



British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill Update

Education and Culture Committee

British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill: Stage 2

The Convener:

Our next item is stage 2 consideration of the British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill. I welcome Mark Griffin, the member in charge of the bill, and his officials; and Dr Alasdair Allan, Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages, and his officials. I remind everyone that officials are not permitted to participate in the formal proceedings. I also welcome Dennis Robertson, who is not a member of the committee but who has lodged some amendments.

Everyone should have a copy of the marshalled list of amendments, which was published on Friday, and the groupings of amendments, setting out the amendments in the order in which they will be debated. As usual, the proceedings will be interpreted in BSL.

For the benefit of those who are following today's proceedings, I will run through the main procedures. There will be one debate on each group of amendments. I will call the member who lodged the first amendment in a group to speak to and move that amendment and to speak to all the other amendments in the group. Members who have not lodged amendments in the group but who wish to speak should indicate that by catching my attention in the usual way.

If the minister and Mark Griffin, as the member in charge, have not already spoken on the group, I will invite them to contribute to the debate, just before I move to the winding-up speech. The debate on the group will be concluded by me inviting the member who moved the first amendment in the group to wind up.

Following debate on each group, I will check whether the member who moved the first amendment in the group wishes to press it to a vote or to withdraw it. If they wish to press ahead, I will put the question on that amendment. If a member wishes to withdraw their amendment after it has been moved, they must seek the committee's agreement to do so. If any committee member objects, the committee immediately moves to the vote on that amendment.

If any member does not want to move their amendment when called, they should say, "Not moved." Please note that any other MSP may move such an amendment. If no one moves the amendment, I will immediately call the next amendment on the marshalled list.

Only committee members are allowed to vote. Voting in any division is by a show of hands. It is important that members keep their hands clearly raised until the clerk has recorded the vote. Although Mark Griffin is a member of the committee, as he is the member in charge of the bill, he is not able to vote during these proceedings.

The committee is required to indicate formally that it has considered and agreed each section of and schedule to the bill, and so I will put a question on each section at the appropriate point. It is our intention to get through all of the amendments today.

To read the full report on the amendments put forward, go to

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=9990>

Scotland's National Action Plan for Human Rights - SNAP

Justice Committee

The Convener:

We move on to agenda item 3. As members are aware, John Finnie is our rapporteur on "Scotland's National Action Plan for Human Rights". I invite him to update the committee on his latest meeting with Professor Alan Miller, chair of the Scottish Human Rights Commission.

John Finnie:

Thank you, convener. I do not know the extent to which you wish me to go into this. You have the clerk's paper, but I can make some general comments.

I am very grateful to Professor Alan Miller, who is a very busy man, not just in respect of human rights in Scotland but, as you know, on the European and international stages, where he holds various positions. We discussed Scotland's national action plan, which is the focus of a lot of the work of the Scottish Human Rights Commission.

In paragraph 5 of the clerk's paper you will see that culture features in the SNAP. Paragraph 5 talks about

"Innovation Forums to identify opportunities to empower people to understand and use their rights".

I know from engagement with some groups that historically people have not seen human rights as being particularly relevant to them within a variety of fields, such as health and social care, in which there can be issues with welfare, care homes, the right to dignity and simple things such as levels of hydration—fundamental human rights.

Last week we heard a ministerial statement on the historical child abuse inquiry, which the Scottish Human Rights Commission has been involved in. As you know, it is also a regular respondent to calls for evidence from this committee.

The SHRC has also been involved with the police service, which contributes to Scotland's national action plan. Members will be aware that the SHRC has engaged on issues such as human rights training at the Scottish Police College. It is fair to record that there have been discussions on some of the issues in relation to stop and search and questions of proportionality. It is good that the SHRC can be seen as an honest broker in the scheme of things; people are willing to engage with it.

There has been planning for a disability summit in 2015 and we discussed the publication of a draft report and delivery plan. I provided some information on the work of the committee and the Justice Sub-committee on Policing in providing scrutiny of issues such as human trafficking and fatal accident inquiries.

I said on behalf of the committee that I would be very happy to keep in touch with Professor Miller on any emerging issues. It is fair to record that one of those emerging issues, regardless of where it sits at the moment, is the difference between the position of human rights in Scotland and their position in the rest of the United Kingdom, and the debate that is to be had on that.

To read the full report, go to

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=9988>

Scottish Agricultural Wages Board (Consultation)

S40-04398 Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Government when it expects to report on the outcome of its consultation on the Scottish Agricultural Wages Board.

The Minister for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (Aileen McLeod):

The cabinet secretary plans to issue a report on the consultation on the Scottish Agricultural Wages Board by 30 September 2015.

Mark Griffin:

Given that the legislation that covers the board specifies the need for periodic reviews to ensure that it is delivering appropriate minimum rates of pay and other conditions of service for agricultural workers, why is the Scottish Government consulting on the board's potential abolition?

Aileen McLeod:

The Scottish Government is asking whether the board should continue as it does now, be retained as an advisory body or be removed so that arrangements for agricultural workers are determined under general employment law. The functions of non-departmental public bodies—the board is one—are normally reviewed periodically, and the previous review that involved the board was concluded in 2008. The current review was announced as part of the Scottish Government's 2011 agricultural manifesto, which made a commitment to reviewing the board's function during the current session of Parliament.

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=9989>

Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee

Major Urban Railway Stations (Access)

Evidence on access to Scotland's major urban railway stations.

George Mair, director of the Confederation of Passenger Transport Scotland, Nathan Kaczamarski, senior communications officer at Cycling Scotland, Tony Kenmuir of the Scottish Taxi Federation and, last but not least, John Lauder, national director at Sustrans. Alex Johnstone will kick off our questions.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):

How would your organisations characterise the accessibility of Scotland's major railway stations?

Tony Kenmuir (Scottish Taxi Federation):

Good morning. I have been conferring with our colleagues at the Scottish Accessible Transport Alliance and, during the past couple of days, we have been discussing access to Waverley station in particular. If you do not mind me holding the floor for a couple of minutes, I can speak about that. I had a look at the station's website this morning, just to make sure that my information is completely current. I will walk you through my experience of attempting to engage with a taxi from the capital's main train station.

If you access the website for Edinburgh Waverley station, there is a very prominent link labelled "Disabled access". If you follow that link and request assistance, you are presented with 10 different phone numbers to ring or text to assistance for when you arrive at the train station.

Underneath the phone numbers, and where things begin to go wrong, is a note that says: "If you need help around the station, speak to a member of staff or go to East Coast reception opposite the entrance to platform 7 next to the taxi rank."

That is the first deliberate mistake: there is no longer a taxi rank in Waverley station. Following on from there, on the same page there is a link to taxis.

A note there says:

“The taxi rank is on Waverley Bridge. The rank in the station has closed.”

Immediately there is conflicting information about how to get egress—I presume egress, because you are already in the station—or where you will be dropped off by a taxi.

Under the note that says that the taxi rank in the station has closed is a link to a website called traintaxi that provides information. First of all, there is a little field that asks you to type in the train station that you want information for. According to that field, Waverley station does not exist. I tried the combinations “Edinburgh Waverley” and “Waverley Edinburgh”. Eventually I tried “Edinburgh” and three stations were listed: Edinburgh, Haymarket Edinburgh and Edinburgh Park. I clicked the link for Edinburgh, and the title “Edinburgh” came up, with “also called Edinburgh Waverley” in brackets.

A short paragraph on that page says:

“Edinburgh is a major station with taxis usually available on a rank.”

There are not.

“Advance booking is not normally necessary or even possible”, which is an astonishing comment “unless arriving early in the morning or late at night.”

It also says that operators who may accept bookings include Central Taxis, City Cabs and Radiocabs, which would come as news to Radiocabs because it ceased trading 15 years ago. Below that—this is my final piece of evidence on this topic—it says:

“All or some of the vehicles used by this operator are understood to be wheelchair accessible. Central Taxis and City Cabs are licensed public taxis so they are entirely wheelchair accessible. It is one of their licensing conditions. The website also recommends that people “call to check availability ... before travelling”.

Without foreknowledge of Waverley station, how it works and recent changes there, the information that is being provided for a traveller arriving by taxi or attempting to leave by taxi is woefully contradictory, if that answers your question.

Alex Johnstone:

It is certainly consistent with some of the things that we have heard previously. Does anyone else want to comment on the accessibility of the major railway stations?

John Lauder (Sustrans):

I am happy to comment from the point of view of pedestrians and people who use bicycles to get to the main stations. In my evidence, I referred to the red line that is drawn around a station when it is being upgraded or developed. That creates a culture whereby the inside of the station that is being renovated, regenerated or indeed built, such as the new station at Haymarket and the improved Waverley station, are very good to move around in. However, the red line that Network Rail draws around a station when it is being developed seems to lead to Network Rail focusing its attention inside the red line. What happens outwith the red line makes it quite difficult to get to stations.

There seems to be a lack of communication between Network Rail and the local authority that provides the road and the streetscape around the station. For example, it is quite difficult to get to Haymarket station simply because it is a very busy area. A lot of people use it and it has been redeveloped to include the tram system. In addition, despite being redeveloped so that it is a very good station when you are inside it, the narrow pavements on the approach to it remain, so it is very busy and congested at peak times. That strikes me as showing a lack of joined-up thinking. Network Rail develops a station at considerable cost and makes it really good, but it does not improve the

area for, say, a mile around the station where people might walk or 3 miles around it where people might cycle to it. There have also been tensions at Haymarket around access for taxi ranks. The other issue that we found with Haymarket, which astonished me, was that we were unable to have a back door to it so that we could access it from the Dalry side of the line. That meant that anyone approaching Haymarket from the west side of the rail line is still on the same narrow pavement that existed before the station was improved. It seemed to be a very easy option to create a back door into Haymarket from Distillery Lane; it would be similar to the Market Street entrance at Waverley. It was never developed and Network Rail consistently told us that it could not be delivered. It got to the point where I backed away from that because I felt that I was really annoying Network Rail. I felt that I did not want to go any further because we want to work in partnership with Network Rail. It got to the point where I felt that I had done all that I could, so I had to withdraw from pursuing that issue.

To return to the point about the red line that is drawn around the redeveloped stations, we fully support station redevelopment—it is really good when stations are redeveloped. However, one of our major concerns about the proposals for Queen Street station, for example, is that again there does not seem to have been an assessment of how people who walk or cycle—or, very probably, go by bus or taxi—are going to get to the station. I imagine that the redeveloped Queen Street station will be great when people are in it but my worry is about how people will get to it. Will there be any change at all?

The final example—poor old Haymarket, but it needs to be cited—is that, despite being a multimillion pound development that given us a very good concourse, no improvement has been made to the cycle parking at Haymarket. We have an aim and a nationally agreed vision that 10 per cent of everyday trips will be by bicycle by 2020.

I thought that we would have had an improved position with the ability to park more bicycles at Haymarket, but that was not delivered as part of the scheme and we are now retrofitting improved parking for bicycles, in partnership with Network Rail and the City of Edinburgh Council. We are doing that with money that we have had to find, as opposed to it coming out of the Edinburgh to Glasgow rail improvement programme budget, which is huge. I would have thought that the £500,000 budget that is needed to build new cycle parking could have been found from that budget, rather than from other budgets that are now being pieced together retrospectively.

There is a lack of joined-upness—I know that that is not a very good expression—and a lack of cohesion caused by looking only within the red line around the station and not at anything outside it.

The full report is available here -

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=9999>

Another discussion session took place. To read the report of the second session, go to

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=10013>

Input into the discussion from Phil Verster, managing director, and Susan Anderson, route commercial manager, of the Network Rail-ScotRail alliance; and Aidan Grisewood, the director of rail at Transport Scotland. <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=10028>

Welfare Reform (Disabled People)

S4F-02837 Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):

To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government's response is to Inclusion Scotland's research suggesting that disabled people are experiencing stress, fear and isolation because of welfare reform.

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):

That research backs up the findings of the Scottish Government's own welfare tracking study, which was published on Monday this week. It found that the UK Government's programme of welfare cuts is negatively affecting some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

In my view, it is completely unacceptable that disabled people are finding the process of applying for benefits so difficult and distressing, and all that is before the further £12 billion of cuts proposed by the UK Government take effect. The Scottish Government will continue strongly to oppose further cuts to the welfare budget, and we will continue to argue for this Parliament to have responsibility for decisions on social security.

Kevin Stewart:

As we have seen from the Inclusion Scotland report, disabled people are already concerned about the cuts and the way they are treated by the systems and processes of the Department for Work and Pensions. Does the First Minister share my deep concern about further cuts to the social security budget and how they will impact on disabled people? Does she concur that the UK Government must explain and outline which group of people it plans to push into poverty next with its proposed £12 billion of further cuts to the social security budget?

The First Minister:

Yes, I think that there is an obligation on the UK Government to provide more clarity than it has done about who will be hit by the further cut of £12 billion, but actually I would much prefer that the UK Government dropped its plans to cut welfare by a further £12 billion.

I very much share Kevin Stewart's concerns that the UK Government's austerity agenda is already having a very damaging effect on vulnerable people in Scotland. The lack of clarification about that further cut is important, because it increases the anxiety that disabled and vulnerable people already feel. If someone is living with a disability, there are already many challenges that they have to overcome in life. They should not have to live with the worry of a UK Government taking a further axe to the benefit that they depend on.

We will continue to oppose the cuts, and—as I said in my initial answer—we will continue to argue that the right place for these decisions to be made is not in the Westminster Parliament but here in our Scottish Parliament.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab):

Does the First Minister share my concern that negative attitudes to the unemployed and the poor are not reserved to Westminster, but are unfortunately all too common in our own society? Will she pledge her support for the stick your labels campaign that aims to tackle stigma and prejudice against the poor and disabled in our country?

The First Minister:

Yes, I thoroughly endorse that view, which Ken Macintosh put forward very constructively. It is important that we challenge negative stigma and negative attitudes.

Vulnerable people in our society did not cause the recession or the deficit, and they do not deserve to pay the price of getting the deficit down. They deserve our support and our respect, and they deserve a helping hand from all of us rather than having their lives made more difficult.

We have to challenge those attitudes wherever they exist. I would never stand here and say that there are not such attitudes in Scotland, but if we all unite to tackle, address and confront those attitudes, we will be doing a great service to vulnerable people across our country.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con):

I would be the first to admit that there is fear about benefit changes, but anyone who has been knocking on doors in the past few months will realise that that fear is rather more widespread than the actual experience, particularly in relation to universal credit.

Universal credit is only now being introduced on a pilot basis in certain parts of Scotland, and it has the potential to bring about a massive improvement in the conditions of many people who are dependent on benefits, yet hostility to the introduction of that scheme is widespread through little experience.

The First Minister:

If Alex Johnstone really thinks that the fears that people have about further benefit cuts are somehow disproportionate to the reality, he has just proven how out of touch he and his party are in Scotland. I openly invite him to come and knock some doors in my constituency on the south side of Glasgow. He should come to one of my surgeries, where people with mental health problems, people with disabilities and people who are struggling hard and working hard to support families are at the end of their tether, coming to my office for food bank vouchers because they are living with the consequences of the cuts that have been imposed by the Government that he supports. If Alex Johnstone is not finding that where he is knocking doors, he should come and knock doors where I knock doors and he will find a very different picture.

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=9992>

Equal Opportunities Committee**Age and Social Isolation**

The evidence session with the **Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners' Rights** as part of our inquiry into age and social isolation. I welcome the cabinet secretary and his accompanying official. Cabinet secretary, I ask you and your official to introduce yourselves and I invite you to make some opening remarks.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners' Rights (Alex Neil):

I am the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners' Rights.

Trevor Owen (Scottish Government):

I am the human rights policy manager in the equality, human rights and third sector division.

The Convener:

We have taken quite a lot of evidence from various organisations and have heard about the impact of social isolation and loneliness on young people and older people.

Sorry, cabinet secretary—do you want to make some opening remarks? I assumed from your introduction that you were not going to.

Alex Neil:

I will do so very briefly, if that is okay.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss this important issue with the committee. We probably all agree that there are no easy answers to the challenges of social isolation and loneliness. We are talking about a fundamental societal issue and we are all committed to exploring what more we can do to tackle it. It is an issue that affects a lot of people in Scotland, although it is difficult to quantify precisely how many people are affected at any one time.

The issue strikes at our hearts because we all, no doubt, know someone who, at some point, has suffered from isolation or loneliness. All the answers cannot come from Government; often, it is about interpersonal relationships and issues that are well outside the control and remit of the Government. Nevertheless, it is important for us to do what we can, because isolation and loneliness can lead to other problems, not least with mental and physical health.

We believe that there is a strong moral case for tackling loneliness and social isolation. There is clear evidence to suggest that an unwanted lack of social contact can contribute to poorer outcomes

for individuals across the board. When someone experiences long-term social isolation, it can lead to poorer health—as I have mentioned—a shorter lifespan and bad lifestyle choices.

To tackle that, we need to take a holistic approach. That may involve, for example, lifting people out of poverty; ensuring that housing and place supports independent living; ensuring that our schools and communities are the best places to grow up in; delivering accessible transport; and ensuring that people have access to fair and equitable work. Our success will inevitably be measured by the improvement in individuals' quality of life, their feelings of connection to society and their ability to create those connections for themselves.

Wider public services play a critical role. When services come into contact with somebody who is suffering from social isolation, it is imperative that we get better at recognising the signs and that we stand ready to help. The third sector is often the route into reaching those who may be invisible to services. That is why we continue to invest in that sector and work to integrate it into how we plan and deliver public services.

We fund a range of projects that contribute to tackling loneliness and social isolation among children and young people and among older people. Today, I will visit the Macmerry men's shed, which—happily—is celebrating its second birthday. We have established a partnership with Age Scotland to develop further the network of men's sheds in Scotland. Members will have heard of those community-led initiatives, which bring together older men—often those who are socially isolated or have long-term health conditions—to engage in activity in a community space. I have been told that those projects have made a critical difference to the quality of those men's lives, and I look forward to seeing that for myself this afternoon.

The full report is available at

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=9993>

S4M-13316 Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 (10th Anniversary)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Scott):

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S4M-13316, in the name of **Angus MacDonald**, on the 10th anniversary of the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Members will be aware that there is a Gaelic translation service for the debate, as previously intimated by the Presiding Officer. Headsets have been placed on desks, and the service can be found on audio channel 2.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the 10th anniversary on 1 June of the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 receiving Royal Assent; welcomes progress being made in bringing to fruition the priorities of the National Gaelic Language Plan; believes that Gaelic education has helped to reverse the decline of Scotland's indigenous language; welcomes research conducted for Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), which found the value of Gaelic to businesses and communities to be up to £148.5 million per annum, demonstrating that what it considers the currently modest investment in Gaelic translates into a significant economic contribution, not just in the Highlands and Islands but in the central belt of Scotland; congratulates Bòrd na Gàidhlig on its work to promote the Gaelic language and culture and to encourage the many community groups that are creating opportunities for speakers of all ages and backgrounds while acknowledging that it is today's young children who will keep Gaelic alive and flourishing in the future, and notes calls for all of Scotland to participate in the task already underway of stemming and reversing the decline of the Gaelic language to ensure its survival in the long term.

To read the debate, go to

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=10002>

Welfare Reform Committee

Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners' Rights

A discussion with the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners' Rights - Alex Neil; Jamie MacDougall, head of the social security policy and delivery division; and Edward Orr, senior policy officer in the social security policy and delivery division.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners' Rights (Alex Neil):

I will keep my comments brief so that we can have a wide discussion. Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to come in front of the committee. Since my last appearance at the committee, a lot has happened regarding the welfare powers that are to be transferred to the Scottish Parliament.

I say at the outset—I emphasised this the last time I was here—that we are about to begin a consultation process on what we should do with the new powers and how they fit in with our existing powers. I am keen to ensure that the committee is a key participant in the consultation and that we work together on that. If we can get a consensus in the Parliament on the way forward once the powers are transferred and on how they fit in with our existing powers, that will be beneficial, not least to the people who are reliant on the benefits in question for their wellbeing and their standard of living. As we are all aware, there are real challenges ahead in taking forward the powers that the Smith commission proposed that we get. There are also challenges associated with austerity and dealing with the consequences of the United Kingdom Government's welfare reforms. In particular, there is an emergency budget scheduled for 8 July, when the detail of at least some of the £12 billion of additional reductions in the welfare budget that the UK Government is proposing to make and the impact that there will be on the powers that are to be transferred to the Scottish Parliament will become clear. We do not know the details of those cuts, because we have not been consulted on that. I hope that we will be consulted, but I suspect that that will not be the case. We are particularly concerned about the impact of the cuts on women, children and people with a disability. Those are the three categories of people whom we believe have been particularly adversely affected by the reforms up until now. We will be interested to hear what the committee has to say about the additional reforms/cuts and what impact they will have.

As you know, recent research by Inclusion Scotland and the Scottish Government shows the real fears that people have about welfare reform. Last week, I wrote to the UK Government to set out our concerns about the £12 billion cuts and the future of the joint ministerial committee on the transfer of welfare powers. I am happy to update the committee on progress on those matters.

Prior to the general election, a couple of meetings were held with the UK Government to discuss the transfer of the powers, but progress has been a bit slow since the general election. I have a conversation with the Secretary of State for Scotland planned for this afternoon, in which we will try to agree to reconvene the joint ministerial committee on the transfer of powers. There has been a change of personnel in the UK Government. The secretary of state was the minister of state but I believe that he will continue to co-chair the committee with me. However, there have been changes in personnel at the Department for Work and Pensions and the Treasury, so who will represent the UK Government needs to be sorted out. I hope that the joint ministerial committee will reconvene fairly soon after that and get on with the job.

Since the general election, the Prime Minister and the secretary of state have both said that the Scotland Bill will implement the Smith commission recommendations in full. However, we believe that the Scotland Bill, which was published on 28 May, falls short in a number of key areas. Apart from modest changes to the welfare provisions, the policy that is reflected in the bill is pretty much identical to that which was published in January. However, the unanimous report of the Scottish

Parliament's Devolution (Further Powers) Committee concluded that, in some critical areas, the UK Government's draft clauses fell short of the Smith recommendations.

It is extremely disappointing that so little progress has been made in the four months since the draft clauses were published, despite a range of constructive suggestions having been made and despite engagement by the Scottish Government. We have drafted and shared with the UK Government a full set of alternative clauses on welfare, which would have implemented the relevant Smith commission recommendations, but those have not been included in the Scotland Bill. The Scottish Government will continue to press the UK Government to amend the bill to ensure that it reflects the substance and spirit of the all-party Smith commission.

Our greatest priority at the moment is to ensure that people have the opportunity to have their say on the new social security powers—as we prefer to call them. I value the work that is being taken forward by several organisations, including the Welfare Reform Committee and non-governmental organisations, in relation to that. We can discuss the consultation process either here or offline to ensure that we are being inclusive and that the committee is satisfied that we are including all the key stakeholders, particularly those who are or could be recipients of benefits. How those people are affected matters more than anything else.

A lot of work is going on behind the scenes to prepare for the new powers. Scottish Government officials have met a range of people and organisations from the UK Government in devolved areas and in the wider field, but much more remains to be done. However, I hope that, by the end of the year, we will have a much clearer picture of what we want to do with those powers—I hope that there will be consensus on that—not just in isolation but in the context of all the powers that the Scottish Government will then have in relation to social security, to maximise the impact of those powers and their budgets to benefit the people that we are here to serve.

The Convener:

Thank you, cabinet secretary. One of the reasons why we invited you here today is that, as you know, we committed to holding an inquiry in the autumn into how the additional welfare powers that were promised under the Smith agreement might be used in practice—for example, how the new personal independence payment would operate. At the time, you thought that that was a good idea, but you have just made clear how fast things are moving and how quickly we might see some change taking place. Do you still think that our holding an inquiry in the autumn will serve a purpose?

Alex Neil:

I do, convener. A number of issues need to be fleshed out, and that will not necessarily have been done by the end of the calendar year. Once the powers have been transferred, there will, in effect, be two welfare or social security systems operating in Scotland: the social security system that is being operated by the Scottish Government and the social security system that is being operated by the UK Government. The interaction between those systems will be extremely important. For example, I am very keen that we try to get one delivery mechanism for both systems so that people are not forced to shop around and will find it much easier to find out what they are entitled to, whether through a Scottish Government programme or through a UK Government programme. The decisions and policy of one system will have an impact on the other. An example of that involves the carers allowance. We are keen to increase the level of the carers allowance so that it equates to the jobseekers allowance, but a consequence of that would be that any additional money that we gave to carers would be treated as income under the DWP's universal credit system. That is one small example of how decisions in one system can impact on what happens in the other system. It is the net effect—in that instance, for carers—that we need to look at, and there needs to be a degree of co-ordination between the two Administrations on an on-going basis.

Those are the kind of issues that the Welfare Reform Committee could look at in considering how the new ways of doing things are being implemented and what their impact will be, probably over several years. There is a watchdog role for the committee in monitoring—in addition to the policy

issues—how the two systems are operating, the impact of each on the other and, in particular, the impact on the end users of the services.

We have asked for two things in relation to PIP, which the convener has mentioned. First, we think that it would be sensible to stop the roll-out of PIP throughout Scotland, because we do not want to roll it out and then replace it very shortly thereafter with something else that we agree would be better in Scotland. If that happened, the beneficiaries—the disabled people—would have to deal with three different systems in the space of about three or four years. I do not think that that would be very clever, and it would be very expensive.

Secondly, given that, under the current plans, the budget for PIP is likely to be reduced by 20 per cent, we have been arguing that PIP should be transferred before the budget cut to allow us to decide whether we want to continue with the current planned levels of benefit for PIP or whether some of that could be better targeted at, say, more disabled people.

Those are the kind of issues in which the committee needs to be heavily involved. I therefore think that there is still merit in your holding an inquiry, although its remit might be slightly different from what was originally envisaged.

The Convener:

That is helpful, cabinet secretary. I know that you watch the committee's work closely. You will have seen in the evidence that we received last week, for our inquiry on the impact of the social security changes on women, the example of the impact on universal credit of any increase in the carers allowance. Importantly, some of last week's witnesses also talked about what they want to happen with the powers and how those powers would interact with current powers and policies. Have you given any thought to anything that you heard last week about how the current system of support for women through the services that are currently provided could be enhanced or progressed using the new powers that you expect us to get?

Alex Neil:

There is no doubt that women, children and, in particular, the disabled have been especially impacted by the welfare reforms and cuts, and I think that addressing that situation is a top priority. However, I am determined not to pre-empt the consultation that we are going to launch before the summer recess. It would be wrong of me to do so, because we want to listen to what people are saying before we start to comment on whether one option is better than another.

Whatever we do, we must give priority to trying to improve the situation for women, children and the disabled, given that they have been particularly adversely affected. That said, if I started to provide a running commentary on every new idea that came forward during the consultation process, that would be unfair to the people who were making contributions. Once we get all the feedback, my job will be to go through it all with my officials and produce a set of proposals that will, I hope, gain consensus. We are monitoring very carefully what is being said, including what was said by the people who gave evidence last week, and the ideas that are coming forward.

As well as taking into account extremely important issues such as the targeting and level of benefits, the regularity with which they are paid and, in the case of housing benefit, the person to whom the benefit is paid, we need to examine how the benefits system delivers its services. There is no doubt in my mind that one of the major problems for people is the sheer number of benefit centres that they have to deal with. As I think I mentioned the last time I was here, I had a case in which I sat with a constituent and dialled six different benefit centres only to be referred back to the first one before we could get a solution to the problem. That cost me about £7 or £8 on my mobile phone. I got that back in expenses, but someone who is on, say, jobseekers allowance and is getting barely over £70 a week cannot afford to spend £6 or £7 on their mobile phone to shop around benefit centres. If we can take that kind of aggro out of the system, we will do everyone a big favour.

To read more on the discussion, go to

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=10012>

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (North East Scotland)

S4O-04431 Alison McInnes (North East Scotland) (LD):

To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to improve access to child and adolescent mental health services in North East Scotland.

The Minister for Sport, Health Improvement and Mental Health (Jamie Hepburn):

I have spoken to the chief executive of NHS Grampian to obtain assurances that the health board is doing all that it can to achieve the CAMHS target. As a result of that discussion, I have written to the board asking for a detailed recovery plan by 3 July. NHS Grampian has done significant work in service redesign to increase its capacity to meet the target sustainably. As a result of that redesign, it has already identified where it needs to increase capacity.

Alison McInnes:

My question actually relates to NHS Tayside, as figures show that the longest waiting times there have got even worse. In the first three months of this year, only 35 per cent of young people started to receive the treatment that they desperately needed within the 18-week target. That is down from 52 per cent at the end of last year.

Everyone knows that early action is more likely to result in full recovery. It also minimises the impact on other aspects of the development of children and young people, such as their education. I thought that that was why the minister's department had changed the health improvement, efficiency and governance, access and treatment targets from 26 weeks to 18 weeks at the start of the year. However, parents in my region tell me that they are questioning the Government's commitment to the targets. ISD Scotland statistics show that around 250 young people in Tayside will now have to wait more than a year to start treatment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer:

Could we have a question, please?

Alison McInnes:

Will the minister reassure parents in Tayside? Has he asked for a detailed recovery plan from NHS Tayside?

Jamie Hepburn:

I will deal with the latter point first: yes, I have. I have spoken to a representative of NHS Tayside. I assure Alison McInnes, all other members in the chamber and all their constituents that the Government is still committed to the targets that it has set. Our commitment can be demonstrated through the £15 million that we announced for the mental health innovation fund last year, which is now supplemented by an additional £85 million over five years for mental health, which was announced in May this year.

I am aware of the particular issues in NHS Tayside. It is not the case that the longest waits are getting longer. Part of the challenge in NHS Tayside is that there have been some particularly long waits, which the health board is dealing with first, hence the particular challenge with achieving the 18-week target. However, I assure Alison McInnes of the Government's determination that the target will be achieved.

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=10005>

Telecare (Highlands and Islands)

S4O-04439 Mike MacKenzie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):
To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of how telehealth could assist in the delivery of healthcare across the Highlands and Islands.

The Minister for Public Health (Maureen Watt):

The Scottish Government has set out the policy direction and strategic priorities to support the expansion of telehealth and telecare in Scotland in the national telehealth and telecare delivery plan, which was launched in early 2013. That work is supported by the £30 million technology-enabled care—TEC—programme from April 2015, for three years, to support local developments. It is the role of health boards, local authorities and new joint integration boards to assess and commission appropriate services to address local needs, and that is being facilitated by the national improvement programme for TEC, called delivering our ambitions, which was launched in September 2014. The councils in the Highlands and Islands are active partners in that work and have received specific TEC funding of £407,000 for 2015-16 in order to expand expertise and provision across their local areas.

Mike MacKenzie:

Does the minister agree that those opportunities are severely limited by very poor mobile telephone connectivity, and will she join me in calling on the United Kingdom Government to address urgently the very poor 2G, 3G and 4G availability across the Highlands and Islands?

Maureen Watt:

Mobile connectivity is an integral part of the Scottish Government's world-class digital ambitions and is of particular importance to rural communities. Many of the coverage problems that we experience in Scotland, particularly in relation to 3G, stem from the UK Government's flawed approach to auctioning spectrum, which allowed operators to focus solely on urban areas at the expense of rural communities.

Ensuring that the same mistakes are not repeated with the 4G roll-out is a key priority for the Scottish Government, so we continue to press the UK Government on digital connectivity issues. Earlier this week the Deputy First Minister met John Whittingdale, the Westminster Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, to discuss the issue.

The Scottish Government is keen to test new models that could extend coverage to areas that mobile operators see as being non-commercial. We recently funded a community-owned mobile telephone mast on the island of Coll, which I am sure Mike MacKenzie knows about. A partnership between Development Coll and Vodafone has brought 3G and 4G services to the island, making it the first island in Scotland to receive 4G.

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=10005>

Deaf People (Support)

S4O-04442 Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con):

To ask the Scottish Government what it is doing to support the estimated 850,000 people in Scotland who are deaf or have a hearing loss.

The Minister for Sport, Health Improvement and Mental Health (Jamie Hepburn):

The Scottish Government believes that adults and children who have sensory impairment should expect seamless provision of assessment, care and support and the same access to employment, education, leisure, healthcare and social care as everyone else. Sensory impairment includes varying degrees of hearing loss, sight loss and dual sensory impairment.

For that reason we have invested £2 million to drive improvement via our sensory impairment strategy, called see hear. It was launched in April 2014 and is the first strategy of its kind in the

United Kingdom, and sets a course towards the step change that is needed to make Scotland a more inclusive place for people with sensory loss.

Nanette Milne:

It is important that individuals who require a hearing aid receive one as soon as possible in order to support them to live independently and to reduce their risk of experiencing isolation. The picture across Scotland is very mixed when it comes to accessing specialist hearing services; that could be addressed by establishing local audiology teams. What assurance can the minister give that a postcode lottery is not developing in Scotland? What engagement has the Scottish Government had with the third sector, which already delivers significant community-based basic maintenance and support?

Jamie Hepburn:

This Government engages regularly with the third sector on a range of topics. I assure Nanette Milne that hearing services is an area on which we have dialogue. I have recently met Action Hearing Loss, for example, to discuss issues, and we will maintain that dialogue continually. Where we have any targets in any part of the national health service, we expect them to be met.

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=10005>

Finance Committee Early Years Change Fund

The Convener:

Our second item of business is evidence on the early years change fund from the acting Minister for Children and Young People, Fiona McLeod, who is joined by Amanda Callaghan of the Scottish Government. I welcome our witnesses to the meeting and invite the minister to make an opening statement.

The Minister for Children and Young People (Fiona McLeod):

Good morning, convener and committee. Thank you for inviting me to give evidence on the early years change fund, which, as you know, is a partnership fund between the Scottish Government, local government and the national health service.

Community planning partnerships submit annual returns to the Scottish Government on their change fund activity. When Aileen Campbell addressed the committee in January 2014, we had information from CPPs about only the first year of the change fund activity, 2012-13. We now have the second year of returns available to us, for 2013-14 activity. I apologise for the delay in making that information available, which was due to the fact that we received the last CPP return only on 19 May this year.

The returns give us an indication of how CPPs are progressing in their journey to deliver transformational change in early years services and the part that the change fund has played in that journey. I have been heartened by the picture from the latest returns, because we can see progress being made in giving the early years the priority they deserve and tangible examples of how CPPs are doing that in their everyday work. This is the very nature of what a change fund is about: delivering a different way of doing things.

For example, in West Dunbartonshire, a speech and language link officer has been attached to each early education and childcare centre, which allows waiting times to be addressed and ensures that the right referrals are made to speech and language services.

This is the first year that we have been able to capture some sense of the actual spend by CPPs. Our calculations indicate that just over £100 million has been invested in early years activity across Scotland through the change fund. That is above the minimum commitment from all partners to spend £89 million in year 2 of the change fund.

However, we must recognise the challenge associated with gathering information on spend in relation to change fund activity. In doing that, we have had to make a number of judgment calls about what to include in providing an estimated level of spend. For example, one CPP provided figures for its total integrated children's services budget, which we have not included in our total because our judgment is that not all of that money related to the change fund.

The conclusions that we can draw are only as good as the information that we are able to gather. Nevertheless, despite those challenges, we can see real progress this year. All 32 CPPs provided examples of prevention, and in year 2 we have received examples of disinvestment for the first time. For example, in Dundee, the CPP is responding to feedback from the community on the type of services that it needs by moving away from providing stand-alone social work family centres to reinvesting in locally based teams that deliver a family-oriented approach to services.

The early years collaborative, our national quality improvement programme that enables local practitioners to test and develop evidence-based early years services at the local level, was cited as an example of how change is being delivered in every single return. When Sir Harry Burns attended the committee alongside Aileen Campbell, he said:

"I would not be the least bit surprised if, 20 years from now, we shut a prison"—[Official Report, Finance Committee, 15 January 2014; c 3548.]

because of the preventative work that we were doing in the early years through the change fund.

I have been heartened by the progress that I have read about, and I will shortly request the year 3 returns from CPPs, which I am sure will provide yet more examples of how we are giving the early years the priority that the evidence tells us they deserve.

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=10027>

S4M-13529 Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Elaine Smith):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S4M-13529, in the name of John Swinney, on the Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy (John Swinney):

I am pleased to open the stage 3 debate on the Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill. This is the final legislative step in the process to give 16 and 17-year-olds a vote permanently in Scottish elections, and I thank everyone who has been involved in getting us to this stage. In particular, the thorough and detailed scrutiny by the Devolution (Further Powers) Committee has been invaluable in shaping this important legislation. I am especially grateful to the convener, the committee members, and the clerks for their constructive and helpful contributions, particularly given the challenging timescales that we have all been working to.

The section 30 order transferring the necessary powers to allow this Parliament to consider whether to lower the voting age came into force on 20 March this year. Less than two weeks later, I introduced the bill and the committee started its examination of our proposals that morning. Members will know the importance of giving electoral registration officers sufficient time to put in place the arrangements to allow 16 and 17-year-olds to be able to vote next May. That gave us our deadline for getting the legislation in place and, subject to this afternoon's vote, we will meet that deadline.

In the development of the bill, we have sought detailed views from experts in electoral administration and child protection. We have listened carefully to the range of views expressed and, where it was appropriate to do so, we have amended our proposals accordingly. We have taken on board detailed comments from registration officers and the Electoral Commission on the technical aspects of the bill and sought advice from experts in data protection and child protection to ensure that the bill's provisions addressed any concerns that were advanced.

We also worked closely with the Cabinet Office to develop a solution allowing young voters to enter their details online in the same way as older voters, which will ensure that the registration process is consistent for all electors and that young people have the same experience as other voters. That co-operation builds on the pragmatic approach that both Governments took to the discussions to agree the detailed terms of the section 30/63 order, which transferred the necessary powers for the Scottish Parliament to lower the voting age. Like the bill, the section 30 order was developed and agreed to a challenging timetable.

At this stage, I place on record my thanks to the Secretary of State for Scotland and his officials for the way in which they have assisted us to meet that challenging timetable. It is not often that a narrative of co-operation between our two Administrations is celebrated in this chamber, but let me be the one to celebrate it this afternoon and to acknowledge the co-operation that has existed to enable us to undertake the reform and to do it in a timescale that has enabled electoral registration to be undertaken in the professional and thorough manner that all of us expect and require it to be undertaken.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill be passed.

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=10022>

S4M-13584 BBC (Memorandum of Understanding)

The Presiding Officer (Tricia Marwick):

The next item of business is consideration of motion S4M-13584, in the name of Bruce Crawford, on the memorandum of understanding on the BBC. I call on Bruce Crawford to speak to and move the motion on behalf of the Devolution (Further Powers) Committee.

Bruce Crawford (Stirling) (SNP):

The motion invites Parliament to agree a memorandum of understanding with the BBC and both Governments. The MOU sets out what this Parliament can expect in the future by way of our relationship with the BBC, such as agreement to provide copies of annual reports and agreement to appear before committees when invited. That will be important, as we will now begin engagement on the renewal of the BBC's royal charter.

I am pleased to say that both Governments reached an accommodation on the proposed form of words for the MOU. The Devolution (Further Powers) Committee is therefore able to recommend the MOU to Parliament today, having consulted the Education and Culture Committee and the Public Audit Committee.

I reiterate that the motion relates only to the MOU, and not to any wider statement by any committee or this Parliament on broadcasting policy per se; the independence of the BBC; or any question of where devolved competence should lie.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the Devolution (Further Powers) Committee's 6th Report, 2015 (Session 4), Report on the Memorandum of Understanding on the BBC (SP Paper 764), and approves the memorandum of understanding relating to the relationship between the British Broadcasting Corporation, the Scottish Government, the UK Government and the Scottish Parliament

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=10035>

Carers (Scotland) Bill: Stage 1

Health and Sport Committee

The Minister for Sport, Health Improvement and Mental Health has been joined by a new set of officials, who support him in this policy area. They are Dr Maureen Bruce, deputy director, and Moira Oliphant, team leader, care, support and rights division, population health improvement directorate; and Ruth Lunny, principal legal officer

Bob Doris (Glasgow) (SNP):

I will be very brief. I am sure that the minister will be interested to know how much the young carers value the support of the Princess Royal Trust for Carers centre in Falkirk. Many of them had a complete lack of information about the support that is available for young carers until they found that vital resource.

I will mention two issues that the young carers raised that are relevant to the bill. They are absolutely convinced that short breaks are vital in supporting them to be not just carers, but normal young people getting on with their lives, separate from their caring responsibilities. They also want greater status in relation to the healthcare system in order that they can deal with situations such as the cared-for person being taken into hospital unexpectedly. I am sure that those matters will be teased out, but given that that is what the young people told us, it is nice to mention them at the start of the session. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to do that, convener.

The Convener:

Thank you. The session may come up later. Minister, you wish to give an opening statement.

Jamie Hepburn:

Thank you for the opportunity to say a few words about the Carers (Scotland) Bill and why I believe it is important.

Both adult and young carers are integral to our society. They provide vital care and support to their families, friends and neighbours. I thank the committee for its scrutiny of the bill; it was very positive to hear about the committee's productive session with young carers, and I know that there have been other evidence sessions as well. I thank the committee for the work that it has undertaken so far.

We have seen much progress in supporting carers. I hear directly from carers about how their lives have changed for the better and the personal outcomes that they have achieved as a result of the support that they receive. The Scottish Government has invested over £114 million between 2007 and 2015 on a range of programmes and initiatives to support carers, and it is investing further in this financial year. However, some carers are not being supported and that can have a adverse impact on their physical, emotional and financial wellbeing. That is a concern for us all. Another concern is that carers can experience very challenging circumstances, including economic and social disadvantage. Sometimes young carers do not have the best childhood.

A crucial role for the bill is to complement important policies and drivers such as the integration of health and social care and the roll-out of self-directed support. Integration of health and social care with the progressive roll-out of integrated joint boards is vital in providing seamless services and empowering local communities to take charge of their own health and wellbeing in innovative ways. There is a key role for new legislation to accelerate and sustain the progress that has already been made to bring about a step change in the way that services support carers and to inspire renewed ambition about supporting carers. This is within a wider context, which is really important. As we all

know, Scotland has a growing population of older people who are successfully living longer, but often doing so with a range of complex and multiple physical and mental healthcare needs. There are more children with complex health needs or disabilities.

We need to support Scotland's carers so that they in turn can support the many people with illnesses and disabilities or who are frail, many with dementia. Of those carers, 47 per cent live in the most deprived areas, caring for 35 hours a week or more. It is striking that that is almost double the level found in the least deprived areas. We need to support carers who experience considerable disadvantage, especially if the impact of caring is taking its toll. Therefore, our wider work to tackle health inequalities within the even wider context of tackling economic disadvantage is crucial. The Carers (Scotland) Bill is a fundamental part of delivering the wider strategy to tackle inequalities and the work that we are doing to deliver the Scottish Government's vision for carers. Our vision is that carers, whatever their circumstances, should enjoy the same opportunities in life as people without caring responsibilities. It is my intention that Scotland's carers should be better supported on a more consistent basis, so that they can continue to care, if they so wish, in good health and to have a life alongside caring.

The objective of the bill is to make real that ambition by furthering the rights of both adult and young carers. The bill is designed to deliver on fundamentals such as carer involvement and participation, comprehensive yet person-centred support planning, preventive and community-based approaches to supporting carers, a strategic overview, and development through the local carer strategies. I believe that the bill strikes the right balance between making the necessary requirements on local authorities and health boards to deliver support for carers and providing the flexibility to ensure a personalised approach to support.

In reviewing the evidence from a wide range of interests, it is clear that there is broad support for the bill's principles. We have listened carefully to carers and carer organisations in developing the bill's provisions, and I hope that carers will be able to recognise their voices in the bill as it stands. As I said in Rhoda Grant's members' business debate on carers in the Parliament on 10 June, I welcome any suggestions that seek to improve the bill and the lives of carers and young carers across Scotland.

We are engaging with important stakeholder interests to consider their views further, and we will give full consideration to all good suggestions as we take the legislation forward. I hope that we have been able to demonstrate that willingness with the Mental Health (Scotland) Bill, which will be debated at stage 3 tomorrow. It is my intention to proceed on that basis with this bill, too. I look forward to the committee's continued consideration of the Carers (Scotland) Bill and the contribution that scrutiny and consideration can make to the bill's improvement. I also look forward to the discussion that we are about to have, and to any questions that members may have.

To read the full report, go to

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=10034>

Welfare Reform Committee

Atos Healthcare and Salus

The 13th meeting in 2015 of the Welfare Reform Committee. I hope that it is not unlucky for anyone. I ask everyone to make sure that their mobile phones and electronic devices are in silent mode. Agenda item 1 is evidence from representatives of Atos Healthcare and Salus: David Haley, the client executive for personal independence payments at Atos Healthcare; Dr Barrie McKillop, the clinical director at Atos Healthcare; Mark Kennedy, the general manager of Salus; and Kenneth Small, the director of human resources at NHS Lanarkshire.

David Haley (Atos Healthcare):

Thank you, convener, and good morning.

I am the Atos client executive responsible for delivery of the personal independence payment—or PIP, as I will refer to it from now on—contract. I joined Atos in March 2014 exclusively to manage the end-to-end PIP contract.

I am pleased to have been invited to today's Welfare Reform Committee to talk about the important role that Atos plays in PIP in Scotland. It is also good to have this opportunity to explain how we work with our partners on PIP, and the role of the Department of Work and Pensions. Atos has no involvement in policy setting. We are responsible solely for evidence gathering on behalf of the DWP via the assessment process, so that reports are delivered to the department for decisions to be made. Atos uses a blended model of local supply-chain partners as well as our own clinicians, and we provide all the back-office support functions for Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

PIP was introduced as a brand new benefit, and all parties involved in PIP have had a difficult start—lessons and improvements needed to be worked on very quickly. People had to wait longer than we would have expected and we have been very clear that those delays were unacceptable. I am pleased therefore to have the opportunity to provide members of the committee with an update on the progress that we have made in Scotland, which includes a four-times increase in our head count of health professionals, which has ensured that the time that is taken to move through the process is now approximately four weeks—or four to five weeks where a home consultation is required.

With our partners, we now have 65 assessment rooms available throughout Scotland. We have also ensured that anyone who lives in an outlying area or in a geographically challenging part of the country where public transport availability is difficult will receive a home consultation as part of the assessment process.

I am very aware of the difficulties of the past and the concerns that surround the process, which is why I am constantly looking at ways to improve the part of the process for which Atos is responsible. Everyone involved in the PIP process at Atos is doing all that they can to make sure that the experience that people have of coming for an assessment to us or to one of our partners is as positive as it can be.

I was therefore pleased that the committee convener and colleagues were able to visit both the Salus and Atos assessment centres in Glasgow and Edinburgh to see at first hand the level of professionalism and care that is afforded to people who visit for an assessment. Once again, I thank you for the invitation to attend today's meeting.

The Convener:

Thank you. Does anyone from Salus want to comment, or was that opening statement on behalf of you all?

Kenneth Small (NHS Lanarkshire):

I would like to say briefly that, despite the fact that this is the 13th meeting of the committee, this is only our third visit—we do not come along to every meeting.

Mark Kennedy and I are very pleased to be here in support of colleagues with whom we have worked very closely in partnership throughout the two years or so that the PIP contract has been running in Scotland.

Salus's contribution has been to concentrate on what we believe we are good at, which is working with our colleagues in Atos and the DWP to deliver mainly for the west of Scotland and Edinburgh city. The 31,000 or so assessments that we have conducted have met the aspirations that we had in the initial stages, when we first came to the committee and articulated why a national health service organisation would become involved in such a matter. I stress that Salus is fully an NHS organisation

and that the income that is generated from our involvement in delivering the PIP assessments is reinvested exclusively and totally in NHS Lanarkshire.

We believe that the quality of our assessments has justified our involvement, and that the public experience of the assessments that Salus has delivered has been positive. As I said, we have conducted 31,000 assessments so far; we have received only 57 complaints against those 31,000 assessments, 42 of which were received after the decision about benefits. Those decisions are not Salus's or Atos's, but the DWP's, so I would not count them as genuine complaints against Salus's involvement. That leaves 15 complaints out of 31,000 assessments, which I think is a pretty good standard.

For more information, go to

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=10042>

Scots Language

S40-04501 Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP):

To ask the Scottish Government what actions it is taking to support and develop the use of Doric and Lallans Scots.

The Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages (Dr Alasdair Allan):

The Scottish Government is a strong supporter of the Scots language in all its forms, including Doric and Lallans. We have appointed a team of Scots language co-ordinators to support Scots in schools throughout Scotland. Later this year we will publish our policy on the Scots language.

We have encouraged and continue to encourage, by means of Education Scotland, the study of Scottish texts in schools. We continue to fund key organisations including Traditional Arts and Culture Scotland, the Scottish Book Trust, the Scottish Poetry Library, the National Library of Scotland, Scottish Language Dictionaries and the Scots Language Centre.

The Scottish Government also values Scots as a language of everyday communication and, like Creative Scotland, will accept any form of correspondence in Scots.

Colin Beattie:

Given the increasingly successful support and recognition that has been given to Gaelic as a native language, are there any plans to support similarly use of Scots as a mainstream language in education and culture?

Dr Allan:

As I indicated, the Government and I have made a strong commitment in the area. The fact that the Scottish Qualifications Authority has developed a Scots language award is testimony to its dedication. As well as providing pupils with the opportunity to learn Scots, the award touches on the history of Scots and its dialects. Education Scotland's Scots co-ordinators have also developed a series of training sessions for teachers who wish to learn how to teach about the Scots language in schools. Scots could be studied in many other areas, for example in Scottish studies awards and through Scots texts in the national 5 and higher English exams. Together with the work that we are doing for the Scots language in the community, that represents a strong commitment from the Scottish Government.

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=10037>



www.parliament.uk UK Parliament

HL52 Social Security

Lord Kirkwood of Kirkhope

To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they plan to consult publicly on the proposed scale of reductions in social security budgets and the form in which those reductions may be delivered.

Lord Freud: The Government's commitment to save £12bn from welfare spending was set out in its election manifesto. Further details will be given in due course.

<http://qndailyreport.blob.core.windows.net/qndailyreportxml/Written-Questions-Answers-Statements-Daily-Report-Lords-2015-06-02.pdf>

HL246 Welfare State**Lord Hylton**

To ask Her Majesty's Government when they plan to publish details of the proposal in the Conservative party's manifesto to reduce the welfare budget by £12 billion by the 2017–18 financial year, and in particular their assessment of how it will affect pensions.

Lord Freud: The Government's commitment to save £12bn from welfare spending was set out in its election manifesto. Further details will be given in due course.

<http://qndailyreport.blob.core.windows.net/qndailyreportxml/Written-Questions-Answers-Statements-Daily-Report-Lords-2015-06-08.pdf>

HL33 Pensions and Social Security Benefits**Lord Laird**

To ask Her Majesty's Government, further to the Written Answer by Lord Freud on 19 January, which public sector pensions and social security benefits will be exempt from reduction in September 2015 if price deflation continues until then; by how much such pensions and benefits will rise; and whether they will reduce pensions and benefits not so protected in line with the consumer price index.

Lord Freud: The existing legislation does not provide for a reduction in the level of social security benefits and public service pension payments. Rates for 2016/17 will follow the publication of September's price inflation later in the year.

<http://qndailyreport.blob.core.windows.net/qndailyreportxml/Written-Questions-Answers-Statements-Daily-Report-Lords-2015-06-04.pdf>

HL449 Bill of Rights**Lord Falconer of Thoroton**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what is their position on the United Kingdom withdrawing from the European Convention on Human Rights.

Lord Falconer of Thoroton

To ask Her Majesty's Government when they expect to bring forward proposals for a British Bill of Rights.

Lord Faulks: This Government was elected with a mandate to reform and modernise the UK human rights framework. A Bill of Rights will protect fundamental human rights, but also prevent their abuse and restore some common sense to the system.

Our plans do not involve us leaving the European Convention on Human Rights. That is neither our objective nor our policy. However, our number one Page 6 25 June 2015 Written Answers priority is to restore some balance to our human rights laws, so no option is off the table for the future. We will

consult fully before introducing legislation and will bring forward proposals for a British Bill of Rights in due course.

<http://qnadailyreport.blob.core.windows.net/qnadailyreportxml/Written-Questions-Answers-Statements-Daily-Report-Lords-2015-06-25.pdf>

900497 European Convention on Human Rights

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab):

What his policy is on the European convention on human rights; and if he will make a statement.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Dominic Raab): We will legislate for a Bill of Rights to protect our fundamental rights, prevent abuse of the system and restore some common sense to our human rights laws. Our plans do not involve us leaving the convention; that is not our objective, but our No. 1 priority is to restore some balance to our human rights laws, so no option is off the table for the future.

Catherine West: When will Ministers publish a draft Bill of Rights, as mooted in the recent election campaign?

Mr Raab: We said very clearly that we shall deliver this in this Parliament. We shall have a consultation in this Session so our plans will be brought forward shortly.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that this country has had a proud tradition with regard to human rights, and it will remain a central part of what we do to promote best practice around the world, but in the end, the country's commitment to human rights will be judged on its actions, not merely the piece of paper it happens to have signed?

Mr Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have a strong record on human rights. We will continue to set an example around the world, but in our own domestic laws we do need to make sure that we have a common-sense balance. It is not a left or right issue; it is what the public expect as a matter of common sense.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Is the Minister aware that the Church of Scotland has expressed concern about his Government's plans to repeal the Human Rights Act? Will he now support the Church of Scotland's call for human rights to be fully devolved to the Scottish Parliament?

Mr Raab: We are well aware of the concerns that have been expressed. We will be consulting fully, including with the devolved Administrations, in due course.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I welcome the Minister to his place. We often hear about rights. Does he agree that perhaps it should be renamed the European convention on human responsibilities?

Mr Raab: My hon. Friend has been tenacious in his campaigning on this subject. He comes up with an ingenious suggestion. Actually, our concern has been less with the black-letter text of the convention and more with its application. Some of the problems have arisen from judicial legislation in the Strasbourg Court, some of them through the operation of the Human Rights Act, as the former shadow Justice Secretary acknowledged. We want to protect our fundamental rights and prevent abuse of the system.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Sir John Major, giving the inaugural Edward Heath lecture on the subject of Magna Carta last week, said that he respected the "power and significance" of the European convention on human rights, and that where there was conflict with the UK Parliament,

“I expect consultation and compromise to settle this issue.”

Should not the Minister, and indeed the Lord Chancellor, heed the advice of someone with so much experience of running a Tory Government with a wafer-thin majority?

Mr Raab: We listen to all the informed voices in this debate. That is why we are going to have full consultation. We look forward to discussing this with the hon. Gentleman and many others across the House.

900500 Human Rights Act

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP):
What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the future of the Human Rights Act 1998.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Michael Gove): I am due to meet the Justice Minister in the Scottish Government next week.

Kirsty Blackman: I welcome that news. The Minister will be aware that the Scottish Parliament voted by 100 votes to 10 to endorse the Human Rights Act last year, and that parties representing 58 of the 59 Scottish Westminster seats are against the repeal. Will the Minister make a commitment to not imposing the repeal on Scotland against the will of our people?

Michael Gove: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place, not just as the Member of Parliament who represents my parents, but as a Member of Parliament who was educated at the same school as me. She makes a very powerful point about the range of opinions in support of safeguarding, enhancing and indeed modernising our human rights in this country. I shall look forward to engaging with the Scottish National party and others, but I think it is important to stress that in this United Kingdom Parliament, human rights are a reserved matter, and parties that support reform of the Human Rights Act secured more than 50% of the votes at the last general election.

Mr Speaker: Mr Hollobone?

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con) indicated dissent.

Mr Speaker: Very rare!

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm150623/debtext/150623-0001.htm#15062354000029>

HL53 Housing Benefit

Lord Kirkwood of Kirkhope

To ask Her Majesty's Government whether they plan to make a statement on the adequacy of existing levels of Discretionary Housing Payments, and if so, when.

Lord Freud: There are no plans for Her Majesty's Government to make any statement on Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) at this time as the financial and monitoring returns analysis for 2014/15 will be published on the morning of 25 th June 2015, on the GOV.UK website.

The Department is committed to monitoring the allocation and use of DHPs and has published mid-year and annual reports using data provided by Local Authorities (LAs) which highlight over and underspending LAs. The release of this analysis into the public domain demonstrates the Department's continuing commitment to supporting LAs efforts to use existing housing stock more effectively as, since 2013, the Department has made available £470 million in Discretionary Housing Payment funding, of which a significant sum is returned by LAs each year.

<http://qndailyreport.blob.core.windows.net/qndailyreportxml/Written-Questions-Answers-Statements-Daily-Report-Lords-2015-06-09.pdf>

Personal Independence Payment

Baroness Thomas of Winchester

To ask Her Majesty's Government what action they intend to take in response to the High Court judgment in *R (on the application of Ms C and Mr W) v Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and others* [2015] EWHC 1607 (Admin) that long delays in Personal Independence Payments are unlawful.

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Lord Freud) (Con): We are considering the terms of the judgment. We have achieved further reductions in average waiting times for an assessment, and they are now well within the Secretary of State's target of 16 weeks.

Baroness Thomas of Winchester (LD): I thank the Minister for that reply. I accept that waiting times have gone right down, but the judge's comments were pretty scathing about the introduction of PIP before all the systems were fully in place, which, she said, led to the implementation being "inefficient". Is he confident that the full rollout of PIP to the bulk of DLA recipients, currently scheduled for October, is entirely safe?

Lord Freud: The judge found significant shortfalls in the introduction, as the noble Baroness said, and we agreed at the time that that was simply unacceptable. Noble Lords will probably remember that at the peak of the backlogs we were looking at waiting times of 30 weeks. That was in June; we set a target of less than 16 weeks, and we have now gone down to seven. On that basis we are confident about the full rollout, although we will and are doing it on a safe and controlled basis.

Baroness Campbell of Surbiton (CB): My Lords, during the general election campaign the Prime Minister stated his desire to "enhance" and "safeguard" PIP. Will the Minister say how the Government plan to fulfil that election promise to disabled people and reassure them that their payments will be protected in the Chancellor's up-and-coming Budget?

Lord Freud: We will continue to support the disabled and the vulnerable in months to come.

Baroness Sherlock (Lab): My Lords, maybe I can follow that up a little more. The noble Baroness, Lady Campbell of Surbiton, specifically asked for an assurance of the Prime Minister's guarantee that he would continue to support disabled people and that their benefits would be protected. Let me give the Minister the opportunity to give that. The Government want to make £12 billion of welfare cuts. Will he say today that none of those will fall on disabled people?

Lord Freud: I repeat what I said: we will continue to support disabled people and the vulnerable through that process.

Lord Phillips of Worth Matravers (CB): My Lords, at the end of her judgment, the judge commented that the Secretary of State appeared to be grappling with the situation in a way which was "entirely appropriate". Does the Minister believe that was a fair comment?

Lord Freud: I think the judge very much took on board the fact that the Secretary of State realised that something that was simply unacceptable was going on and that we took very large measures to deal with it. Those measures included ramping up the numbers—we ramped up the number of health officials by a factor of four—and we had many more places to do the assessments, and so on. That is what has got the situation under control.

Baroness Gardner of Parkes (Con): My Lords, is the Minister aware that a great deal of time is taken to reassess the cases of people who have incurable and irreversible conditions? Would it not be of great benefit to the department for those people not to be reviewed so often?

Lord Freud: My noble friend makes a fair point. Indeed, one of the ways in which we have speeded up the process since last June is by making more paper assessments, and it is precisely that group of people for whom we are able to do that.

Lord German (LD): My Lords, what assessment has the Minister made of people with Motability cars who may be waiting for a decision or who are seeking an appeal? While you can back-date cash requirements for people who make appeals and are successful, you cannot back-date a motor car.

Lord Freud: My Lords, of course, the people who are being reassessed, whether through a natural reassessment or through the full rollout, will continue to receive their DLA rates, as they were, until they get the conclusion of the PIP assessment. Therefore, there is no question of them losing a car in that period.

Baroness Farrington of Ribbleton (Lab): My Lords, I did not quite understand the Minister's reply to my noble friend. Did he say that the Government will protect disabled and vulnerable people during the forthcoming cuts, as the Prime Minister said they would, or did he say that they will not protect them?

Lord Freud: To clarify matters, I said that this Government would support disabled and vulnerable people through this process.

Baroness Campbell of Surbiton: Protect!

Lord Alton of Liverpool (CB): My Lords, the Minister will recall that, during the debates on personal independence payments, warnings were expressed from all sides of your Lordships' House about the dangers of rolling out this programme too rapidly, with some people possibly left exposed. He has told the House how long the average waiting time will be. Can he now tell the House the average amount of money involved for disabled people who have not received the funds that they are entitled to? What emergency provision is made for people who are, after all, some of the most vulnerable in our midst?

Lord Freud: The delay is of course unfortunate for people and we have said that that is unacceptable. The money is back-dated to the point of claim. Where people have a serious problem, we have a complaints process which they can use and we can try to make redress through that.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201516/ldhansrd/text/150610-0001.htm#15061054000333>

HL268 Employment: Disability

Lord Touhig

To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they are taking to end the disability employment gap.

Baroness Altmann: In the last 12 months there has been an increase of 238,000 disabled people in work. That is really positive, but there is more to do. We have been very clear that the gap between the employment rates of disabled people and non-disabled people remains too big and have committed to halving it. Government cannot achieve this ambition alone so we are working closely with disabled people, their organisations, employers and employment support providers to develop our strategy to enable more disabled people to get into, remain in and progress in work. The

Disability Confident Campaign, which actively promotes the Access to Work scheme, is key to supporting employers in working with Government to halve the disability employment gap.

<http://qnadailyreport.blob.core.windows.net/qnadailyreportxml/Written-Questions-Answers-Statements-Daily-Report-Lords-2015-06-18.pdf>

Disabled People: Access to Work Fund

Lord Touhig

To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the effectiveness of the Access to Work fund and what plans they have to help people with disabilities into work.

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Baroness Altmann) (Con): My Lords, last year Access to Work helped more than 35,000 disabled people to work, including almost 2,000 into self-employment. Disabled people and stakeholders consistently tell us of the effective support that Access to Work offers. A wide range of employment support programmes underpins our success. We are building on this by launching specialist employability support, expanding the Disability Confident campaign, extending work choice and expanding the use of our Access to Work mental-health support service.

Lord Touhig (Lab): My Lords, an Access to Work grant is a lifeline helping disabled people to find a job and stay in work, so I am sure I was not alone in being surprised last week when the Minister for Disabled People seemed almost to boast about the fact that his department had underspent the fund's budget by £3 million last year. In those circumstances, will the Minister tell the House why the Government are cutting the grant that disabled people can receive under the fund and why they have failed to publicise the fact that the fund even exists? How will this help the Government to honour their pledge to cut the number of unemployed people by 50%?

Baroness Altmann: My Lords, Access to Work is not being cut. We are introducing a cap, which means that the resources available can support growing numbers of people. We are determined to reduce the disability employment gap by half and to spend more money on these programmes. It is a demand-led programme. The cap will ensure that we can reach far more people, and, indeed, we did just that over the past year.

Baroness Thomas of Winchester (LD): Does the Minister accept that when the bulk of personal independence payment reassessments start in October, when thousands may lose their Motability cards, the Access to Work scheme is likely to be overwhelmed by disabled people trying to get to work, particularly in rural areas?

Baroness Altmann: As I said, Access to Work is a demand-led scheme. Nobody has ever been turned away from it. The reforms to PIP are about taking money away, but not from those who need it. Therefore, the reforms will deliver a more dynamic benefit system whereby we can tailor support to meet people's needs as they change over time, and Access to Work will be available to more people.

Access to Work and Deaf People

Lord Low of Dalston (CB): My Lords, as the Minister said, the Government aim to halve the disability employment gap so that hundreds of thousands more disabled people who can work, and want to be in work, find employment. This is an ambitious aim, and I wonder how far the Minister believes it will be assisted by capping the amount that an individual can receive from the Access to Work programme. A cap at one and a half times the mean average salary may sound generous, but it could limit the effectiveness of the scheme for those with the greatest obstacles to labour-market participation, such as deaf people who need the support of a sign-language interpreter. Will there be any flexibility in the administration of the cap to cater for cases such as these?

Baroness Altmann: I reassure the noble Lord that the cap for existing claimants will not be introduced until 2018, and we will work sensitively with all those affected to ensure a smooth transition from the support they currently get to an alternative form of support under the new arrangements. More than 35,000 people are currently in the Access to Work programme and 200 will be affected by the cap. As I said, nobody currently receiving more than the cap will lose any of their support until we have worked through the programme of transition over the next three years.

Lord Fink (Con): My Lords, does the Minister agree that misconceptions about people with disabilities, particularly mental health problems, could cause them real difficulties in finding a job? What are the Government doing to help to remove this sort of stigma, particularly among employers?

Baroness Altmann: I agree with my noble friend, and that is why the Government's campaign to make Britain disability-confident is so important. For individuals with mental health conditions, we provide a wide range of support across our programmes—and there are many such programmes—targeted at supporting work for both employers and individuals. We are very conscious that all disabled people who wish to work have a right to support from the Government to help them to do so.

The Lord Bishop of St Albans: My Lords, perhaps I may press the Minister a little about the very real concerns of many people in the deaf community about the use of British Sign Language, not least because currently four-fifths of the highest-value awards are paying for BSL services. Indeed, the DWP's own figures show that almost 90% of the users who will be affected by the cap that is to be brought in are deaf. How do the Government plan to continue to support and encourage deaf professionals on a par with the hearing community in the light of this cap?

Baroness Altmann: I reassure the right reverend Prelate that we will continue to support deaf people and people with hearing loss. Specialist teams will help customers and their employers with advice on adjustments and technological support and with personal budgets so that users can manage their support flexibly themselves when the scheme is rolled out later in 2015-16. We are also in discussions with relevant stakeholders about how best to plan the implementation. As I said, existing customers will be protected until 2018 while we work through the transition.

Baroness Wilkins (Lab): My Lords, how will the department monitor the impact of the cap on Access to Work funding from the day it is introduced?

Baroness Altmann: We will carefully monitor all our programmes. Access to Work is one of the many programmes that we have introduced and are planning to roll out to protect the disabled and help them to work if they want to, as many do. Last year, we ensured that nearly a quarter of a million more disabled people had work. That is a tremendous success, and our programmes are working.

Baroness Sherlock (Lab): My Lords, it has been rolled out. It is already out there, and the Government are limiting the budget. Will the Minister follow up on the questions asked by the noble Lord, Lord Low, and the right reverend Prelate? Of the 200 people affected, 90% are deaf. They will not be protected in the long run; they will lose the money to pay for their interpreters. Advice is helpful. Interpreters are essential. How will the Government protect them?

Baroness Altmann: We are introducing a range of programmes. Access to Work was never designed to be an unlimited-cost programme. We will ensure that all those who are potentially affected by the cap will have more flexible support to help them as they require it.
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201516/ldhansrd/text/150629-0001.htm#1506294000442>

900444 Personal Independence Payments

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the implications for his Department of the High Court ruling in June 2015 on delays in personal independence payments.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): We have taken decisive action to speed up waiting times for personal independence payment claims and are pleased that the Court has recognised the huge progress made. The average new PIP claimant now waits only five weeks for an assessment.

Alan Brown: Currently, delays to people receiving PIP causes problems, but the impact of delays on other benefits such as the carer's allowance and blue badges is hugely significant. Although the Government have made progress, will the Minister advise us what the backlog is in terms of numbers, and how many people wait more than seven weeks?

Justin Tomlinson: It is important to recognise that other benefits are backdated. We have made huge progress. The backlog has been falling month on month since August 2014, and we are now within where we would expect to be as part of usual business. We are looking at a median time, end to end, of 11 weeks. We will continue to monitor that important issue closely.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): May I draw the Minister's attention to a letter I received from a constituent last week? He says: "I was recently contacted by DWP to be assessed for PIP...I sent the forms off and within 3 days had a medical assessment at my home...I have to tell you that the process from start to finish was 3 weeks. Is this a record?...Whilst we read a lot in the media I think my recent experience shows the system may at last be improving."

Justin Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for that. Claims are now cleared at four times the rate they were in January 2014. We have quadrupled the number of healthcare professionals, introduced more than 200 new assessment rooms, doubled the number of DWP decision-making staff, and improved IT systems and claimant communication. I am delighted that my hon. Friend's constituent has benefited from those improvements.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I welcome the new Ministers to their roles. The recent High Court ruling found that the delays to PIP were unreasonable and unlawful. They are also undermining the well-being and dignity of sick and disabled people. I know that I am not the only Member who has seen constituents affected not just by inordinate delays, but by poor quality assessments, driving them into hardship and destitution. The High Court ruling should have been a wake-up call for Ministers, but they seem to be refusing to accept that PIP is just not fit for purpose. In the light of that damning judgment, will they halt the roll-out of PIP and initiate a review as a matter of urgency?

Justin Tomlinson: Actually, the Court and the Paul Gray review agreed that there were no inherent failings in the system, and significant improvements have been made, which I have already listed. The reality is that some cases were unacceptable, but we must not forget why we introduced PIP. It is a modern benefit that allows thorough face-to-face assessments and will ultimately see a higher proportion of maximum value paid, compared with the old disability living allowance system. We are continuing to make improvements and I will keep a close eye on the issue.

Dr Whiteford: I am disappointed by the Minister's complacency. Earlier this year, Citizens Advice Scotland published research showing that 55% of current DLA claimants will lose out in the transfer to PIP. It is not just sick and disabled people who will suffer—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry; I thought you were cutting me off, Mr Speaker. The Scottish Government estimate that 450 carers in Scotland will lose their carer's allowance because of this transition. That will put further strain on families that are already at a disadvantage—

Mr Speaker: Too long. Some of these questions require a bit of advance practice and a blue pencil. I have no impediment in my throat: I was trying gently to hint to the hon. Lady that her question was a tad long.

Justin Tomlinson: I am afraid that I do not share the hon. Lady's views. PIP is a far better system than the former DLA. Under DLA, only 6% of people had a face-to-face assessment, 50% of awards were made with no medical advice, and 71% were allocated lifetime awards, even though one in three cases would change within 12 months—often getting worse, so that people missed out on the appropriate support. We are right to push this and I will continue to keep a close eye on the improvements we have made.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I warmly welcome the Minister to his post. My constituency has many isolated rural and coastal communities. What is being done to ensure that assessment centres are more accessible and flexible for people in those communities?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend for that question: he is a real champion for his constituents. We have added an extra 200 assessment rooms. People who find it difficult to reach an assessment room can travel by car as long as it is within 60 minutes; by public transport if it is within 90 minutes; or, by prior agreement with the assessment providers, they can have taxis provided and paid for.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): What a difference a weekend makes. On Saturday, thousands of disabled people marched in protest against cuts in their benefits. The Minister comes here today, trotting out his sunshine stories, while in the real world disabled people are losing benefits left, right and centre. He can remedy that today by saying, "This Government will not cut the benefits of any disabled person throughout this Parliament." Come on, say it!

Justin Tomlinson: We are clear that we will protect the disabled and vulnerable. Let us remember that under the PIP system 22% of claimants will end up getting the highest rate of support, which is higher than the 16% under the DLA. We are doing more to help the most vulnerable in society.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm150622/debtext/150622-0001.htm#150622700015>

900447 Disability Benefits

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab):

What his policy is on maintaining the level of (a) employment and support allowance, (b) personal independence payment and (c) attendance allowance for disabled claimants.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr Iain Duncan Smith): I thank the hon. Lady for her question and for her campaigning in this area. I would like to take this opportunity to offer her my condolences, having not spoken to her before.

I am currently reviewing all policy on welfare. The outcome will be announced when the work is complete, but as the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), said, it is our intention to protect the most vulnerable, including the disabled. I believe our reforms demonstrate our strong record of supporting disabled people. We introduced the personal independence payment to ensure more support is going to those who need it. More than 700,000 of those who were, once upon a time, stuck on incapacity benefits under Labour are now preparing or looking for work. Spending on disability benefits increased in real terms, and, as my hon. Friend has said, disability employment increased by 238,000 in the previous Parliament.

Mrs Moon: I thank the Secretary of State for his condolences.

My advice surgery has received people who are terminally ill, people with life-ending degenerative conditions, people who have been found fit to work despite both conditions, and those on attendance allowance have been told to use their attendance allowance to pay for their second bedroom, so that they are not affected by the bedroom tax. There is huge fear out there in the disabled community. May we have an assurance that those with disabilities will not be further affected by more cuts in welfare benefits?

Mr Duncan Smith: Our purpose is to protect the most vulnerable. It has been from the beginning, and it will continue to be. There is, therefore, no reason for people to be fearful, and I hope that Opposition Members will not whip up such fearfulness, although I am by no means accusing the hon. Lady of that.

We must review welfare spending, but we want to do so in a way that actually changes lives. We felt that much of the huge increase in welfare spending under the Labour Government—an increase of some 60%—went to the wrong people who were not doing the right thing.

That is the key point. Our purpose is to reform welfare in order to get people back to work, and to ensure that those who cannot manage and have disabilities are treated with the utmost kindness and given the utmost support.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): There are many unpaid carers in my constituency. Does my right hon. Friend agree that flexible working patterns can be an important part of support for them? What encouragement can the Government give employers and employees who need to embrace such flexibility?

Mr Duncan Smith: Universal credit will be of enormous help to people with caring responsibilities, and others who are periodically required to be at home, because it will pay to be in work for every single hour. Moreover, under universal credit, as part of the in-work allowances, we have included an extra piece of support for those who care for others, on top of the carer's allowance.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Disabled people do not want kindness; they want justice, and access to the benefits that can help them to live their lives. Will the Secretary of State give them a cast-iron guarantee that there will be no cuts in their benefits, no cuts in tax credits, and no cuts in the disability premiums that tax credits can bring? Disabled people need those assurances, given that, we understand, the Secretary of State has now agreed with the Chancellor that we are to expect welfare cuts amounting to £12 billion.

Mr Duncan Smith: Let me remind the hon. Lady what happened during the last Parliament, under a Conservative Government. Spending on disability living allowance was up by half in the decade before PIP came in, and just 6% of new claimants had face-to-face assessments. Under PIP, 20% of claimants receive both the higher rates, as opposed to 16% under DLA. Our reforms are about helping those in the greatest need. Let me remind the hon. Lady of something else as well, just in case she has forgotten.

We did debate the overall figure of £12 billion, and Labour lost the election. I remember something that was said by the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), who is not with us for the moment—I send her my best. She said:

“Labour will be tougher than the Tories when it comes to slashing the benefits bill.”

Is it not a bit of hypocrisy for Labour Members to come here and make their claims, having said that they would be tougher than we are?

Kate Green: Labour will be tougher in cutting benefits when that is a response to the wrong drivers of those benefits. What we will not tolerate is cuts in benefits for people who are in work and who need those benefits to enable their work to pay. May I ask the Secretary of State about some of the work-related benefits for disabled people? Will he confirm that there will be no cuts and no

downgrading of the payments to people on employment and support allowance in the work-related activity group, and will he tell us whether industrial injuries disablement benefit will be protected from cuts?

Mr Duncan Smith: The hon. Lady really needs to think carefully about what she says. Labour Members say that they will be tougher than us. Let me give the hon. Lady a simple pledge: we will protect the most vulnerable. There is only thing that is tough at the moment —tough on Labour Members: they lost the election. They had no idea how they were going to end the deficit, and that is why they are sitting on the Opposition Benches.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm150622/debtext/150622-0001.htm#1506227000018>

HLWS54 Personal Independence Payments

Baroness Altmann

My honourable Friend The Minister for Disabled People (Justin Tomlinson) has made the following Written Statement. Personal Independence Payment (PIP) is a major reform which is transforming the way we support disabled people to live independently. PIP replaces the outdated Disability Living Allowance (DLA).

PIP focuses support on those who need it most and, unlike DLA, a significant majority of claimants will have a face-to-face assessment as part of the application process. It is a more dynamic benefit with regular reviews to check entitlement remains correct – payments can increase as well as decrease - whereas 70% of those receiving DLA were on indefinite awards. And PIP is a more modern benefit which takes better account of mental health conditions.

I now intend to roll out the final phase of this vital reform, that of the reassessment of all remaining people on DLA for PIP. We have already rolled out PIP across GB for new claimants and for individuals who choose to claim PIP or whose circumstances change or where their DLA award comes to an end, including for children when they reach 16.

My original intention was to start this final phase in October 2015 GB wide. In May Departmental statistics confirmed that average reassessment claims for PIP were waiting only 4 weeks from returning their PIP forms until an assessment, which is in line with our expectations. This improved performance means I am pleased to announce that we are now in a position to begin the final phase in July, initially at small volumes and in a limited number of areas.

We recognise that this will result in some claimants being invited to reassessment earlier than they might have expected. But by operating at a smaller scale initially, this will enable us to monitor the system closely in small volumes to ensure an efficient reassessment process is in place. It will also provide us with an opportunity to test key parts of the PIP process, such as the way in which we communicate with claimants.

This is in line with the previous Government's response to recommendations in the independent review of PIP carried out by Paul Gray in December 2014. My priority remains safe and secure delivery of PIP and we will use evidence from this early roll out to ensure we are continuously improving the way in which we deliver PIP, offering the best claimant experience possible.

<http://qnadailyreport.blob.core.windows.net/qnadailyreportxml/Written-Questions-Answers-Statements-Daily-Report-Lords-2015-06-25.pdf>