Parliament have received emails from their constituents expressing support for the introduction of compulsory microchipping. The Government's journey towards that introduction will have been aided by the campaign. There is evidence that it will be a very positive policy.

Compulsory microchipping is not, however, a measure to tackle dangerous dogs. It is perhaps another tool in the box—it can trace a dog back to its owner and it can help to encourage responsible dog ownership by bringing the owner into contact with services—but it does not itself change the behaviour of dogs or their owners.

The dangerous dogs consultation is disappointing, in that it concerns what I believe is a dog welfare policy, alongside another policy that it would appear no one, including the Government, supports, namely the compulsory muzzling of all dogs. There are legitimate concerns that the introduction of muzzling could have a detrimental impact on the welfare of dogs, as well as reinforcing a negative stereotype of all dogs as dangerous, which is far from the case. Muzzling already plays a part in tackling the issue of dangerous dogs, as long as it is used proportionately. Under the Control of Dogs

(Scotland) Act 2010, muzzling can be included in a dog control notice. I believe that that has the support of animal welfare charities and should be maintained.

We must acknowledge the reason for the consultation, which is the incidence of dog attacks with tragic consequences. How do we address the problem when the owner is beyond changing their behaviour? I accept arguments around breed and deed, and evidence that shows that many incidents happen in the home, but what more can be done to protect communities, and children in particular, from aggressive dogs with irresponsible owners? Unfortunately, the consultation is limited in that area and, although I welcome microchipping, it is not the answer. We should be open to considering other models of dog control.

Of course, education and training for owners, as well as pets, is key. Kenneth Gibson highlighted the work that Dogs Trust is doing with young offenders. However, let us not kid ourselves that all owners will respond to such training. We must be open to considering measures that could give greater protection to communities from dangerous and out-of-control dogs.

I welcome the measure on compulsory microchipping and look forward to its introduction in Scotland.

17:16

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I, too, congratulate the member on securing the debate, which is a bit of a reprise of the debate that Claire Baker secured last September, in which I also took part.

Like others, I support and applaud the work of Dogs Trust. Indeed, a few months ago, I held a microchipping event in Galashiels, which resulted in 121 dogs being microchipped and vet-checked. I would have had more people coming along, but some people did not believe that it was free. I will call my next event, in Newton Grange, "free chips". We will see whether people turn up in greater numbers to that.

My concern about compulsory microchipping is that it might be seen as a remedy that will end attacks by out-of-control and dangerous dogs. Of course, it will not.

The Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010 started off as a member's bill, which I took control of from Alex Neil when he was promoted. I express my regret to the minister that that act is not better publicised. Had it been Government legislation, it would have got more publicity, but, as a member, I cannot give it an equivalent amount of publicity. I have met councillors and farmers who did not

even know of the act's existence. Those are people who should be in the know but are not. While we are busy going down the track towards more legislation, let us advertise the legislation that is already in place.

The problem with compulsory microchipping is not so much how to get the microchipping done, but the question of who registers it and how the information is kept up to date. I recall the words of Mike Flynn, a senior inspector at the SSPCA, who said:

"We support voluntary micro chipping of pets but not necessarily compulsory chipping. There is no point in making it compulsory unless there was a system and legislation in place, to ensure that the details are kept up to date and transfer of ownership is recorded (the same as if you sell a car)."

I raised the issue in Claire Baker's previous debate. We must overcome it.

My response to the Government's consultation was very much along the lines of the briefing from Advocates for Animals. Indeed, I confess that I poached one of its ideas, which was a presumption in law that all dogs be microchipped by a certain date. That is a roundabout way of delivering compulsory microchipping, but it also involves welfare issues.

That leads us to what Kenneth Gibson called "passive enforcement." If there is a presumption that all dogs will be microchipped, anyone can be stopped after a certain date and asked why their dog is not microchipped. The question then is who is responsible for the dog being microchipped. In my consultation response, I suggested that that person should be the owner of the dog, or a person who can reasonably be presumed to be the owner of the dog. That person could be the breeder, with the microchipping being done as part of the selling of the puppy in the first place. The buck should certainly stop with the owner or someone who is presumed to be the owner—that is who should be responsible for ensuring that the register is up to date.

I say to Claire Baker that some people support the compulsory muzzling of dogs in public places. I think that the idea is a non-starter. Let us start by considering the question of defining what a dog is. When does a puppy become a dog? How do we define that? Further, vicious attacks often occur in family homes or gardens, so muzzling dogs in public places would not deal with that. Are working dogs to be exempt? What about guard dogs? Is a guard dog to be muzzled? When is it a formal guard dog and when—let us put it in quotes—an "informal" guard dog? Again, those are difficult enforcement issues. Kenny Gibson has already referred to muzzling interfering with the natural activities of a dog and sending a message, particularly to children, that dogs are bad news,

which, in the main, they are not. On occasion, owners are bad news, but not the dogs themselves.

I refer to the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010, which requires muzzling when appropriate. Failure to muzzle when required is a civil offence, which means that the standard of proof and evidence is just on the balance of probabilities, so it is not too hard to get the evidence to determine whether there has been a breach. However, at the end of the day, if a requirement to muzzle all dogs went through, it would allow reckless owners to be even less responsible because they could always say, "My dog was muzzled at the time."

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Q has been giving your remarks his full attention. I now call Christine Grahame—sorry, Alex Fergusson, to be followed by Malcolm Chisholm.

17:20

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Christine Grahame once in the debate is quite enough, Presiding Officer.

I join other members in congratulating Kenny Gibson and Dogs Trust on enabling the debate to take place. I find myself in a troubled situation because I have just listened to Kenny Gibson and have—probably for the first time ever—agreed with every word that he said. What troubles me more than that is that I listened to Rob Gibson in a previous debate and, uniquely I think, agreed with every single word that he said. Graeme Dey put it to me that if I keep going like this, I might find myself agreeing with the back benchers of that party on a question that they will be asking in September. Let me put it firmly on the record: "No. I won't." I am sorry if that brings disappointment.

This is an important debate. Even if it is a reprise of a previous debate, I am glad that it has been brought back and I congratulate Kenny Gibson on bringing it back. I start on the issue of muzzling. In the motion, we are asked to express concern at the prospect of muzzling. I want to do more than express concern about it. I want to state that I would utterly and completely oppose the proposal. I find it totally ridiculous. It goes completely against nature and would, in some cases, be tantamount to cruelty for some dogs.

Dogs need to be able to lick, smell and snuffle— if that is a proper word—or, to put it more politically correctly, to exercise their natural behaviour patterns. Muzzling would prevent them from doing so. If I was a cynic, I would say that it is almost a straw man option. I think that only one question in the consultation referred to muzzling, while some 30 referred to microchipping. Whatever the reason it was in the consultation, I hope that it is there to be taken out, because it is

quite clear that, apart from some individuals, no one really supports the proposal. I cannot support it either.

I come to the more robust proposal about microchipping. Without repeating all the arguments that have been made, I can see nothing but plusses in the proposal. It would increase responsibility and accountability. It would certainly improve the traceability of dogs that have been abandoned or lost. It is one of those proposals for which the time is right, full stop, and I would not argue against it.

I will raise one concern, however. I am interested that Elaine Murray is here and I hope that I am not about to pinch one of her arguments. She will be as aware as I am that in Dumfries and Galloway we have a particular problem with greyhounds being abandoned. The dogs are largely of Irish origin, the logic being that the A75, which brings people from Ireland, is a handy dropping-off point for unwanted greyhounds. It is not a small problem. Dumfriesshire and Cumbria Greyhound Rescue is a rehoming charity that has rehoused 1,000 such animals in the past decade.

Racing greyhounds are identified by tattooed marks in their ears. In far too many cases, the dogs' ears have been mutilated and sometimes even cut off before they have been abandoned in order to ensure that they are not traced back to their roots. The reason that I raised that in regard to microchipping is that yesterday I emailed Libby Anderson—formerly of the Scottish SPCA and now of OneKind—and asked her whether she had any information on how easy or difficult it is to remove microchips after they have been put in place. She said that

“it is universally acknowledged that microchips cannot be removed or tampered with, without surgical intervention.”

I simply want to raise a concern about the prospect that unscrupulous people, who want to abandon their dogs, will try to get rid of the microchip in a horrible DIY surgical intervention, which I suggest would involve no anaesthetic whatever. I worry about that prospect. While it is certainly not a concern that would make me oppose the proposal, it is one that we need to be aware of as we move forward with this programme.

17:25

Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (Lab): I congratulate Kenny Gibson on securing the debate. I think that it is our third debate on dogs in the past few months—my colleagues Paul Martin and Claire Baker having secured the earlier ones—which shows what an important subject dogs are to a lot of people.

I do not have any background with dogs, but as a constituency MSP, I know that dogs are a massive issue in my constituency, as it is in others. They come up nearly every week when I go to meetings. I apologise because I might have to leave this debate early if it runs on; I have to go to a meeting this evening, at which I expect dogs will be mentioned. Dog fouling is the issue that is usually mentioned at residents meetings, but last week someone was complaining about a Dobermann that regularly visits the house next door. The owner does not have it on a lead and it has been growling at the resident's children. Those are examples that come up every week.

I suppose that I have a personal angle on this now, because I have grandchildren and I go to the park with them. Of course, they cannot play in lots of the parks because of the dog fouling. The worst example that I saw a couple of weeks ago was dog fouling on a roundabout in a children's playground. The issue comes up all the time.

I am slightly disappointed by the Scottish Government's consultation. I totally welcome it and I absolutely support microchipping, in support of which I spoke in Claire Baker's previous debate, so I will not repeat the arguments in favour of it, which seem to have widespread support in Parliament. I am disappointed, however, because only the last two pages of the consultation document refer to the two issues that really concern my constituents and, I am sure, other members' constituents; dog fouling and dangerous dogs.

As Alex Fergusson said, the idea of muzzling all dogs is a straw man, if that is the right phrase. I have never come across anybody who proposes that, so why on earth it is the only substantive suggestion in the section on dangerous dogs is a bit of a mystery to me. It is an opportunity that other options for control of dangerous dogs are not being given. Equally, on dog fouling, there are no proposals at all, although the obvious suggestion of increasing the fine seems to me to be something that we should certainly pursue.

Let us concentrate on dangerous dogs. I totally agree with what Christine Grahame has done and said on that issue. If the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010 was being implemented effectively, in principle that would be the right approach. Action should be targeted against particular individuals who are causing problems, although we would want to rely on the courts imposing proper penalties and sanctions.

I had another constituency example recently of someone whose dog had behaved absolutely horrifically. It was coming to the end of the control period and a constituent of mine was worried that the dog owner would be allowed to own a dog again. If someone's dog has caused absolute

havoc, they should never again be allowed to own a dog.

We need to look at intermediate options. No one is suggesting muzzling all dogs, and microchipping will not solve the problem, so we have to consider muzzling some dogs. I know that some people do not like the idea of picking particular breeds and I know that in principle that is not right but, realistically, it might be an option that we have to consider. If muzzling is ruled out, why not let us look at the issue of dogs on leads. If more dogs that are a threat to the public were kept on leads, especially short leads, that would help to avoid the problems that arise.

Christine Grahame: Will Malcolm Chisholm take an intervention?

Malcolm Chisholm: I do not think that I have time; I am in my last minute.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You can take back the time.

Christine Grahame: I simply remind Malcolm Chisholm that bad though attacks in public areas are, most really bad attacks take place on private land and in homes, so leads would not be the answer and would not cure that problem.

Malcolm Chisholm: We cannot solve all the problems with one measure, but if we could solve the problem in public places, it would certainly make the lives of many of my and, I am sure, Christine Grahame's constituents a lot better. It would be particularly helpful for children, for whom I have a particular concern.

We have to look at the options of more dogs being kept on leads and possibly more dogs being muzzled. It is a missed opportunity that those intermediate options are not dealt with in the consultation paper.

17:29

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): I begin by paying tribute to the Dogs Trust. All too often we MSPs are approached by organisations promoting an approach that they wish the Government to adopt, with no recognition of the cost implications for local or national government or, indeed, for individuals. In addition, very often they have not entirely considered the unintended consequences of what they are calling for.

However, when it comes to pressing the case for compulsory microchipping, the Dogs Trust is to be commended both for marshalling a robust argument and for being prepared to put its hands in its own pockets, as it were, to make its proposal a reality.

I must admit that initially I had some slight reservations about compulsory microchipping;

reservations that its cost could put people on lower incomes off dog ownership or push them down the road of purchasing pups from irresponsible breeders. However, I have become a convert through a combination of the case that the Dogs Trust has made and its commitment to carrying out free chip implantation across Scotland. That commitment is backed by a track record of delivery, with 2,214 dogs being chipped last year and 3,500 more so far this year. I do not know whether the Dogs Trust is represented in the gallery today, but I would happily promote a visit by one of its roaming chipping teams to my constituency.

The arguments for microchipping—if it is financially achievable and thereafter can be monitored in a way that is practical and non-burdensome for local authorities—have always been there, but with only four minutes at my disposal I will not rehearse them. By highlighting how such a scheme could be made to work through passive enforcement, by identifying how councils need not face considerable additional expense and by offering to buy additional scanners for local authorities, the Dogs Trust has, for me, won the argument.

It has done the same when comparing and contrasting the effectiveness of microchipping versus re-introducing a dog licensing scheme, and in challenging the need for compulsory muzzling of all dogs in public—a proposal that clearly has no support in Parliament.

We must recognise the huge importance of education when it comes to encouraging responsible dog ownership. The Dogs Trust claims to have engaged since the beginning of 2012 with more than 100,000 Scottish schoolchildren through its education programme. That is terrific, but it is not alone in working in that area. In my constituency of Angus South, for example, a membership group called Carnoustie Canine Capers is extremely active in encouraging responsible dog ownership through, among other things, its green dog walkers project and its talks for youngsters.

We must recognise that responsible dog ownership does not end at having the pet microchipped, but involves treating the dog well and ensuring that it behaves in a manner that does not cause fear and alarm to others, or create an environmental menace.

I want to conclude by focusing on how those last two points pertain to rural settings. Although probably the majority of owners would not allow their dogs to stray and interact in a menacing way with other animals, and are always geared up to clean up when their pets have done their business in public places, there are those who do not and are not, and such disregard for the countryside

environment that they enjoy can have serious implications.

The NFU Scotland is to lodge a petition in Parliament on having agricultural land included—albeit with provisos—in the Dog Fouling (Scotland) Act 2003, and to have enforcement powers granted to the police or local authorities under the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003. My colleague Fiona McLeod has been involved in the issue for some time. The petition has been sparked by problems over livestock being harassed by dogs that are off the lead, and the livestock's coming into contact with parasites that are found in some dog faeces, which leads, it is claimed, to abortions in cattle and death in sheep.

It is an important issue and one that I hope the Dogs Trust might incorporate into its messaging regarding responsible dog ownership. The countryside is not just there to be enjoyed; it is also a place of work. The message to dog owners who visit it must be this: Keep your dogs under control and please clean up after them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Due to the number of members who still wish to speak in the debate, I am minded to accept a motion without notice to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[Kenneth Gibson.]

Motion agreed to.

17:33

Elaine Murray (Dumfriesshire) (Lab): I congratulate Kenny Gibson on securing the debate. I had some concerns about the wording of the last part of his motion, which I will refer to later, but he explained his intention and we are in complete agreement on compulsory muzzling of all dogs.

I have kept dogs for much of my life. I have also been attacked by dogs and have scars to show it. On one occasion I was attacked by a German shepherd when I was out campaigning on my own, and it was quite an alarming experience. Tragically, many people have experienced far worse, so it is important that measures be taken to reinforce dog owners' responsibilities to both look after and control their dogs.

I and Labour members supported the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010, which began as a member's bill that Christine Grahame introduced. As Christine does, I wonder whether its provisions are fully understood and implemented. However, I agree with the Scottish Government that it is time to consider other measures, although, as others do, I think that the consultation is rather limited. I

would like to see more strict action being taken on dog fouling, for example.

Scotland is lagging behind other parts of the United Kingdom with regard to compulsory microchipping, so I am pleased that legislation on that may now be forthcoming.

On licensing, I have an open mind. It could be a way ensuring that dog owners are made aware of their responsibilities. The Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 required the Scottish Government to issue guidance on looking after various species including dogs, but I am not sure how widely that guidance is currently available. Part of licensing could be raising awareness of the correct care and control of dogs. I look forward to the results of the consultation and to hearing the views of the public.

We own two jackahuahua bitches—they are Jack Russell-Chihuahua crosses. They are both microchipped and there was, despite the fact that they are small dogs, no problem at all in having that done. To pick up on Alex Fergusson's point, I do not know where the microchips are in the dogs, so it would be difficult to take them out. However, the microchips bring us peace of mind that, should the dogs get lost or worse, they could be identified and we would be informed.

If the evidence suggests that I require to be licensed to keep my dogs, I am prepared to undertake whatever might be necessary to do so. However, I would have a significant problem with being obliged to have them muzzled in public. Members who know the characteristics of the breeds of dogs from which mine come will appreciate that jackahuahuas can be snappy, noisy little creatures. Therefore, we keep our dogs under control when other dogs or children approach, and I always warn children and their parents that dogs snap on occasion and that mine have been known to do so.

I also always carry bags on my person. In fact, I sometimes come into the chamber and find a bag hanging out of my jacket. It is important that we carry bags with us all the time if we have dogs.

The suggestion that all dogs might have to be muzzled in public has generated a huge amount of local correspondence. A constituent slightly mistook the process that the Scottish Government was undertaking and wrote to one of the local newspapers saying that the Scottish Parliament was about to pass a bill compelling all dogs to be muzzled in public, which caused consternation among, and a huge flurry of correspondence from, dog owners throughout my constituency.

Of course, I assured everyone who contacted me that muzzling is just part of a consultation and that there is no bill at present. I intend to get back to all of them with the content of this debate

because it might reassure them if they read what is being said.

Muzzling should not be imposed on well-behaved dogs that are under control and have well-behaved owners, if the dogs present no danger to people or other dogs. There are welfare issues associated with muzzling. For example, dogs require to pant to cool down so I know that many vets would be concerned about the proposal for compulsory muzzling of all dogs.

I had some concerns about the wording of the motion, because it might be interpreted as saying that compulsory muzzling should never be used. It can be imposed on a particular dog as part of a dog control notice; the alternative could be to have the animal destroyed. The potential to require an individual dog to be muzzled because its behaviour is frightening or dangerous should not be lost altogether, so I was pleased that Kenny Gibson reassured me that he also holds that view.

I look forward to the result of the consultation. We need to stress the need for dog owners to be responsible. Whatever the size of their dog—large or small—we should persuade people to be as responsible as possible in their dog ownership, so I will be interested to see the consultation results. However, we also need to consider stronger controls on dog fouling, because the public are concerned about it.

17:38

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): I, too, congratulate my colleague Kenny Gibson on securing the debate. I am also grateful for the briefings from the Dogs Trust and OneKind that have helped to inform me.

As those charities do, I support the motion, which calls for compulsory microchipping of dogs but opposes the call for muzzling of all dogs in public. Microchipping is the responsible thing to do, as the Dogs Trust says. I will not repeat all the reasons in favour of it that other members have mentioned, but it is clear that it would help to enforce owners' responsibilities under the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006. However, I agree with members who said that it would certainly not solve all the problems with dog mauling.

I oppose the compulsory muzzling of dogs because it would punish dogs that are no threat to anyone, and I agree with Alex Fergusson that it would be cruel. It would also not be justified because it would not have prevented some of the worst cases of dog mauling, which have occurred on private property, as Christine Grahame said.

My dog is a Cavalier King Charles spaniel, which is one of the most gentle and docile breeds

of dog in existence; that is why I got it. I had no experience of owning a dog when I bought one for my children. I did not come from a family of dog owners, so I felt that I should get a dog that would not, if I did not get it quite right, cause problems for anyone else. We should remember that dogs and humans have been companions for thousands of years, and that that relationship has been overwhelmingly positive.

Just the other week, I was in this chamber with two hearing dogs from Action on Hearing Loss. We know that, through the work that hearing dogs and dogs for the blind and people with other conditions do, they make an extremely positive contribution to society. Even for people who do not have disabilities, dogs can provide companionship and ease loneliness, and there is considerable academic and scientific evidence that dogs reduce stress and have health benefits for their owners.

I do not want to dismiss the issue of dog attacks, because it is very serious and should not be trivialised, but it is difficult to legislate for. I remember reporting on the last death in Scotland in 1989 when a young girl was tragically killed by Rottweilers. I was struck by the fact that the UK legislation after that attack and a spate of other attacks—the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991—did not include Rottweilers. I am very aware that it is controversial to talk about “dangerous” breeds, and that it is also true that it is the owner and not the dog who is most often at fault. I also praise schemes such as the prison scheme that Kenneth Gibson highlighted. However, the fact is that some breeds of dog are more dangerous than others.

When I was researching the subject, I found an American study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which found that pit bull terriers and Rottweilers accounted for 67 per cent of the deaths over the 10-year period of the study. We cannot argue with such statistics.

Although the previous licensing system was not ideal, the Government should consider a licensing system that would encourage responsible dog ownership. I was struck by what Elaine Murray said about controlling her dogs and warning children who want to clap them. I read about a little girl who was mauled by a dog. She had asked whether she could clap it and the owner said yes, but they had only had the dog for two days and did not know about its background and history, and the little girl received severe facial injuries. In particular cases and with particular breeds, we need to consider enforcing responsibilities on owners.

Some members have mentioned that the current legislation is not being enforced. In the consultation process, the statistics bear that out. For example, in the years that have been studied, in Glasgow—our biggest city and one that has a

problem with dogs in certain areas—only two dog control orders were issued. Aberdeen City Council carried out 317 investigations of dogs in one year, but issued just four dog control notices. We have legislation in place, but it is not being enforced as we all wish it to be enforced.

17:43

Jean Urquhart (Highlands and Islands) (Ind):

I, too, welcome the debate and congratulate Kenneth Gibson on bringing it to the chamber.

Last summer, I was invited to visit the Dogs Trust rehoming centre in Uddingston. As someone who always had dogs until very recently, it was sad and yet uplifting for me to learn about the number of dogs that are picked up by the trust—more than 4,500 in 2012—and are then all well cared for by the staff and volunteers until they can be rehomed or their owners can be traced. I was also very impressed by the dedicated work of the staff. It was their first-hand accounts of current issues of animal welfare that led to my support for compulsory microchipping.

Compulsory microchipping would go a long way towards helping to reduce the numbers and to improve animal welfare in Scotland. Currently, 40 per cent of reunions between dog and owner are due to microchipping and registration. With a compulsory scheme, more of those cases could be solved. Of course, not every dog that is picked up by local authorities or the Dogs Trust is genuinely lost, and some are found with clear signs of neglect or worse. Compulsory microchipping would help to bring to justice more individuals who are clearly unfit owners. Although, as OneKind noted, microchipping would not on its own protect dogs from neglect and ill treatment, it would help to trace the perpetrators.

I agree with the Dogs Trust and OneKind that proposals to introduce muzzling would be a retrograde step for animal welfare. It would treat the symptom rather than the cause, while at the same time punishing the vast majority of dogs and their owners for the actions of a few. It would suggest that every dog is dangerous and would breed distrust and fear, and there is no evidence that it would reduce dog violence in general.

There are obviously some individual dogs that require muzzling, but there is already a mechanism in place for that. Placing a general requirement on all dogs would be authoritarian and unnecessary, and would not have my support.

Another element of animal welfare that should be considered, and which has not been mentioned, is the suitability of certain breeds for certain lifestyles. On my visit to the Dogs Trust, I saw a large number of active dogs—huskies, malamutes and collies—that had been abandoned

or brought to the centre by owners who had realised that they really did not have the time, space, energy or ability to give their pets the exercise that they needed. The Dogs Trust is careful to ensure that every dog that it rehomes is matched to an owner with the capacity, both physical and environmental, to satisfy the dog's needs. That is another element that we perhaps need to think about.

My hope is that the debate can help to start a conversation in Scotland about responsible dog ownership in all its forms, and that the benefits of compulsory microchipping, as well as the case against muzzling, are recognised and taken on board.

17:47

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP):

Like other members, I congratulate both Kenneth Gibson and the Dogs Trust on bringing the debate to the chamber. My contribution to the debate is, I hope, as a responsible dog owner, although Mr Q may sometimes question that when I want to take him out in all conditions regardless of the weather. My point is a serious one, because it is about responsible dog owners. I was privileged to go to the summit on responsible dog ownership, where the commitment of the Government was evident because two cabinet secretaries were there.

We have heard a lot about compulsory microchipping, which speaks for itself. It is the way to go and it should happen. When I was a member of the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee, I tried to get the issue into the work programme, although that was not possible because of other commitments. However, I have discussed it with the cabinet secretary many times and I believe that the consultation will prove to be extremely supportive of compulsory microchipping.

I agree with others who have said that microchipping will not solve the problem of dog attacks, but neither would muzzling, which I totally oppose. However, I am convinced that appropriate and responsible dog ownership can make a difference.

Malcolm Chisholm spoke about keeping dogs on a lead in public places. I would say that that is absolutely to be encouraged, certainly in built-up areas, where a dog should always be on a lead. I have some sympathy with Christine Grahame's remarks about the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010, which was introduced as a member's bill but is not enforced.

My understanding is that a dog should be on the lead when it is in an urban area, on pavements or elsewhere, but a lead also needs to be under

control. Often, we see people using extending leads that allow their dog to be 20 feet or further in front of them, and they have no control over that dog. If people have dogs that they find difficult to control, they are encouraged by veterinary practices and by others to get appropriate training, and I support that. Using a Halti can offer appropriate training and provide some reassurance to members of the public, especially with dogs that jump up. The dog should be under control at all times.

Guide Dogs has always supported microchipping for its dogs, especially for those dogs that can sometimes go astray away from their owners when they are playing, and there have been occasions on which guide dogs have actually been stolen in public places. I support and fully endorse microchipping, but I do not support muzzling. As I have said, we should look at raising awareness in terms of responsible dog ownership. I think that all members would welcome that. I hope that the minister will take cognisance of Christine Grahame's point that appropriate legislation already exists and that perhaps we should address the issue of its proper enforcement.

Dogs are territorial. As has been mentioned, when we as MSPs are out campaigning or when postmen are delivering mail, dogs are sometimes territorial and protect their patch. If that is the case and the dog owners are aware of it, the dogs should either be kept inside or should be on a restricting lead when outside. If they are not on a lead, there should be a notice advising people to be aware that a dog is present.

17:50

Paul Martin (Glasgow Provan) (Lab): Like others, I congratulate Kenny Gibson on his very thoughtful speech and on promoting the good work of the Dogs Trust. Indeed, I have visited my local Dogs Trust centre, which is in the Glasgow East constituency area, and I arranged for my dog, Buster, to be microchipped during that visit.

I agree with Dennis Robertson that the debate about microchipping dogs is straightforward. Microchipping would ensure that dog owners take responsibility for their pets and consider more seriously their role as responsible dog owners.

The Dogs Trust promotes and encourages responsible dog ownership. As the last member to speak in the debate before the minister, I am aware that almost all the previous speakers have advised that they are opposed to the possibility of muzzling all dogs in public places. However, I ask members to consider ensuring that the Parliament is given the opportunity to interrogate the possibilities and examples that exist in other parts

of the world, including the example in the Republic of Ireland, where compulsory muzzling is in place for dogs with certain physical attributes.

I say that about muzzling because of my experience in dealing with the case of Broagan McCuaig, who many members will recall I spoke about in a previous members' business debate that I brought to the chamber. Broagan was eight years old when she was attacked by two American bulldogs. Since that vicious attack in October last year, Broagan has continued to go through a rehabilitation process. Other speakers referred to examples of more serious dog attacks, which include the case of Kelly Lynch, who was attacked by two Rottweilers.

Given that serious dog attacks have taken place, I think that it would be wrong for Parliament to simply rule out the possibility of muzzling dogs without members being given the opportunity to take evidence through the parliamentary committee process from various experts in the field and to consider other options at the same time. We should also consider the very good work that has already taken place. I give special mention in that regard to the Alexandria and district community dog management centre, whose whole emphasis is on ensuring that people are responsible enough to be dog owners in the first place prior to their taking ownership of a dog. The emphasis of the project is on ensuring that people are trained to be dog owners rather than on training the dogs.

The challenge that faces the Parliament is to ensure that we look at all the available evidence, including that on muzzling and the examples of good work in places such as the Alexandria dog centre. We should also consider, as Malcolm Chisholm said, the examples of some of the horrific incidents, while recognising that we do not have all the answers for taking the issue forward. However, I think that it would be wrong of us to discount any option without taking evidence on it first.

17:54

The Minister for Environment and Climate Change (Paul Wheelhouse): I thank my colleague Kenneth Gibson for lodging the motion for this evening's debate and the other colleagues who have contributed so ably to it. It is probably the first time that members have not called for Kenneth Gibson to be muzzled—given the subject, I thought that that was likely to happen, but it did not. In fact, Alex Fergusson praised Kenneth Gibson very highly; I imagine that he will probably get a rap over the knuckles from the whips when he gets back.

As is the case in many areas, education is a critical part of the process. Members might be aware that the Scottish Government published its "Code of Practice for the Welfare of Dogs" in 2010. Although it provides an important reference source for all dog owners, I whole-heartedly support the proposal to commend the work of the Dogs Trust and other animal welfare organisations. A number of members have mentioned the Dogs Trust, and I commend it for the support that it has provided to members for this evening's debate and for its contribution to the wider debate.

We have many such organisations in Scotland, and they perform a vital role in helping animals in need, in spreading important messages about our responsibilities as pet owners and in helping to inform developing policies on the way forward.

Members might be aware that the Scottish SPCA is celebrating 175 years of rescuing and rehoming animals, including a significant number of dogs. The organisation also provides an exemplary free educational service to Scotland's children through its prevention through education programme, which encourages our children to treat animals with compassion and respect.

I know that my colleague Richard Lochhead—who, unfortunately, could not be here today—has been struck by the passionate commitment of the Dogs Trust to promoting responsible ownership that benefits the animals and the general public. It works actively to improve standards and to provide practical help, such as free microchipping. The example that Kenneth Gibson gave of the trust's visit to his constituency was an interesting one, and I think that Christine Grahame gave a similar example. There cannot be many people who are unaware of the trust's message, "A dog is for life, not just for Christmas."

However, we must not forget the equally vital role that local authorities have to play in enforcing dog control and dog welfare legislation, and the challenges that they face in such work. That strong message came out of the summit on responsible dog ownership that was held on 27 March this year; another message was about the need to share best practice.

We expect to obtain useful feedback on responsible ownership issues from the responses to our consultation, "Promoting responsible dog ownership in Scotland: microchipping and other measures". I am pleased that the consultation has been welcomed by Kenneth Gibson and other colleagues. It is clear that the matter is of huge importance to the people of Scotland.

The consultation closed on 31 March. Around 2,500 responses were received from a diverse range of people and organisations. That massive response demonstrates clearly the strength of

feeling on the issue. The process of analysing the responses is now under way, and a report should be available this summer.

As has been the case in this evening's debate, the main focus of the consultation was on the potential for compulsory microchipping of all dogs. The Scottish Government has long recognised the benefits of voluntary microchipping in reuniting lost dogs with their owners. Indeed, microchipping is recommended as best practice in the code of practice. I am aware that there are mixed views on the effectiveness of microchipping alone in preventing dog attacks or combating welfare issues such as puppy farming. The point that microchipping will not be a silver bullet that solves all the problems is a fair one; it should be one element of an overall strategy.

I am also aware that there are concerns about how to enforce such a measure effectively—Christine Grahame and others commented on that—and about the financial impact on responsible dog owners and those who use dogs in the course of their business.

However, I agree with my colleague Kenneth Gibson that compulsory microchipping could have a number of benefits for animal welfare and could encourage responsible ownership, provided that we are realistic about what we can achieve using the technology and that we can arrive at effective solutions that address the challenges of enforcement and funding. We will consider extremely carefully the views that have been provided in response to the consultation on the benefits of microchipping, the challenges that it presents and how they can be overcome before we decide on a way forward for Scotland. We will also consider the potential benefits and challenges of a licensing regime.

The motion is supportive of compulsory microchipping, but it raises concerns about the compulsory muzzling of all dogs. Those concerns have been reflected in most of the speeches that we have heard in the debate. I take on board the point that Mr Martin made about the role of muzzling in the light of incidents such as the one that he described, which was a great tragedy, and a suggestion about muzzling was made in the consultation.

My colleague Mr Lochhead and I share the concerns about muzzling in general. Legal provision for muzzling dogs that are known to have been out of control is in place under the Control of Dogs (Scotland) Act 2010. Dog control notices can include a range of measures, such as muzzling the dog when it is in a place to which the public have access, keeping the dog on a lead, neutering and attendance at dog behavioural training.

I take the point that many severe incidents have taken place in private settings. We must be mindful of that, but the suggestion of compulsory muzzling of all dogs in public raises significant welfare concerns, which many members have mentioned. That has been a hot topic in many of the responses to the consultation from dog owners. There is no doubt that muzzling can prevent dogs from biting, but widespread muzzling is not necessarily a proportionate step.

Muzzling impairs the ability of dogs to pant and drink water when exercising. It could also impede normal positive social interaction with other dogs and people, such as sniffing and licking—Alex Fergusson made that point. That could have the unintended consequence of resulting in more, rather than fewer, behavioural problems in our dogs.

Given the tragic results of dog attacks, which Mr Martin outlined, we have a duty to consider all options that could prevent further injuries. However, a sensible balance must be struck between public safety from the risk posed by relatively few dogs and the welfare of the large dog population in Scotland.

We must remember that the majority of owners of the 640,000 dogs in Scotland are responsible and their dogs are well cared for and well controlled. I take the point that Joan McAlpine, Christine Grahame and Dennis Robertson made about ensuring that local authorities know about the existing powers and use them when that is appropriate.

Given the horrific consequences for dog welfare and public safety that can occur when things go wrong, we have a moral and social obligation to continue to strive for better ways to tackle the irresponsible owners who place dogs and people at risk. I was greatly encouraged to hear the examples of Carnoustie canine capers, in Mr Dey's constituency of Angus, and Alexandria dog care centre, in Mr Martin's area, which are helping to ensure that owners understand how to look after their dogs and treat them responsibly.

Emotions may—understandably—run high, but a proportionate way forward needs to be forged that recognises the many benefits to society of responsible dog ownership, while dealing more effectively with those who behave irresponsibly.

Meeting closed at 18:02.

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