

### Adoption and Permanence

- **The Presiding Officer (Ken Macintosh):**

The next item of business is a debate on motion S5M-02624, in the name of Mark McDonald, on adoption and permanence in Scotland.

- **The Minister for Childcare and Early Years (Mark McDonald):**

Every child deserves the best possible start in life and to grow up feeling and being loved, wanted, safe and secure. All across Scotland, thousands of adoptive families provide the love and security that all children deserve. They make a huge difference to the lives of children whose early lives have often been blighted by abuse and neglect. I want to thank them all for making that difference for their children.

Achieving permanence for children through adoption necessarily involves a process of checks and balances and a system that applies a rigorous approach, involving a range of agencies and professionals. That system needs to be proportionate and effective, and must enable the finding of permanent homes for children.

In recent years, we have made much progress in improving the system and the process. The starting point is the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007. Its measures have resulted in changes that have been an unalloyed good, and I want to pay tribute to Labour's Hugh Henry, then Minister for Education and Young People, and the Liberal Democrats' Robert Brown, his deputy minister, for shepherding that legislation through this Parliament.

As Robert Brown said when closing the debate at stage 3 of the bill, the legislation represents not just a milestone but also a start, and that is what has been achieved. Services have been improved and now function within a more coherent framework. The development and use of permanence orders has helped to provide adoptive parents and adopted children with greater security. More and better support, not just in financial terms, but by way of advice, information and training, is now available. Further, crucially, the act has enabled opportunities for more people to adopt, including same-sex couples.

However, implementing the legislation and delivering the change that is required have not always been as straightforward as we might have hoped. None of us foresaw nor wished for the demise of the British Association for Adoption and Fostering in July 2015. In order to ensure that advice, training and support could continue to be provided to professionals and organisations, the Scottish Government stepped in with funding to enable the creation of the Adoption and Fostering Alliance Scotland, which enabled some of the former BAAF Scotland employees and members to continue their work. We now provide funding of £100,000 to AFA Scotland and support a range of other charities and organisations doing vital work in the area. The St Andrews Children's Society, which was established more than 90 years ago, receives more than £160,000 a year to maintain and expand Scotland's adoption register; it also seeks to recruit more adopters and foster carers. Birthlink also receives funds from the Scottish Government. It provides and maintains the adoption contact register for Scotland. Its work is especially important in enabling people who have been adopted to reconnect with their birth families through its register, which contains tens of thousands of people's details. Adoption UK receives £75,500 to promote adoption policy and good practice and to operate the national adoption advice line.

Adoption UK has also taken on the facilitation of the first adoption week Scotland, which is taking place this week and which, rightly, is themed as a celebration of adoption in Scotland. Events are taking place across Scotland, including an information session for people who are interested in finding out more about adoption and a practitioners networking event to enable those working in the sector to meet and hear input about adoption and permanence initiatives. Further, a large celebratory event for adoptive families is being held at a soft-play centre in Edinburgh. I hope that members will use the opportunity of adoption week Scotland to promote those events and to highlight the role that is played in their communities by adoptive families. This week, we should do all that we can to celebrate adoption.

With the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, we have placed Scotland's adoption register on a statutory footing. The register provides opportunities for children to be matched with families across Scotland if they cannot be matched locally. By requiring all local authorities to use the register, the legislation plays an important role in reducing delays in children being matched with adoptive families and finding permanent homes. Since the establishment of the register in 2011, it has facilitated 320 matches with

adoptive families. I recently visited the 300th register match and was impressed with the supportive and caring environment in which the child was developing, thanks to his new family.

However, the progress that has been enabled by the register is not enough by itself. The current rate of matches is good, but it is not good enough. There are still far too many children waiting—growing up while waiting—for a family and a home, and there are not enough prospective adopters to provide those children with a home. If we are to see a step change in children finding permanent and nurturing homes, over the coming years adoption numbers need to grow—in the hundreds. We can get there only if we start by reaching out through our collective efforts to the dozens of potential adopters who are willing and able to help out the hardest-to-place children and young people.

We need to ensure that the system continues to evolve to increase opportunities. The register is playing a big part in that, exploring and developing innovative and child-centred ways of promoting adoption. One such example is adoption exchange days, which feature profiles of children who are waiting for adoption, including photographs, drawings and letters, which help approved adopters to gain an insight into those children. Beginning in 2012, exchange days have been held throughout Scotland and have resulted in 88 matches to date.

Another example is adoption activity days, at which prospective adopters meet a range of children who are waiting to be adopted and engage with them in a supported, safe and fun environment. So far, there have been three adoption activity days in Scotland. There has been positive feedback from those who have attended, including through an independent evaluation of the first activity day, which has been published and is available from the Parliament's library. The first activity day was held in October 2015 in Prestwick, with seven matches being made as a result. The second, which was in Perth in May, resulted in two children being matched. The third was held in Bathgate on 5 November and so far there have been 14 notes of interest in pursuing adoption further.

The 300th matched family, which I visited, came about with the help of an activity day. The adoptive parents said that there was a strong possibility that if they had not attended the event, they would not have made such a connection and been matched with their son.

We have held three such successful events, and I can announce today that from April 2017 adoption activity days will become a permanent feature of Scotland's adoption register. Moreover, I am increasing funding to the register to double the number of events from three to six per year.

Although we are working to embed an approach that puts children at its heart, we also need to use technology to maximise resources and ensure that prospective adoptive parents can play an active and proactive role. I can therefore also announce that we are putting into effect measures that enable adopter-led matching through a secure online system called link maker as part of Scotland's adoption register. It allows prospective adopters to look for matches directly while enabling social workers, practitioners and agencies to seek placements for children by considering the profiles of prospective adopters. Many registered adoption agencies throughout the United Kingdom are now using link maker effectively and securely, and adding it to our adoption register will provide consistent access across Scotland.

Of course, making the process more child and parent centred and more efficient will not by itself improve adoption rates. One of the biggest challenges is to reduce the drift and delay that still often permeate parts of the process. Our work to address that is centred on the permanence and care excellence—PACE—programme, which supports improvement projects in 10 local authority areas, with plans to add a further four by March 2017.

We have funded the centre of excellence for looked after children in Scotland since January 2014 to implement the PACE programme. Its care and permanence team works closely with individual local authorities and their partners to make improvements to their decision-making systems. By providing intensive, system-wide support, the CELCIS team and the local authorities with which it works put early intervention into action, streamlining decision-making processes and creating concurrent planning by all the agencies involved in an adoption process.

While local areas are identifying and taking forward the right actions that will lead to improvements for their locale, we are monitoring and evaluating the impact of those actions, with a view to sharing more widely what works. I have recently seen at first hand some of the outcomes that have been achieved by PACE projects in a number of local authorities in Scotland. The work is very encouraging and is an example of empowering practitioners to take the best course of action to deliver the best outcomes for the children in their local authority area.

The PACE projects across Scotland give us a route map for the future. We will continue to achieve more adoptions and more permanence for children if we can ensure that all parts of the system are involved and committed to improvement; that professionals and practitioners have the tools, skills and knowledge that

they need to effect change; that we continue to adapt those tools to meet needs and interests; and, crucially, that we increasingly involve prospective adoptive parents and children in the process.

I want to conclude where I began, by thanking all who work and volunteer in the adoption system for the commitment that they bring to this vital work, and by thanking all adoptive parents—and those who are still to come—for giving some of Scotland's most vulnerable children a home, a family, security, care and, crucially, love and hope. We are grateful to all who adopt children and all who are registered as prospective adopters. I recognise that we have more to do to encourage more people to come forward. Part of today's debate is about celebrating the on-going work to provide safe and stable home environments for children who are in need of permanence, and part of it is to serve as a rallying call to those who may be considering adoption to look at the benefits that it can bring not just to the children who are adopted and who achieve permanence, but to prospective adopters who go on to become an adoptive family.

I confirm that we will accept Labour's amendment although I have to add a couple of notes on that. We do not operate a priority system that is based on background or status. Children should be given support based on need. However, I believe that the spirit of the amendment is about ensuring that adopted children get whatever support they need and are not forgotten about at the point at which they leave the care system. In that spirit, we can accept Labour's amendment. This has the potential to be a consensual debate and I am glad that we are able to accept the amendment.

There is more to be done to ensure that more children and young people benefit from a secure, permanent and nurturing family environment at the earliest opportunity. As we pause this week to celebrate adoption and the difference that it makes, let us resolve to get on and make sure that we continue to do just that.

I move,

That the Parliament welcomes the first-ever Adoption Week Scotland, which takes place from 21 to 27 November 2016, to celebrate and promote adoption; acknowledges the role played by measures in the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 and by Scotland's Adoption Register, which have resulted in progress in recent years to increase the number of adoptions; considers that there is more to do to speed up decision making and reduce drift and delay in the system, and supports the roll-out of the Permanence and Care Excellence (PACE) programme to all local authority areas to make improvements in this regard so that more children benefit from a secure, permanent and nurturing family environment at the earliest opportunity.

- **Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab):**

I welcome the opportunity to speak in today's debate on the motion in Mark McDonald's name on adoption and permanent solutions for looked-after children. Scotland's first-ever national adoption week, which takes place this week, is certainly a cause for celebration. It is a great opportunity for people who are interested in adoption to find out more about the process and perhaps to engage with and speak to those who have adopted about their experiences, and for organisations that are involved in the adoption process to encourage and raise awareness about adoption. I hope that professionals and those who are interested in adoption will make the most of the week and that it will be a success that can be repeated.

I am pleased that we have been able to allocate time to celebrate national adoption week and to engage in broader discussion about adoption and long-term care solutions for children. For children who cannot live with their birth parents, adoption and other long-term care solutions lead to the best possible outcomes for their development. Statistical evidence and real-life stories tell us that adoption can be hugely transformative for the lives of children and their families.

The minister's acknowledgement of the success of existing measures on adoption during the past decade, including the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 and the introduction of Scotland's adoption register, is welcome. During the past few years, we have made a lot of progress in encouraging adoption by making it more accessible to all potential adoptive parents, by providing better access to the support that they need to go through the adoption process and by making it easier for authorities to place children with prospective adoptive families.

Despite such welcome progress, we also know that much work is still to be done to improve the situation of Scotland's looked-after and adopted children. The Government's acknowledgement that we must consider doing more to speed up decision making and reduce drift and delay in the system is welcome. On the basis of that commitment, Scottish Labour members will support the Scottish Government's motion, and I am grateful that our amendment has been accepted in the spirit in which it was intended.

When a child can no longer live with their birth parents, it is right that authorities should exhaust every possible avenue to reunite that child with their family before deciding to put the child forward for adoption.

However, we must also make sure that children's rights and needs are always at the centre of decision making, and we would welcome moves to expand the use of the parallel process model that is used in Glasgow to explore more than one option for a child at the same time, to reduce delay in the system.

When I spoke recently to foster and adoptive parents, one parent told me the story of a newborn baby who had been placed in their care at just a few days old and was eventually moved on at the age of three and a half. Such delay in permanence planning for a child is unacceptable and should, for the sake of the child's wellbeing and development, be prevented from occurring wherever possible.

Certainty and stability are the gold standard, and I welcome the reference in the motion to "the roll-out of the Permanence and Care Excellence ... programme to all local authority areas" to ensure that

"children benefit from a secure ... environment at the earliest opportunity."

Supporting permanent, long-term solutions for children's care, wherever possible, has the best possible results for children's long-term wellbeing and development.

However, the evidence and stories from the authorities and the professionals who are involved in the care of looked-after children, as well as the experiences of adoptive families, tell us that adoption is not a magical fix. Adoptive families are an incredible asset to Scotland's looked-after children and to our society as a whole, but they continue to face challenges after the adoption of a child. National adoption week should be an opportunity for us to give voice to those challenges and to show support for Scotland's adoptive families and the continuing challenges that they might face.

The reality of adoption in Scotland is not the mythical and old-fashioned image of an unwanted newborn baby being taken in and supposedly rescued by a—usually affluent—couple. Most children are adopted from care, and adoptive families parent some of Scotland's most vulnerable children, a significant proportion of whom suffer from the long-term effects of developmental trauma that is caused by neglect or abuse.

Research from Adoption UK shows that one in four adoptive families are at risk of breaking down because of a lack of available support. That has led organisations such as Scottish Adoption and Adoption UK to back the fair deal for adoptive families in Scotland campaign, which calls for the expansion of support to every adoptive family who needs it and for priority support to be given to adopted children who need additional support in school and in child and adolescent mental health services.

I hope that the minister and our colleagues across the chamber will support the amendment in my name, which deals with some of those issues and acknowledges the need for changes to be made to the support that is available to adopted children and their families. A child with developmental trauma who is adopted on a Friday does not suddenly on the Monday no longer require the support that they were receiving as a looked-after child. However, in many cases, adoptive families describe hitting a wall when it comes to accessing support; they describe services and authorities being understanding for the first few months or the first year after adoption, but that understanding slowly slips away.

Just this week, I was made aware of the case of a single adoptive parent who lives in Bellshill in Lanarkshire—in the region that I represent—and who was matched for adoption with a child who has a diagnosed learning disability and developmental difficulties. The child was termed hard to place because of their needs, and the adopter had to secure an adoption allowance from the placing local authority, as her circumstances meant that she would need to give up work to meet her child's needs during the first few years of the placement. Once placed with her, the child began to achieve developmental stages that had been previously thought to be beyond their abilities. That made it clear that the child's experience of early neglect had been partly to blame for their delayed development.

With the support of the adoption allowance, which enabled the parent to meet the child's needs, the outcomes were life changing. The parent is now meeting the challenge of getting the right support in place for her child in their school placement. The child has been thriving in the nursery environment and the parent is keen that the transition to primary school does not cause any regression in her child's development.

Ensuring that the right support for adopted children is in place in schools is vital, and I welcome moves from adoption organisations such as Adoption UK to work with the Association of Headteachers and Deputies in Scotland to make all schools attachment aware. Adoptive families can often find education to be one of their biggest challenges. The worst-case scenario of not having the child's needs met by their teachers can result in them turning to home education as the best solution for their child. The attachment-aware campaign is a welcome action and I hope that more schools and local authorities will get behind it.

There are many examples around Scotland of good practice on support for adoptive families. For instance, schools in East Lothian are taking part in a project through the education attainment fund that focuses on improving the relationship between teachers and children who might have attachment issues—particularly

those who are adopted. The project aims to improve communication by using a personal folder for the child to ensure that information is not lost in changes between teachers and support staff. It also aims to introduce to each school attachment ambassadors who can act as a single point of contact and support for the families who require that. We can learn much from those models of good practice and we should strive to ensure that access to such support is comprehensive across the country and is not patchy in certain areas.

The vital role of local authorities in caring for looked-after children and placing children with adoptive families cannot be overestimated. Councils need to be properly resourced to carry out that role, and it is important that we use all the Parliament's available powers to ensure that social work departments and local authorities across the country have the resources that they need to look after Scotland's children.

After all, looked-after children are Scotland's children. It is the responsibility of all of us to ensure that children in care have the best life chances, and part of that responsibility is to ensure that our system of placing children with permanent adoptive families is robust and supportive. Adopted children and their families should be able to receive the support that they need to thrive, and I hope that colleagues across the chamber will support that sentiment today.

I move amendment S5M-02624.1, to insert after "delay in the system":

“; notes the need for continued support services for adoptive families facing challenges; accepts that adopted children should be given the same priority as looked-after children in education and access to mental health services; recognises the transformative benefit of adoption and permanence to children and their families”.

- **Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con):**

I welcome the minister's motion and Labour's amendment, both of which will be supported by the Conservatives.

As we have heard, this week is adoption week, which is sponsored by Adoption UK: we welcome and support the week's aims. There are 14,400 looked-after children in Scotland, and last year only 500 children were adopted. Clearly the gap between the number of people who are looking to adopt and the number who are being adopted is still large, and we still have a long way to go to reach and help the most vulnerable. However, we acknowledge that this and previous Governments have tried to do that; we welcome the moves that have been made in the past and look forward to new initiatives in the future.

We need to encourage diversity in people looking to adopt; we must ensure that people from different backgrounds and that different types of couples and individuals are willing to put themselves forward. We need to get rid of some of the myths about what or who a person has to be in order to go ahead and adopt, so I hope that what goes out in the media and what happens in Parliament this week sends the positive message that although adoption can be hard, it is fulfilling and helpful, and is something that we want to encourage families and individuals to consider.

I welcome what is happening with Scotland's adoption register, and I give the Government credit for putting the system online, for ensuring that local authorities can log into it and for making things much more flexible. I should also mention the success of adoption days, in which prospective parents can go and meet social workers and find out at least the bare bones about children who are looking to be adopted. There is, however, an issue in that respect. A constituent in Edinburgh told me that a while ago they went to an adoption day, and although they were matched with a child, the process has taken so long that they are still waiting to adopt. The legal process has moved a long way, but it is still complicated and time consuming: it takes a long time to move from being matched and getting approval to adoption itself. I would welcome it if the Government could look at whether we could speed things up through the legislation and do things to help birth families and adopting families to get through the process.

- **Mark McDonald:**

I am grateful to Jeremy Balfour for highlighting that point. Obviously, I cannot comment on the case that he has cited, but if he writes to me with the details—if he has not already done so—I will be more than happy to look into the matter, to see what the issues are and to find out whether the problem applies only to that particular case or is something in the system that we need to consider.

- **Jeremy Balfour:**

I thank the minister for that. We need to look at the situation. Sometimes, meetings are arranged by social workers but do not fit for the family or are cancelled at short notice.

We need to look at the best interests of the child and keep the process moving forward, but we also have to remember how hard it sometimes is for the birth mother or birth family to give up their child. We perhaps also need to look at the support that we give them as they go through that process.

Once the adoption process has happened, families face many issues. Roughly a third of adoption cases go very smoothly and well, and a third are rocky, but the family come through it. Unfortunately, however, a third end up with further difficult issues.

As has been highlighted, attachment is important. Young children, whether or not they are adopted, often face attachment issues—I have seen that having stood in the past four months in a playground waiting for a primary 1 child. Adopted children often have greater attachment issues. As has been said, we need to encourage headteachers and local authorities to put in the appropriate resources so that teachers are aware of the issues and know how to deal with them.

In secondary schools, teenagers start to become more aware of themselves and they start to ask questions. It happens with any teenager, but a teenager who has been adopted will have questions such as, “Where have I come from?”, “What was my birth mother like?”, “Where do I belong?” and, “Will I turn out like my birth parents?” Those are good and fair questions, so we need to ensure that appropriate support is given to children as they go through that.

We must also acknowledge that adoption can lead to education problems. We are making progress on that, although 14 per cent of looked-after school leavers still have no qualifications. That figure is simply too high. We need to work to ensure that children who have been adopted are given education that meets their needs, and that they are given the support that they require. We are talking about the most vulnerable people in our society.

The good news is that adoption works for children. Adoption UK has quoted a letter from an older lady in which she says:

“What people don’t seem to understand is that family doesn’t have to be blood; loyalty, faith, and kindness are what makes a family”.

We can make that true in thousands of lives. She goes on to say that, throughout her life, she has learned the important lesson that

“love is the most precious thing in the world to me”.

That is what we want to say to every child in our society today—that love is the most important thing. We need to do that by supporting the parents who go through the adoption process and by supporting the families who put themselves forward. We have to ensure that local authorities, schools, social work and national legislation all work towards that.

I am happy to support the Government motion.

- **The Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani):**

We move to open debate, with speeches of around six minutes. I have some time in hand, so time can be given for interventions.

- **Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP):**

I have friends who were adopted and friends who have adopted children. One of the most selfless acts that any human being can do is to commit to taking on legal responsibility as a parent and to providing a child with a loving home and a secure environment in which to grow up.

I note Labour’s amendment in the name of Monica Lennon—in particular the cognisance that is given to provision of mental health services for adopted children via their education. I am sure that members are already tired of hearing my teacher’s rhetoric, but it is worth emphasising again the centrality of health and wellbeing to curriculum for excellence as one of the eight core curriculum areas, in addition to its overall importance, as underpinned by the getting it right for every child framework. Monica Lennon has been a passionate advocate for the need to work to improve and support mental health education. I welcomed her contribution during my members’ business debate on the topic in September.

Children who have been adopted often experience trauma. Therefore, recognition that their mental health needs must be met in parity with that of their peers is certainly welcome to Scottish National Party members.

As the minister stated in his opening speech, the Scottish Government set up Scotland’s adoption register in 2011. More than 300 families nationally have children after being matched through the register. It is imperative that the Government works to deliver permanence more quickly for looked-after children and young people, and I am delighted to hear the minister commit to doing exactly that. However, permanence

is not just about adoption: it can include supported return to the child's birth parents, if that is the most appropriate way to support them.

For vulnerable children, permanence is vital. They are often marginalised before they even reach the school gates, they live in chaotic households and they may never have known love. They are the children whom schools traditionally sent home because they did not have a tie on, and who were told off by teachers like me for not bringing a pencil to school. Far too often, they are the children whom the system—care or education—failed.

In 2014-15, almost three quarters of looked-after school leavers were aged 16 and under, compared to just more than a quarter of school leavers generally. Moreover, only 35 per cent of looked-after children leave school with one qualification or more at Scottish credit and qualifications framework level 5, compared to 85 per cent of all pupils. The rate of exclusions among looked-after children is also much higher than it is in the general school population, although it should be said that the picture is improving. Nonetheless, the figures show that being able to achieve early permanence is a significant indicator when it comes to attainment and achievement.

Permanence can include remaining at home through a permanence order, a kinship care order or adoption. The legal certainty that permanence brings often cements a home that loves and cares for the child in question.

Last December, the Government announced a strengthening of the partnership with the centre for excellence for looked after children in Scotland—CELCIS—to offer the permanence and care excellence programme. In March this year, the Government committed to funding CELCIS with more than £580,000 a year to support the improvements in helping looked-after children find permanent homes. That has allowed a further six new advisors to be appointed to work on PACE—permanence and care excellence—and to provide support to local authorities. The motion supports the roll-out of the PACE programme so that more children benefit from a secure, permanent and nurturing family environment at the earliest opportunity.

Fife Council has the third-biggest population of looked-after children of any local authority in Scotland. I met its CELCIS team last month. It is already proactively engaged across the authority to support improvement and partnership working with the Scottish Government.

The Government published its "Getting it Right for Looked-after Children and Young People" strategy in November 2015. It builds on existing improvements and calls on the sector to commit to improvement. The strategy's priorities include early engagement and support for families in order to prevent children from becoming looked after; help for children to have a safe, secure and nurturing permanent home through early permanence; and ensuring that every child receives the best care and support by improving the quality of their care.

The picture is not one of doom and gloom for Scotland's looked-after children; rather, it is one of improvement. The proportion of looked-after children with at least one qualification at SCQF level 5 has increased from 15 per cent in 2009-10 to 35 per cent, and the proportion of looked-after children in positive destinations has increased from 40 per cent in 2009-10 to 69 per cent.

I encourage members to read the blog by Fiona Aitken on the CELCIS website, which seeks to dispel some of the myths around adoption. It is not all about babies. The people I know who have adopted did not adopt infants. Nonetheless, they gave the children whom they adopted the love, support and nurture that they would not or could not have received from their biological parents.

No two adoption journeys are the same, but for everyone involved, adoption is ultimately about family, compassion, hope, happiness and acceptance. The motion reflects the importance of all of those vital aspects in the adoption process.

- **Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):**

This has been a good debate and it is good that it takes place in a special week. The four preceding speeches have all been excellent and considered, which is a measure of how important the debate is.

The minister mentioned two former ministers, Hugh Henry and Robert Brown, to whom we owe a lot. That reminded me of just how long the issue has been taxing the education committees of Parliament. The motion and amendment that are before us today rightly make clear the consensual nature of our approach. However, as the minister said, that should not encourage complacency. It remains abundantly clear that a child's life chances are dictated largely by the early years of his or her life. As such, it is crucial that we establish the permanency and consistency that members have spoken about today.

When the Education and Culture Committee in the previous session of Parliament studied the issue, it was clear that the statistics could hardly be more blunt. Looked-after children have the odds stacked against them from the start, and they have poor academic attainment and less chance of progressing to positive

destinations in education and work. The committee was looking at a deep-rooted problem that has not, as yet, been fully tackled. All of us in Parliament have a duty to ensure that changes are forthcoming, because it simply is not good enough that more than one in 10 young people who leaves care in Scotland will experience some form of homelessness within two years.

Jeremy Balfour made it clear that the Conservatives acknowledge the Scottish Government's work and compliment it on the progress that has been made. We welcome further moves from the Scottish Government to speed up the adoption process and to allow more placements, for the exact reasons that Jeremy Balfour set out.

The 2011 report by the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration shows that it takes, on average, two years from the first involvement with state services to secure an adoption and that, in some extreme cases, it can take up to 10 years. The minister is right to say that there has been good progress, but—as his intervention on Jeremy Balfour indicated—there are issues in specific cases that could provide some learning experiences for not just the Scottish Government but all of us, as we go forward.

It is important that the adoption process becomes as simple as possible within the limits that are set by the need for checking and assessing the compatibility of children with parents. Perhaps we can learn from other Governments in that respect. In order to achieve permanence in adoption placements, we require a sufficient stock of adopters on the adoption register. At present, 800 foster families are required in order to meet the pressures on the system. Robin Duncan, who is the manager of Scotland's adoption register, highlighted the work that has to be done to ensure that there are enough adoptive families in Scotland for all the children who need placements. He also noted that we struggle sometimes to find families for children who are—as Jenny Gilruth said—just that little bit older and may have more complicated needs and greater learning difficulties.

Many adoption agencies are carrying out recruitment campaigns to attract new adopters, and they should be warmly congratulated on their efforts to raise the profile of adoption. I hope that adoption week and this debate will further that process. We believe that that work could be helped by the creation of an adoption tsar, which would be a voluntary post, supported by a small logistics, campaign and office budget. The tsar would be appointed by Scottish ministers and tasked with co-ordinating and encouraging efforts to raise the profile of adoption in Scotland. We look forward to moves in that direction.

Permanence is vital for looked-after children. Since 2010, more children have been in placements lasting more than five years, which is very welcome. However, the length of care time for shorter-term placements has remained more or less the same, with 22 per cent of adoption placements being of less than six months' duration. That can have a significant impact on the emotional and intellectual development of a child, particularly when it comes to narrowing the attainment gap. As we all know from trying to narrow that gap, it is clear that looked-after children underperform academically. As I said, the Education and Culture Committee in the previous session of Parliament spent a great deal of time under the stewardship of its convener, Stewart Maxwell, looking at exactly why that is and what we have to drill down into. The committee and its convener had some good suggestions to make in that regard.

Although the figures for looked-after children are showing some signs of improvement, they remain significantly worse than the average for all school leavers. That is of considerable concern, because youngsters want to move on to college or university or into the world of work. I urge the minister to concentrate some effort on looking at what we have to do to help that process. It creates a difficult situation if we allow youngsters to go out into the world without the support that they need after they have come through a difficult time in their life.

This debate, which is on an issue that has been a focus for a long time in Parliament, is hugely significant. We all want progress in supporting our youngsters and ensuring that they have the best start in life. In that, it is crucial that youngsters have around them a supportive family that engenders trust in how they see their future. We welcome every effort by the Scottish Government to hasten that process and we are happy to support the motion and the amendment.

- **Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP):**

It gives me great pleasure to speak in the debate. This is an area in which I have some experience and I hope to use that to contribute to a positive, cross-chamber discussion. However, the contributions so far have been excellent and much of what I say will echo what other members have said. I will follow in the footsteps of Jenny Gilruth and talk about my experience before becoming an MSP. We are told that, eventually, we will forget that, but we will see.

I spent eight years working with children and young people as a social worker, much of that on the front line of child protection. Often I had to manage situations in which children had to be looked after away from

home, usually with family members, but sometimes with temporary foster carers. Trust me when I say that there are few things more emotionally challenging than assessing whether a child should remain at home. Many times, children who are removed are able to return to their parents quickly, which is, of course, what everyone wants. However, other times, the concerns and dangers are too great for that to happen and many children remain looked after and accommodated. As others have said, that means that their care and support are reviewed regularly by the local authority.

It has been well documented, in this discussion and others, that the outcomes for children who are looked after and accommodated are not always what we would want. Looked-after children can often fare worse in a number of settings, including education, health and the criminal justice system. That is why I and, I think, everyone in the chamber will fully welcome the First Minister's recent announcement of a root-and-branch review of the care system to deliver better outcomes for those whom we are looking after as a nation.

One way in which outcomes can be improved is by deciding on permanency at an earlier stage, which of course includes adoption, as well as permanence orders, which were introduced in the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007. Research has demonstrated clearly that when sound, informed and speedy decisions are made about where a child should live, the child is more likely to be settled and happy, and their outcomes and life chances are improved. That is why I would agree with the part of Monica Lennon's amendment in which she describes adoption and permanency as having a "transformative benefit", which I thought was an excellent phrase.

Unfortunately, as has been said, the process to permanency can often take a long time. There are usually good reasons for that, for example, as Jeremy Balfour mentioned, the birth parents being given every chance to get things right, and other prospective family members, such as grandparents, being assessed. That is one of the biggest challenges that social workers and others who are involved in the permanency arrangements face. Many times, parents respond well initially and then, unfortunately, it goes the other way at a later date. Anyone I have ever known in social work would want to give the parents every opportunity to ensure that they get things right. Inevitably, parents have to be given time to do that. That is one of the reasons why permanency can take longer.

Issues can also arise with the assessment of prospective carers. That has been mentioned in the debate, too. There are the mountains of paperwork—referred to in social work as form Fs and form Es, which some members may be familiar with. Deep consideration is often given to whether children should be placed with their siblings and, if not, what contact arrangements might be best. Again, that can be a very complicated process, because one child might have one set of needs and another might have a different set of needs. Their permanent environments need to be taken into account, too. There is much to be taken into account.

Most important, the views of the child must be taken into account. Often, when a child is adopted, they may be too young to contribute fully or, at least, verbally. However, when a child is older, and a permanence order is sought, their views should be at the centre of any decision. I am sure that that is almost always the case.

I am sure that every member in the chamber recognises the challenges that I have outlined and understands that moving to permanency and adoption is far from a simple and straightforward process. That is why I fully welcome adoption week Scotland and the Scottish Government's commitment to the area, as demonstrated in the minister's motion for this debate. It is important that we use that focus to make progress in the area, and work must be done to speed up as much as possible the process of prospective adoptive parents and foster carers going through the checks that are required for them to be approved or rejected. The motion and the amendment recognise that and the steps that we are taking as a Parliament and a country.

We should recognise the excellent steps that have been taken. As a couple of other speakers have mentioned, in 2015-16 more than 300 children were adopted from care in Scotland. On top of that, Scotland's adoption register has moved online, which has given social workers and adopters a more immediate and direct involvement in the process and is bringing down delays. Yesterday, I had the privilege of speaking to a former children and family colleague who is now in the family placement and adoption team. I took the opportunity to speak to her as I knew that I would be speaking in this debate. She and her colleagues are excited about the register moving online and they believe that it is another significant move forward in their area of work.

I welcome the increased funding from the Scottish Government for wider permanence, with a commitment of £580,000 to support improvements to the process of helping looked-after children to find a permanent home. As I mentioned, the Government's commitment to making progress in the area was made clear when the First Minister outlined in the programme for government that it is one of the priorities for the current session of Parliament.

As we have heard, the First Minister has also confirmed that the Scottish Government will implement in full the getting it right for looked-after children strategy by continuing the national roll-out of the PACE programme with the aim of having it in the majority of local authorities by the spring. The change to adopter-led matching from next autumn will also see vast improvements to the system, again leading to children being placed with a family much more quickly than was possible previously.

Improving outcomes is also dependent on the right support being in place to help children to deal with their circumstances emotionally. Many therapists now seek to involve the permanent carers in that work—and advise starting it while the child is in temporary care—as much of the focus is on “Building the Bonds of Attachment”, to quote the title of a relatively famous book. Many of us take that for granted for ourselves and our children but, often, our looked-after children have not experienced it. That is yet another example of how the progress that this Government and this Parliament have made will directly benefit this group of young people.

Having witnessed at first hand how happy a child and their adoptive parents can be when they start their family life together, I am so pleased that this Government is making the area a key focus of its early agenda. I look forward to working with the Scottish Government to ensure that we get the best possible solution for Scotland’s children and adoptive parents.

- **Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab):**

Most speakers have commented on how consensual and positive this afternoon’s debate has been. Too often, we tend to use those words as a euphemism for dull, but that is not the case today. The topic of this debate goes to the heart of some pretty profound and fundamental human needs and desires that are common to us all. The importance of nurturing and parenting as adults and the need for security, love and attachment to a parent in childhood are at the emotional core of the human condition.

In modern days, attachment theory has researched and described the importance of that in a formal way, but we all know and feel it pretty instinctively. However, that does not mean that we all benefit from it or get it right. Far too many children in Scotland today, for one reason or another, are denied that unconditional love of a parent or parents in their birth family.

Recently, we have often spoken of the importance of corporate parenting for looked-after children, and I think that we are beginning to accept and understand what is meant by the obligations of that role. The First Minister has promised to take her role as a corporate parent seriously and to seek to improve the ways in which we discharge that obligation. That is very welcome.

However, today’s debate has begun with the knowledge that the permanence of a placement with a family is a better outcome and that, for many—if not all—children, an adoptive parent will be much better than a corporate parent, no matter how good or well meaning that corporate parent might be. That said, that is not necessarily an easier outcome. It is certainly my view that trying to be a good parent is perhaps the hardest thing that most of us will ever try to do.

For children, living with parents, even in the love and security of the family, can be a challenge at times, too. That is much more so for adoptive parents and adopted children. Apart from anything else, a child who has left care for adoption is almost certainly already profoundly hurt and hurting. Thankfully, children are no longer given up for adoption simply because they were born illegitimately, for example. Adoption UK has told us that the majority of adopted children have suffered from abuse or neglect prior to care and adoption. It has said that the likelihood of adopted children not being affected by prenatal domestic abuse, substance abuse or alcohol abuse is slim indeed.

Jenny Gilruth made the point that adoption is not just about babies. Indeed, the average age of an adopted child is around two. A child who has lived the first two or more years of their life facing abuse and neglect will almost certainly suffer from attachment disorder, having failed to form normal attachments in their early years. Instead, they will have learned a lack of basic trust through abuse and separation from those who should have provided care. How could it be otherwise? The lack of trust will have been learned by direct experience and the reality of their life.

If parenting is hard, adoptive parenting must be harder still. Jeremy Balfour was right to say that there are more than 14,000 looked-after children in Scotland. We place only 500 children a year and we place only half of those 500 in stranger placements. That shows that we have a very long way to go to meet the need.

The 2007 review and the legislation that followed it tried to help with that. The minister has acknowledged that. They streamlined the process and led to the later introduction of the adoption register. It is important that the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 recognised for the first time that families come in many diverse shapes and sizes, all of which are valid and able to provide the love and care that we

want for adopted children. It opened the doors to many more people becoming adoptive parents who had previously been excluded from doing so.

Adoption activity days, which the minister talked about, are among the latest ways in which we can try to move towards closing the gap between need and what is provided. However, Scottish Parliament information centre figures show that the 500-ish figure for placements has remained unchanged since 2011, so we have to acknowledge that progress has been slow. Dr Robinson's adoption activity day evaluation gives a snapshot of 149 children seeking a placement, but there being only 61 families. Therefore, there is a gap, and we have much work to do.

The Government is to be congratulated on its efforts on adoption week, the promotion of exchange days and activity days, and its efforts to try to raise the number of successful adoptions. However, that is only half the story. Adoption UK has told us that one in four adoptive families is at risk of breaking down due to a lack of post-adoption support. It has said that families are desperate for help with parenting and support for children who face the challenges of moving on from their early life trauma.

In the same way that people do not stop being parents when their children become parents but take on the new and different role of being grandparents, we as corporate parents do not stop being corporate parents when a child is adopted. We still have a role and an obligation, although they may be different.

I am delighted that, in my constituency, we have a project in North Berwick cluster schools to try to find ways to improve the support that adopted children receive from teachers and schools. That, as Monica Lennon said, is something that all adoptive families and adopted children should be able to expect, wherever they go to school, as they should expect to receive additional support from other children's services, not least child and adolescent mental health services.

The minister spoke of starts and milestones on this critical journey. The additional support for adoptive families has to be part of the journey; Labour's amendment makes that clear. I am pleased that the minister will be able to accept our amendment.

- **Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):**

I will start on a happy note. Two close friends of mine who are in a same-sex marriage have just gone through the adoption process and hope to welcome their new arrival to their home in the next few months. Everyone who knows them is in no doubt that they will make fabulous parents and that their child will grow up in a household of love and safety. That indicates two things—first, that we have moved on vastly as a society from the days when it was thought that only the traditional nuclear family model would work as a framework for adoption or permanence, and secondly, that the single most important thing is that children are brought up in a safe, happy and loving home, with parents who nurture them and give them the tools to be well-rounded, decent adults.

Like everyone in the debate, I welcome the first-ever adoption week Scotland, which is taking place this week. The Scottish Government's aim is for Scotland to be the best place in the world for children to grow up, regardless of their background or what circumstances they are born into. Make no mistake: the ideal place for children to grow up is at home with their natural parents, but as we all know for many children, and for many reasons, that is not always possible.

One of the saddest things that I experienced during my years as a children's panel member was witnessing a mother with an addiction problem read out a letter of thanks to her toddler son's foster mother who was sitting next to her. With tears streaming down her face, she spoke of her gratitude that someone had offered her little boy the chance of a better life—a life she knew that she could not give him. Everyone in the room could see that the child was thriving due to being nurtured in a family home. Accordingly, it is vital that there are effective, confident professionals who can support children into alternative care placements, whether that be through adoption or a permanence order.

As the minister outlined, more than 300 families have adopted children through Scotland's adoption register, but it is sad that more than twice as many children are on the register needing a family as there are prospective adopters offering one. This month, Scotland's adoption register has moved to an online system, which gives adopters and social workers direct involvement faster. That will reduce delays and find the best possible matches between children and families.

Deciding to adopt is a life-changing event and the decision is never taken lightly. The process can be long and sometimes stressful for prospective adopters, who are put through rigorous checks and stringent suitability tests. That is simply because we have to get it right for every child. The Scottish Government is constantly striving to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the adoption and permanence order process, including through the introduction of adopter-led matching this year, as has been mentioned.

We are providing hands-on, expert support to local authorities to help children achieve permanence through the permanence and care excellence programme. PACE brings together local authority agencies and professionals, the children's hearings system and health services to improve and to speed up processes.

Scottish Adoption has this year been awarded top marks across the board by the Care Inspectorate. That is just one of the many valued agencies and voluntary groups that support people through the adoption process.

A fitting way to conclude would be to listen to the experience of one adoptive parent:

"With the support of Scottish Adoption we have been able to parent our child therapeutically, to help him develop from an anxious, frightened child, to a loving, caring, funny and charming young man.

He is still only very young, but thanks to the support we have received, we now realise that we, as parents, have what it takes to support him on his journey to greatness.

Adoption has been far more challenging than we ever could have realised when sitting in the room at that first information meeting, but by far, the best thing that we have ever done in our lives."

That is proof—if it were ever needed—that the rewards outweigh any challenges and that loving and nurturing a child, whether biological or not, is beyond compare.

I am happy to support the motion and the Labour amendment.

- **Alison Johnstone (Lothian) (Green):**

I will support the Government motion and the Labour amendment at decision time. It is true that we are enjoying a consensual debate, and rightly so; I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to it.

If we are truly to meet our goal of providing every child with the best start in life, we must ensure that our looked-after children have a smooth and quick journey into a stable and nurturing family environment. I welcome the opportunity that the first adoption week Scotland brings us to raise awareness of looked-after children's needs and of the positive, life-changing opportunity that becoming an adoptive parent can be.

We know that getting children into permanent adoption or long-term fostering placements is no simple task. Lack of information on a child's individual journey through the care system can be a barrier to finding a permanent home, and carers must be fully supported and resourced to provide a loving home.

We have had success in lowering the number of looked-after children over the past three years. However, the number of children and young people who need to be accommodated in care placements outside their family home has risen by 18 per cent over the past five years. Often, children and young people who are in such a position face a long and uncertain process, with multiple placements with foster carers or in residential homes. As the University of Strathclyde's centre for excellence for looked after children in Scotland says of a child in that position:

"The clock on that child's childhood never stops ticking."

It is our responsibility, as corporate parents, to ensure that decisions on permanent homes can be made as quickly and effectively as possible, so that young people can begin to build the normal, everyday childhood experiences that will support them into their adult lives, which will give them memories and enable them to develop resilience.

That is why I welcome the roll-out of the PACE programme across Scotland. If we improve local authorities' ability to make informed decisions about a child's route to a permanent home, through better data recording and information sharing, more looked-after children can be settled quickly with minimum disruption to their lives. Where PACE has been trialled in Aberdeenshire, there have been marked reductions in decision-making times: in 2013-14, the majority of decisions took more than 20 weeks to be determined, but from April 2015 to April this year, all decisions took place in less than 20 weeks. That is a positive change.

It is crucial that, once a child has been adopted or placed in long-term foster care, adequate support services are in place for their family and carers. Iain Gray made that point well. The Scottish Greens support the Fostering Network's call for a national minimum fostering allowance, which would end the disparities in the financial support that local authorities provide. The City of Edinburgh Council pays foster carers a standard allowance of just over £100 per week, but across Scotland allowances range from £77 to £205 per week.

To end such discrepancies in Wales, the Welsh Government has provided for a national minimum maintenance allowance for foster carers. I would be grateful for the minister's comments on the issue, which I raised when I was a councillor in the City of Edinburgh Council between 2007 and 2011. Edinburgh's allowance is mid-range, but housing costs in the city are some of the highest in the country, so the financial cost can be a barrier to many people who would be interested in fostering or adopting.

The barriers are not just financial. We have to expose the myths that Jeremy Balfour talked about and take positive action. I am pleased that that is happening. There is growing awareness that people from all walks of life, with all sorts of homes and all sorts of jobs, can provide the homes that looked-after children need.

Other positive action is happening. Edinburgh Leisure's looked-after and active membership provides free swimming, gym access and fitness classes to looked-after children and their carers. Supporting adoptive families not only ensures that young people have a stable place in life but supports the wider community of which a child is a part—for example, by reducing disruption in school and behavioural problems that could impact on classmates.

I am sure that members will have received a great deal of correspondence this week but, ahead of the debate, I was contacted by adoptive parents who live in the Lothian region who requested that the Scottish Government look at providing a support package that is similar to that received by adoptive parents in England. One of their key asks is that their child's teachers are understanding of their child's additional needs and have the confidence, support and capacity to provide extra learning support as required.

We know that children who have been looked after are more likely to be excluded from school and to leave education at the earliest opportunity. Teachers have a crucial role to play in boosting children's confidence to do well in school. Since the beginning of this session of Parliament, my Green colleague Ross Greer has been highlighting the falling numbers of additional support for learning teachers in our schools and the crucial role that they play in closing the attainment gap, to which Liz Smith referred and which is a concern.

I note with concern that the number of looked-after children who are entering further and higher education fell last year. The reasons behind that have yet to be drawn out, but the role of teachers in supporting children to take the first steps beyond school cannot be overestimated. A report by the Rees centre for research in fostering and education on the educational progress of looked-after children in England highlighted the importance of teachers as role models for young people, helping them to build life skills and aspirations for their adulthood.

Having a disrupted start in life should not prevent our young people from aiming for success in their future, and additional support for learning staff can be a vital source of encouragement for young people to aim high. The authors of the report "Celebrating success: what helps looked after children succeed", which the Scottish Government commissioned in 2006, spoke to 30 looked-after children and found that those who had gone on to achieve success in adulthood had been encouraged to have high expectations by their teachers.

We all appreciate that decisions about adoption need to be well informed and made without unnecessary delay, and I welcome the roll-out of PACE to give the positive results for looked-after children that we all hope for. I, too, thank all those who provide a secure, stable and nurturing home for children and young people who have suffered neglect and trauma. Finding the right fit can be challenging and, even when we have found that fit, many challenges remain and on-going support for the whole family is essential. I ask that we come back to the issue regularly because, as corporate parents, we have a responsibility to look after our youngest and most vulnerable citizens.

- **Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD):**

Presiding Officer,

"Everything that needs to be said has already been said. But since no one was listening, everything must be said again."

That strikes me as an unfair quote to use in a debate such as this, so I will not use it. However, it was my way of responding to Iain Gray's point that sometimes people think that consensual debates are dull. In fact, I have learned a lot by listening to a variety of members across the chamber during the debate.

I thank Mark McDonald for his observations about Hugh Henry and Robert Brown. By the powers of Facebook, I let Robert Brown know that he had been commended in a debate by a Scottish National Party minister in a subsequent Government for the work that he had done in a previous ministerial life, and he was suitably impressed. Mark McDonald will probably get a Christmas card this year—I have no doubt that it will be one of many.

Like Liz Smith, I reflect that an awful lot of work has gone into adoption over much time, involving many politicians of different hues, in a genuine attempt to find stronger and more positive ways forward in a challenging area of public policy. As other members have said, we all have friends and family who are adoptive parents or who have been through the adoption process. I take the opportunity to say hello to my first cousin Will and his partner, and their fantastic daughter, Monique, although they live in Canada and I am not sure whether Scottish Parliament television ever gets that far—I hope not, in many ways. The last

time that I stayed with family in Canada, they told me what the adoption process was like. I wish that I had taken a few notes, because they might have been useful today.

I take the minister's point about adoption activity days and the range of activities that have been introduced, which strike me as constructive and sensible. I hope that they have the ability to inspire many. Adoption week across Scotland and this debate are important signals and, indeed, symbols. However, Parliament must challenge signals and make the measures that have been talked about today tangible for children and young people who desperately need our help.

As other members have said, adoption provides a stable family life for children who, for whatever reason, would not necessarily have had that life with their birth parents. For parents who cannot or choose not to have children, adoption is a way of building a loving family, and for the majority of those families, adoption is successful and helps children to thrive. As any parent knows, raising a child has its challenges, and in cases of adoption those challenges can be even more difficult to overcome—especially given the lack of support services once the formal adoption papers have been signed, which members have mentioned. I take the minister's point that he is reflecting on that and that more needs to be done. Some of that was reflected in Monica Lennon's speech and is addressed in the Labour amendment.

Research illustrates that up to a quarter of adoptions are at risk of breaking down. By any standards, that is a worrying statistic, and in Scotland that equates to some 125 children each year being affected. That is 125 children who return to the care system, which older children would have thought that they had left for ever. We must seek to understand why that happens and take the necessary actions to address that worrying statistic.

Adoption breakdowns can have a variety of causes. Adoption UK notes that its members desperately need support services that range from guidance for parents to more help for children in schools. If those services are not being provided, we need to ask whether we are content to let some of our most vulnerable children move through life without the support that they need simply because they have ceased to be the state's responsibility. That cannot be right.

When support is available, there is sometimes a view among parents and, sadly, among the authorities that asking for that support is a sign of weakness. One family sought support for one of their children many years after their adoption had been finalised only to be told that, if they took the request further, all three of their children would be temporarily taken from them. Unsurprisingly, that adoption subsequently broke down.

Adoptive parents must be given assurances that seeking help—we all do it in every walk of life—is in no way a sign of their being bad parents but, on the contrary, signifies that they are trying to do the best for their children. Families often adopt without a full picture of the child's background, no matter how good the reports are, and coping with unknown challenges is immensely difficult. We must reflect on that in taking matters forward.

As Alison Johnstone just said, looked-after children tend to leave school earlier and with fewer qualifications. It is therefore right that teachers are alive to the importance of monitoring the attainment of looked-after children. However, teachers might not always be aware that a pupil is from an adoptive background, and we need to strike a balance. Few adoptive parents would want their child to be continually monitored and treated differently from their classmates—to say nothing of the view of the child themselves—as that would undo much of the work of creating a normal family life. Nevertheless, we must ensure that adopted children do not slip unintentionally through any cracks.

Providing guidance through teacher training and professional development programmes for qualified teachers could start to address the challenge. Children spend upwards of 30 hours a week at school, so it cannot be right that the needs of adopted children are not formally assessed and taken into account by their teachers. Adoption UK's pilot project in North Berwick, which has been mentioned, includes the provision of attainment training for teachers and support staff. If we are to create a better learning environment for adopted children, the people whom we trust to teach them must be properly equipped to do their jobs.

Like others, I am conscious of the weight of requests that we make of teachers. The papers for tomorrow's meeting of the Education and Skills Committee are full of representations from teachers on their workload in the context of scrutiny of Education Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority. I am sure that Liz Smith has read those representations, too. Nonetheless, here we are in another context making yet more demands on teachers' time when they are challenged pretty strongly by the day job as it is. This whole area must also be part of the day job, but a balance has to be struck.

The First Minister has rightly focused on the need to improve the lives of children in the care system. This adoption week has demonstrated the importance of ensuring that adopted children and their families are supported, too. The least that we owe these children—our children—is the reassurance that we will work

together, through the agencies, the Government and the Parliament, to give them a stable environment to grow up in. That is the least that we can do.

- **Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP):**

I start by recognising Aberdeenshire Council's achievement of its aims for early permanence for children who need a caring and stable home and family. The Aberdeenshire PACE group's aim is:

"each child living in a stable, safe, secure and happy home, where they know they will stay until they are independent and where they know they can make lifelong connections."

The group goes further than that by setting itself a measurable target to ensure that

"90% of children will be accommodated before their 12th birthday and will have a permanence plan within 9 months."

That target was met in January 2016 and the group is working hard to sustain the position and improve on it in future years. Last week, its achievements were recognised when Aberdeenshire Council won *The Herald's* society award for the young people's project of the year. Further, at the 2016 quality improvement awards, the project won the outstanding contribution to improving outcomes for children, young people and families award.

Those awards reflect what the group has done around the idea of support. As many speakers have mentioned, it is not enough simply to place a child with a family; support must be provided to ensure that the adoption flourishes and does what it should for the parents and the child. The PACE group has programmes that involve peer support from other adoptive parents—who would know more about what newly adoptive parents are going through than people who have been through that themselves? It provides training and coaching opportunities for prospective adoptive parents, who can ask as many questions as they might have and access support. There are also support groups for adoptive children and looked-after children.

The young people's organising and campaign group—YPOC—in Aberdeenshire does many of the things that Tavish Scott just mentioned. It is important not only that teachers are trained and know how to work with children who have been in care but that children who have been in care take ownership of their situation. The YPOC group has produced materials for teachers that communicate how its members feel when they are in meetings and which outline issues that they face. It has produced a fantastic DVD on issues that its members face in school—the young people made the DVD themselves, and I highly recommend it. I am making pizzas with the YPOC group in a couple of weeks and we will see how that goes.

Variations abound on the quote that

"A society should be judged on how it treats its most vulnerable",

and there are arguments about who first said it. However, the sentiment is extremely relevant to the debate. No one is more vulnerable than a child who is without a loving, caring protector. The longer that children experience uncertainty in their lives, the more damage is done. The sooner that children can be settled in a permanent home with their new family, the better their life chances.

A couple of months ago, I had the privilege of spending an afternoon with Laura and Shaddelle from Who Cares? Scotland. Both those exceptional women had been what we call cared-for children, but they had vastly different experiences.

Shaddelle and her little brother had been badly neglected by their birth mother but had been given a new permanent home early and were able to grow up in a loving and stable environment. It was by no means plain sailing. Shaddelle and her foster mum, Hazel, who she calls Mum, still had to cope with her childhood trauma, and unsettling sporadic unwanted contact from Shaddelle's birth mother made things very hard at points. However, she and her brother had a loving family who were there for them no matter what, and the confident, bright and compassionate Shaddelle is living proof that early permanence can make a world of difference to a young person.

We can contrast Shaddelle's experience with that of Laura, who moved from foster carer to foster carer and from a children's home to a secure unit where she was locked in at night, supposedly for her own protection. Lack of early permanence was the start of a downward spiral for that young woman. She told me, "I just wanted someone to claim me." I will never forget those words. She needed someone to take her on board, warts and all, difficulties and all.

I imagine that all of us here got into politics to make a difference and, of course, people throughout the country give money to Children in Need and whatever. I am reminded of a conversation that I had with a social worker whom I know, who said that the biggest difference any person can make is to give a loving and secure home to a child who, for whatever reason, has a risk to their wellbeing in their birth home and is

confused, scared and vulnerable. Such a child will only become more vulnerable the more transient, temporary and numerous their moves are from place to place.

I urge anyone who has been watching the debate to look at the work that Who Cares? Scotland does and at the recent STV documentary called "Who Cares". The strongest voices belong to those who have been through the care system and two of those voices belong to Laura and Shaddelle. The two of them are ambassadors for looked-after children, and their message is simple: vulnerable children need to be loved and to feel secure as quickly as possible, so that they can start their journey towards being ordinary kids, with ordinary, safe and happy lives.

Early permanence through adoption is the key to that and I fully support the Government's prioritisation of that goal. I support the Government's strategy, which takes new approaches that are in line with the recommendations by those who know the situations best: the adoptive parents and the looked-after children who have been through the system.

- **Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con):**

I am pleased to take part in today's debate. As we mark the first ever adoption week Scotland, I pay tribute to the individuals and couples in the Lothian region, which I represent, who foster and adopt children—children who are some of the most vulnerable members of our society and who are often in considerable distress. Their contribution is a great one and we should acknowledge it, commend their efforts and look at supporting them in every possible way.

Children need stability and routine in their home lives to allow them to have the confidence to develop and flourish, establish friendships and make progress in education. We want to see more people become fosterers and adopters, more fosterers go on to become adopters and adoption made easier and less bureaucratic. I very much share the concerns about the length of time that it takes to secure an adoption, with the average being more than two years from initial contact. That must be reduced, and I welcome the Scottish Government's recognition of that in its motion. Many individuals and families who want to adopt are looking to ministers to deliver the improvements that are required and to make those changes at the earliest opportunity.

Scottish Conservatives welcome the creation of Scotland's adoption register, and we are pleased that investment has been provided to bring its services fully online, which will, we hope, speed up the matching of children with adoptive parents. We believe that the time is right for guidance to local authorities that was drawn up more than five years ago to be reviewed and refreshed, to identify any delays that local government policy could be bringing to the process.

Alison Johnstone outlined the fact that in the past few days we have received a number of emails from constituents who have raised issues around the foster care allowance. Although my constituents have emphasised that they do not foster to make money, it is appropriate that the concerns are looked at. I hope that, if I write to the minister, we can take forward concerns about the variations in costs faced by many foster parents, especially those who live in more expensive communities such as Edinburgh.

Both the Fostering Network and those who run the adoption register have spoken out publicly about the lack of foster and adoptive parents in Scotland, and I hope that we can all unite in sending out the message that we encourage more of our constituents to consider fostering and adopting.

In Edinburgh, an extensive advertising campaign has literally placed the issue on the streets, with billboards being placed in communities across the city to encourage people to consider fostering. I would welcome any insight from ministers on how that approach is being developed, how effective the advertising is and whether more public information campaigns can be brought forward. For example, it has been suggested to me that regular information sessions in supermarkets and shopping centres may give individuals and families who might be considering fostering the opportunity to discuss the issues informally. It has also been put to me that every council tax bill should include information on fostering, although I am not sure that that would deliver the outcome that we all desire.

I have raised in the chamber a number of times the fact that social media is changing how people access information. There is a great opportunity with Facebook, for example, and the geographical advertising that it can undertake. We could try to get it on board so that we could advertise the opportunities and how great it is for families to adopt children. I hope that the minister will take that on board.

As the minister said, many hundreds of foster and adoptive parents are needed to give homes to looked-after children. Adopting and fostering can be incredibly rewarding for parents of all ages and all backgrounds, and we need them to come forward.

Adopters and fosterers are especially needed for children in their early teens and children who have complicated needs, including physical and learning disabilities. We need to develop better advertising to

cover those children. Sadly, the older children become, the harder it is for them to find adoptive families to take care of them. We need to look at how we can ensure that teenagers can benefit as well as younger children and babies.

As well as local authority fostering and adoption services, we should also recognise the important and valuable role of the voluntary sector in the area—both the local and national charities and the independent charitable fostering and adoption agencies. Iain Gray, who is not in the chamber at the moment, outlined the importance of on-going support for families, and, as Tavish Scott said, one quarter of adoptions break down, so we must look at what work is being done on those issues.

Barnardo's Scotland offers effective training to help new adoptive parents as they step into their roles and on-going support after children have been placed, including group meetings organised by Barnardo's own social workers. Meetings are also attended by potential adopters who are waiting for a child. In Edinburgh, we have the St Andrew's Children's Society which hosts the adoption register and has a long-standing and good reputation for excellence.

Scottish Adoption also does first-class work in the area. It was recently commended by the Care Inspectorate, which awarded it top marks across the board—it won praise for the range, variety and accessibility of the post-placement support that it provides. Post-placement support is really important, as is the sharing of knowledge, tips and experience among experienced fosterers and adopters and those who are looking to foster or adopt for the first time.

I again welcome the debate, and I appreciate the consensual approach that we have all taken. I look forward to progress being made so that more children in care can benefit from potentially being fostered and adopted.

I have one final point that I hope that ministers will take on board. It relates to teachers and their ability to identify children in their classes who are adopted and those who are young carers. I attended a young carers conference, and that issue was flagged up to all the MSPs who attended, but I have not seen anything since then about how we can move that issue forward.

I hope that the message that we can all take from today's debate is that these children are everyone's responsibility. We must make sure that we work to build the best possible life and future for them.

- **Elaine Smith (Central Scotland) (Lab):**

Like others, I welcome the first adoption week Scotland as something that is much needed to raise awareness of the specific issues faced by children who are adopted and by families when they add new members to their family. It is also a chance to celebrate adoption. Nothing can be more important than caring for our children, and those who are foster carers, kinship carers and adoptive parents contribute immensely to our society. It is therefore absolutely right that we take this opportunity to thank them all.

Today, the focus is on adoption and the generous compassion that helps the family, the adopted child and the whole of society. As the minister did at the beginning of the debate, we should, of course, thank the voluntary organisations that work in the field. He mentioned some of them, but there are others, such as St Margaret's Children and Family Care Society in Glasgow. Of course, all the national health service, local authority and other public sector staff who are involved also deserve to be thanked.

We all know about the problems that young people who have been adopted can face before their adoption. Sadly, those problems can continue after they have been adopted. We do not have comparable data for Scotland, but we know that the majority of children who are adopted in England have suffered from abuse and/or neglect prior to their adoption. By increasing the chances of a child staying with their adoptive family and feeling welcomed into the everyday structures that many other children take for granted, such as school, sports and friendship groups, we can ensure that they are given the best chance to flourish even when they might not have had the best start in life. That would be the fresh start that they very much deserve.

We should reflect on the problems that children in care face and we should recognise the advances that have been made in recent years in assisting them, particularly with regard to increasing the age limit so that they can stay on with families.

However, a great deal more needs to be done. For example, we know that children in care are four times more likely to suffer a mental health difficulty. As such, I welcome the Scottish Government's indication—which Fulton MacGregor mentioned—that it will carry out a root-and-branch review of Scotland's care system. I hope that the experiences of children who have gone through care will be included at the heart of the review. Perhaps, in summing up, the minister can give us a bit more detail about the nature of the review and say when it will begin.

We know that, unfortunately, the state has not always been a great guardian for many children. We know that children in care are less likely than their peers to do well at school and that some have experienced further neglect and abuse while in care. Any future review of the care system in Scotland has to take those issues into account and must reflect on the reality that getting as many kids into adoptive families as possible is a beneficial outcome for all. After all, we know that children who are adopted from care do very well compared to those who remain in care, as Adoption UK said in the briefing that members received before the debate.

If we look after children well and build up their opportunities, we will construct a solid foundation on which Scotland and its children can flourish. Therefore, I am pleased to support Monica Lennon's amendment; I am also pleased that the Government has indicated that it will also do so. The amendment reflects some of the specific reforms that we should pursue in order to improve the lives of families who adopt. To achieve that, adoption will need to be a more appealing prospect for families and hopeful new parents. By increasing the support that is provided to those who adopt children from care, we will gradually see increased numbers of children taken out of care and into welcoming permanent homes where they can feel that they belong.

As we know, only 500 children were adopted in Scotland last year. To improve that, we need to focus on the three things raised by my comrade Monica Lennon. First, every adoptive family must have the right to support when they need it. Secondly, every adopted child must have the right to additional support in school. Thirdly—taking into consideration what the minister said in his opening speech—every adopted child must be given quick access to child and adolescent mental health services. Parity for adopted children with looked-after children is important.

Many members have made the point that this is a consensual debate. However, it is important to note the reality that local authorities have to face. On top of cuts made in previous years, local government funding is being cut again this year, and we have only recently seen the announcement of an end to the 10-year council tax freeze. With that in mind, it will be no easy task for local authorities to find extra money to support adopted children and adoptive families. That reality cannot be ignored—local authorities need to be properly resourced.

In taking forward improvements, we should learn from the process that took place in the previous parliamentary session, in which policy was informed by those who experienced care—we should do the same for those who are adopted. I imagine that very few of us know first hand about the unique experiences of those who have been adopted and/or were in care. That expertise needs to inform the way forward—the people who understand adoption on a personal level are a fundamental resource for us.

There are two cases—if I can call them that—that I know about and will mention. When I was a young kid, I witnessed a young child being told by other children that they were adopted. I was personally affected by that; I can remember it very well. Such incidents can have an on-going negative effect and show that families may need support in explaining adoption to children and that children should be able to access their own support if they need it.

I also know of an adopted child from a Catholic family who felt special and who was delighted that they had been specifically chosen by their family. I mention that they are from a Catholic family is because they said, at a very young age, that they felt lucky to have three mothers: their birth mother, their real mum and Our Lady. That was obviously a much better experience for the child.

We can be in no doubt that family life for both the child and the parents can be greatly enhanced by adoption. The state has a duty to make that as easy as possible for them and, in turn, that will benefit our society.

- **Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):**

I welcome the debate, which is being held during the first-ever adoption week Scotland. I also welcome the consensual points that have been made about the benefits of the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007 and of the adoption register in Scotland, from which more than 300 families and—more importantly—children are benefiting. The new moneys that the minister announced will be very welcome.

The Scottish Government's strategy for looked-after children and young people was published in November 2015. It is worth noting the strategy's priorities, which are to support families early to prevent children from becoming looked after in the first place; to provide early permanence when required—that has been mentioned by a number of members; and to make sure that every child receives the best care and support.

I would like to take a slightly different approach: I want to commend the role of kinship carers under the Government's strategy and all that they do to prevent children from becoming accommodated in the first

place—and to prevent pressures on adoption services as a consequence. The kinship carers I have met across my constituency of Maryhill and Springburn and beyond do exceptional and vital work. In particular, I want to mention the kinship for the north group, which was previously run by Jessie Harvey, a formidable and wonderful lady, and is now run by Sadie Prior, who is doing another sterling job on behalf of that organisation. I have been happy and privileged to work with them over a number of years. I thank them for all that they do, but they do not want my thanks; they wish to receive appropriate support, help and assistance, not for them but for the children they care for.

A successful kinship care arrangement saves a significant financial outlay, given the alternative expensive residential options that councils would otherwise have to pay for, and the life outcomes for young people in kinship care are far better, on average, than those for looked-after and accommodated children. That is crucial. Ending up with happier and healthier children with better life chances is what it is all about for all of us.

Ahead of my election in 2007, I made a commitment to kinship carers with regard to financial support—I committed to fight for parity with foster carers. The Scottish Government worked towards that goal over a number of years and finally fully realised it in 2015 through a £10 million commitment. I thoroughly welcomed that—we are proud of that achievement.

However, this is 2016, and kinship carers, as well as foster carers and adoptive families, quite rightly have a fresh set of asks. At my most recent meeting with kinship for the north in Possilpark, we discussed how peer advice and support for kinship carers need to be better supported. I am well aware of and welcome the Children 1st advice line for kinship care, but Sadie Prior discussed with me the idea of a national volunteer-led model of advice and peer support for kinship carers that the kinship carers I work with, along with the Scottish kinship care alliance, are keen to develop. I understand that the minister's officials might have had some initial representations in relation to that initiative, but I would like to extend an invitation to him to come and meet the kinship carers in the kinship for the north group in Possilpark to talk to them about their needs and about the potential of a national network of peer support and advice, which they would be happy to be involved in as volunteers. They would love to see the minister in our constituency.

As I said, one way of easing pressure on adoption services is to reduce the need for young people to be adopted in the first place. Kinship carers are placed front and centre in realising that ambition.

I was struck by what Monica Lennon said about on-going support for adoptive families. Young people do not stop having significant needs simply because they have been adopted; that is not how it works. Ms Lennon noted the calls for a fair deal for adoptive families in relation to school, child and adolescent mental health services and a variety of wider support needs. Those are all powerful points. Those key asks have been long-term campaign goals for kinship carers, and I am sure that the minister will consider Ms Lennon's points in the round to ensure that, whether we are talking about foster carers, kinship carers or adoptive families, there is equity of service for all groups. The issue is not about those who care for the young people; it is about the young people with needs themselves.

My final point relates to the idea of early permanence. I was struck by Fulton MacGregor's point that early permanence needs sound, speedy and informed decision making. As MSPs, we sometimes see families only when they are in need. That includes families who have engaged with the social work system and who are desperate to retain their children, whether that is at home or through a kinship care placement. There is a perception—I am sure that it is only a perception—that, once social workers have made an initial decision about a family, that position can become entrenched, and they can rule out the prospect of children returning to the birth family or going into kinship care arrangements, because of the closeness between the birth family and the aunt or gran or whoever.

I accept the need for early permanence to achieve the best outcome for vulnerable young people, but I reinforce the comment that was made by Fulton MacGregor, who has much more experience than I have on the issue, that the decision has to be sound and speedy, but it also has to be informed. That means making sure that we do not needlessly rule out other potential options, including kinship carers.

- **Maurice Corry (West Scotland) (Con):**

I declare an interest as a local councillor with Argyll and Bute Council and as a member of the council's corporate parenting board, which looks after more than 200 looked-after children. I agree with Iain Gray about the responsibilities that we have as members of that board to follow and monitor children once they leave us and go into adoption or kinship care. We discussed that issue very seriously at our most recent board meeting, which was in Lochgilphead. We have issues relating to not just the municipal areas but the islands and rural areas within our boundaries.

For a child in care, being brought into a loving environment and family is one of the greatest gifts that they will ever receive and, for a family that receives a child to raise, giving that child a loving home and parents is the most important task that they will ever undertake. There are many benefits to the state from a child being adopted or fostered. The cost of keeping a child in residential care equates to more than £150,000 per child per year. Although financial benefits are welcome, the more important thing is the positive impact that adoption has on a child's life. Children who are in residential care are less likely to go on to further education, employment or training than those who are not in residential care—the figure is only 77 per cent, compared to the national average of 93 per cent.

Children in residential care are more likely to experience homelessness: more than one in 10 are likely to end up homeless within two years of leaving care. What is more, they are more likely to end up in prison. It is a worrying statistic that, across the United Kingdom, 25 per cent of the adult prison population has been in care, although they make up just 2 per cent of the overall adult population. Getting a child adopted can lead to changes and much more positive life chances for them, and that benefits everyone in society in the end. Because there are such benefits to the child, the prospective family and the state, all work that is undertaken to promote and encourage adoption and fostering must be welcomed.

Permanence in adoption is important for a child. The long-term placement of a child, particularly in early childhood, is beneficial for their speech and vocabulary in the early years and it lays the foundations for better mental health and academic attainment later on in primary and secondary school. If we are going to tackle and narrow the attainment gap, we must include in that work children who are adopted. The longer that a child has a stable family environment, the better they should perform at school. Making sure that those children have an equal opportunity in life compared to those who do not need to be adopted should be the responsibility of us all.

I recently saw a documentary on Bulgaria that compared the situation there 20 years ago to now. Then, there were large state institutions where children were left by their parents because they could not afford to keep them. Now, there is a move to small family units, with a view to putting children out to adoption in various environments in the country.

Some years ago, when I was a member of NATO forces in the Balkans, I had the privilege of visiting and dealing with a wonderful children's home in Kaposvár in the southern part of Hungary, where I saw the love and care that was given to the children there. That was 15 years ago, and the home was looking to put children into smaller units and into families that had stepped forward. Some of them were poor families, but they were given help by the state at that time.

The creation of Scotland's adoption register was a welcome step in the right direction towards securing a good home for all children who need one. In particular, the decision to take the service online will make it radically simpler, which will dramatically help to speed up the process of matching children and families. Putting the register online was a Scottish Conservative policy, so I am delighted that the Scottish Government has once again taken our lead and is putting our ideas into practice.

Speeding up the process should be a key aim of adoption policy in Scotland. It takes more than two years on average to secure adoption from a family's first involvement with the state services. That is too long. It is unfair on the child and the family. There are even extreme cases in which it has taken up to 10 years to secure adoption. The process to register as an adopter or a foster family needs to be as simple as possible while, of course, staying within the safe limits of checks and assessing the compatibility of child and parents. New ways of speeding up the process need to be found. In our corporate parenting board, we are continually discussing that subject. It is a very important part of our work.

For example, refreshing the guidance that was issued to local authorities in 2011 so that it is in line with the 2014 act would allow a review of the guidance, which sits alongside the act. I hope that that would identify any blockages in the local government processes that slow down the overall process and lead to their being dealt with accordingly.

When adoption agencies are already making effective efforts to make families aware of the option of adoption and fostering, they should be encouraged. As Robin Duncan, the manager of Scotland's adoption register has noted, there are simply not enough families for children who need to be adopted, particularly children who have more complicated needs, such as learning difficulties.

It is clear that more work needs to be done to simplify and improve the system but I am sure that, working together, we shall get there in good time.

I pay tribute to all the families in my West Scotland region that adopt and foster children and provide kinship care. We are all immensely grateful to them for stepping forward and helping to give the children hope, a future and, above all, love.

- **James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP):**

At the recent SNP conference, along with many others—about 3,000, I think—I was profoundly moved when the First Minister addressed the issue of care-experienced kids in Scotland. Those young people are entitled to the same fair and equal opportunities as every other young person in the country. In politics, we do not often talk about love, although we have heard the word a few times in the debate. However, the First Minister was absolutely right when she stated that care-experienced young people deserve to be loved.

There is no denying that the young people in the audience, who raised their red paper hearts, agreed completely that some care-experienced kids have, for years, deeply missed being loved. However, for them to be loved and for drastic change to be made in their lives, we must look at the facts.

As many members have stated, the statistics for young people living in care are deeply shocking: nearly half of five to 17-year-olds living in care are diagnosed as having a mental health disorder; 7 per cent of young people in care go from high school to university, compared to nearly 40 per cent of other young people; 50 per cent of prisoners identified as having been in care at some point in their lives; and 85 per cent of young people in care leave school before the age of 16.

I was particularly distressed when I read that last statistic because, if 85 per cent of care-experienced young people leave education before the age of 16, what chance does that give them to move on and make the life to which we are all entitled? The Government has been challenged with closing the attainment gap for all young people and no specific group should be left behind. Although the workplace is the right path for some young people, many of those who leave school early and enter apprenticeships should be going on to further and higher education to reach their full potential.

The initiatives mentioned in the motion will provide more stability for the lives of care-experienced young people, which in turn will drastically reduce that horrifying statistic of 85 per cent. No member can argue with that or the benefits that such initiatives will bring to the young people and, indeed, society.

In the short time I have been convener of the Education and Skills Committee, it has been my pleasure to work and have discussions with the charity Who Cares? Scotland, which my colleague Gillian Martin mentioned. Representatives of the charity have been to a number of education and skills events and have appeared before the committee. The work that its staff and the young people themselves are doing is deeply touching. I spoke to one young lady who said that, thanks to Who Cares? Scotland, she is looking forward to going on to further education and is so keen to be part of the changes in young people's lives that she can see herself entering the field of politics—something that she would never have imagined for herself just a few short years ago. We need to see more of that.

The Who Cares? Scotland manifesto made a commitment to challenge the First Minister and the Scottish Government to alter the terrible outcomes for care-experienced young people. In setting up the adoption register, the Scottish Government has gone some way towards accepting the gauntlet that the charity threw down. As has been said, more than 300 families have now adopted children after being matched through the adoption register, and 69 per cent of those children are aged under five. It is worth noting that a key aim of Scotland's adoption register is to increase the number of adopted children who are the most difficult to place, which takes us back to those care-experienced young people. I am delighted that the registry is bringing families closer together and reducing the amount of time for which potential adopters and children are waiting for a placement.

I have some experience of that. A few years ago, my partner and I thought about fostering or adopting, and we looked into it. Part of the reason why we did not go ahead was the complexity and the length of time that the process was taking, in particular for fostering, to move forward. Eventually, my partner and I decided—I suppose that it was more my doing than hers—not to go ahead with it.

The children's social work statistics for Scotland show a further decrease in the number of looked-after children for the third consecutive year. That news is welcome, as is the 4 per cent reduction in the number of children on the child protection register, which has been supported by the 19 per cent annual increase during 2014-15 in permanence orders and orders with authority to adopt.

I am delighted that the Scottish Government, in order to build on those achievements, is working towards making the register available online to streamline the process even further. All those positive indicators and steps will go some way towards providing a strong, stable and loving family environment. That will lead children towards attaining at school and interacting with peers, which will equip them for successful adulthood and for whatever they wish to achieve in their lives.

The strategy, "Getting It Right For Looked After Children and Young People: Early engagement, early permanence and improving the quality of care", reaffirms the Scottish Government's commitment to the vision of a stable, loving childhood that prepares looked-after children for fulfilling adulthood by improving their outcomes. The strategy calls on the sector to accelerate progress by supporting families through early

intervention that leads to a nurturing home and providing early permanence, with the benefits of the best care and support possible to increase the quality of care.

Maurice Corry—who I see is no longer the chamber—spoke about Bulgaria. When I was in South Sudan a number of years ago, I saw for myself the importance of somebody taking responsibility for caring for kids who had nobody else. South Sudan, which borders Uganda, experienced a civil war that involved child soldiers. One woman had 16 children, none of whom were hers—they were all orphans from the civil war. In South Sudan, the notion that a village makes a family really was the case. Everybody mucked in together, and people felt that they were one family. That is pretty much what society used to be like here, but it has become less so over the years. For me, that experience highlighted the importance of somebody taking responsibility and showing those children love and care. The children in South Sudan were benefiting hugely from that, as I saw when I visited the schools and colleges that the charity that I was with had helped to fund.

The legislation that we have in Scotland benefits not only care-experienced young people, but the wonderful potential parents across the country. There has been much talk in the Parliament about making Scotland a fairer place in which to live and thrive, but we can only really accept that fairness has been achieved if no child is being left behind. The statistics that have been discussed during the debate are truly some of the most shocking that I have seen. I am delighted—but not surprised—that all members are committed to supporting the motion and the amendment, and to supporting these young people to have the best start in life. Only then can we expect to see them flourish into happy, successful adults and become an integral part of Scottish society, which they are all capable of doing.

- **The Deputy Presiding Officer (Christine Grahame):**

I am disappointed that Maurice Corry is not in the chamber for the closing speeches. I have had no notice or request from him. Perhaps that message will be conveyed to him by the Conservative team.

We have some time in hand, so I can give Daniel Johnson an extra minute to wind up for the Labour Party. You have up to eight minutes, Mr Johnson.

- **Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):**

Thank you, Presiding Officer. Much has been made this afternoon of the positive, consensual tone—

- **The Deputy Presiding Officer:**

Bear with me a minute. I see that I have failed to name Miles Briggs, who is also not in the chamber. No doubt that will be conveyed to him, too.

My apologies, Mr Johnson.

- **Daniel Johnson:**

Not at all, although you have slightly broken up the pace of my humour.

- **The Deputy Presiding Officer:**

I am sure that you can recover it. You are a stylish gentleman.

- **Daniel Johnson:**

I will stumble through that again.

There has been a positive, consensual tone to the debate, and if that is different, I suggest that it is because we are pleased not to be debating Europe and Brexit, as we have become used to doing on a Tuesday afternoon.

A debate on adoption was bound to strike a different tone. It is not just an important issue but one with real and human impacts. I welcome the Government's motion highlighting the first ever adoption week. I echo Mark McDonald's initial comments and thank the people and agencies involved in making adoption work in Scotland. They do massively important work. I also note Mark McDonald's announcements on adoption activity days and PACE. I think that everyone in the chamber welcomes every effort that is made to improve adoption, by not just finding placements for children who are seeking adoption, but supporting those placements thereafter. In some ways, Liz Smith summed it up best when she said that although there may be consensus, there must not be complacency.

I hope that adoption week will be an opportunity to talk about the successes of adoption, especially for those who have only recently become allowed to adopt, and to dispel the myths that sometimes surround adoption. I hope that it will also be an opportunity to put adoption into the context of looked-after children as a whole and talk about the placement stability that it offers. Finally, I hope that it will present an opportunity for the Government to look at support for families after a child is adopted. I welcome the fact

that the Government is backing our amendment. I welcome, too, the calls by Adoption UK and Scottish Adoption for a fair deal for adoptive families.

I commend Adoption UK, Scotland's adoption register and the Scottish Government for putting together the document "Reality of Adoption in Scotland". It is not often that I get emotional preparing for debates, but the stories in that document are powerful and important. If we are to improve understanding of adoption, we need to bring out those important stories.

I was particularly struck by the stories of two LGBT couples who have adopted since the 2007 act allowed same-sex couples to adopt for the first time. They spoke of their apprehension as they went through the process and the pride of parenthood. One couple said that it was the best thing that they had ever done. I was pleased to hear Mark McDonald acknowledge the work of Hugh Henry and Robert Brown, because it was the Labour coalition Government that made those new families possible when it introduced its bill in 2006.

However, there seems to be some way to go in that regard when we compare Scotland to other parts of the UK. In England, 1,690 adoptions to same-sex adopters took place last year, compared to just 67 in Scotland. One in 12 adopters were same sex in England, one in 13 in Wales and just one in 23 in Scotland. I would therefore be interested in the Government's take on that trend and whether a cultural shift is needed to bring things in line, or indeed whether new legislation or guidance is required.

The message from this week should certainly amplify those voices. It should also bust the myths that surround adoption: on age, sexual orientation, marital status, disability, income and nationality. It does not matter—adoption is open to all. We heard from Monica Lennon and others about the stereotype of the unwanted baby being taken in and rescued by usually affluent people. However, we know that adoption can be an option for looked-after children of all ages. It is open to couples and single people, affluent or not. It is important that, this week, and in this debate, we seek to dispel those myths, not further them.

Jeremy Balfour did a very good job of bringing to life the gap between the number of children seeking adoption and the placements made. It is worth noting that adoption is rare in comparison to the total number of looked-after children in Scotland. We have 15,000 looked-after children in Scotland, while 4,000 children cease to be looked after each year. Adoption is the destination of just 7 per cent of those young people. Although we very much welcome the increased attention that adoption gets this week, as a Parliament, we must put adoption in context: it is not the usual final destination for children in care.

I thank Fulton MacGregor for his comments this afternoon, because he shed some light on the experience of working in the system, its complexities, the judgments that have to be made and the balancing of interests. We must always seek to ensure that the system and those processes are carried out as efficiently as possible.

Another set of professional experiences that we heard this afternoon came from Jenny Gilruth, who did an excellent job in highlighting the long-term impacts—particularly the educational impacts—that are experienced by many people who come from care and are adopted.

Permanence was highlighted throughout the debate. Alison Johnstone described the child for whom the clock never stops ticking, and the academic research on multiple placements for looked-after children only serves to underline the importance of permanence. There is a large body of evidence that links multiple placements with problems with behaviour, mental health, education, employment, social relationships, financial management and housing. Placement instability further reduces the opportunity for children to develop secure, permanent attachments, leading to transitory relationships, which can amount to greater confusion and a lack of social identity.

Adoption is not the only way to reduce placement instability. Long-term fostering can achieve that, as can kinship care, as Bob Doris pointed out, and residential care. However, adoption is an important and transformative way to provide permanence and reduce the number of placements.

Iain Gray did an excellent job of highlighting the need for on-going support for adoptive families, and other speakers highlighted that, too. As Monica Lennon said when she spoke about our amendment on that subject at the beginning of the debate, a child who has come from a traumatic background and is adopted still needs support the day after adoption. Adoption means permanence, but added barriers to support should not be put up. It is right, therefore, that priority support should be given to those adoptive families who need it, both in education and in mental health services.

Scottish Labour is happy to back the Government's motion, which marks the beginning of adoption week, and we hope that members will consider backing our amendment to recognise that families with adopted children face challenges and need support in education and mental health services.

- **Ross Thomson (North East Scotland) (Con):**

I start by declaring an interest as a councillor on Aberdeen City Council and, therefore, as a corporate parent. I echo the comments of members who have welcomed the debate and its positivity and unanimity. As the Scottish Government has rightly recognised, our system of care needs radical reform, so the launch of a root-and-branch review that seeks to ensure that love is at the centre of that system, and that every child in care is loved and feels loved, is very welcome.

For far too long, we have let down the most vulnerable people in our society. As my colleague Maurice Corry highlighted, more than one in 10 young people leaving care in Scotland experience homelessness within two years. Some 14 per cent of looked-after school leavers receive no qualifications, while only 8 per cent receive one or more qualification, and only 4 per cent of care leavers go on to higher education. Although we have seen improvement in terms of positive outcomes and destinations for care leavers since 2009, we have also seen the number of positive outcomes stagnate since 2012, with very little improvement.

They are not somebody else's children: they are the children of all of us, which is why Parliament, the Scottish Government, its agencies and our society need to step up and ensure that our care leavers get the very best opportunities to succeed, to be what they want to be and to make the most of their potential. For those who are in care, we have work to do to ensure that children have a family, love and—most of all—a childhood. If we are to improve outcomes, we must work to reduce the time that it takes to find permanent stable placements.

The evidence that we have seen at the Education and Skills Committee shows that, in terms of educational attainment, children who are in more permanent places and who have fewer moves achieve more. It is therefore important that greater weight be attached to permanent adoption, where that is in the best interests of the child, in order to provide a permanent solution and a better outcome.

Transforming the system to deliver the best possible outcomes for our children and young people will take work. The number of adoptions of children from care in Scotland has remained broadly flat in recent years; in fact, the most recent figures show that the proportion of children leaving care for adoption dropped from 7.2 per cent to 6.9 per cent between 2014 and 2015. Furthermore, in 2012, the number of children who lived with prospective adopters was 1.6 per cent of all children in care and, two years later, in 2014, that number was 1.7 per cent. No real progress or change was achieved.

As my colleague Liz Smith highlighted in her speech, it is astonishing that it takes on average more than two years to secure an adoption. There have been some extreme cases in which it has taken up to 10 years. Therefore, a key objective of the Scottish Government should be to speed up the whole process and to ensure that it is as simple as possible while compatibility to register as an adopter or foster family is properly assessed.

My colleague Maurice Corry alluded to the comments of Robin Duncan, who is the manager of Scotland's adoption register. He warned:

“we still don't have enough adoptive families in Scotland for all the children needing placements”.

We need to congratulate adoption agencies on the hard work that is being carried out to recruit new adopters. The Scottish Conservatives believe that in order to support that work and attract new adopters, an adoption tsar should be created. That would be a voluntary post, and the person would be appointed by the Scottish ministers. Their task would be to co-ordinate and encourage the effort to raise the profile of adoption in Scotland so that we can make real progress in attracting the new adopters whom we need, because too many children are still waiting for a loving family.

We still have work to do to change perceptions and attitudes—especially in respect of foster families, who are too often viewed as being for difficult children. In challenging those perceptions, we can work towards improving the supply of foster parents, which will in turn help to make placements last longer and therefore result in more positive outcomes.

I turn to contributions that members have made to the debate. My colleague Jeremy Balfour recognised and welcomed the efforts of the Scottish Government and previous Executives. We welcome the extension of activity days, which is great news, and the comments of the minister, who made an important point about myth busting in respect of adoption and the need to encourage people to come forward to do something that is, as he said, hugely fulfilling. He also highlighted the challenges in the system, which can be complicated and slow, as it was in the constituency cases that he mentioned.

My colleague Liz Smith talked about the work of the previous session's Education and Culture Committee—Tavish Scott also referred to it—and how it had examined the challenges around educational attainment and what could be done to improve outcomes for leavers from our care system. We need to congratulate warmly the agencies that continue to do all that they can to recruit new people and to launch new campaigns on their work, and we need to urge the minister again to consider all school leavers and the support that could be put in place as they go out into the wider world.

In opening for Labour, Monica Lennon touched on a very important point: one in four adoptive families is at risk of breaking down due to lack of support. She referred to families hitting a brick wall. Tavish Scott touched on that very point when he spoke about the challenges of adoption breakdown and how it is incumbent on us to try to understand the reasons for and causes of that so that we can ensure that support is available and that families that seek support in a natural and normal way do not feel stigmatised or ashamed about doing so.

I know that Jenny Gilruth made a comment about people being tired of hearing her rhetoric as a teacher. I never do; I always think that it is a welcome contribution to our debates. She touched on the important questions about how we achieve the best attainment for our young people and children, the best ways of supporting them in the education environment, and ensuring stable and secure homes and permanent adoption placements. We can work towards those.

Fulton MacGregor made a terrific and incredibly valuable speech about his direct experience, and about the importance of taking into account children's and young people's views and how children and young people have to be at the heart of the decision-making process.

Iain Gray talked about the vital role of being a corporate parent. That role needs to be taken very seriously; indeed, we cannot forget our role when it comes to children who have left our care. We, as corporate parents, always have that role and very real responsibility. He also touched on something else that was not mentioned by other members: the number of children who suffer from prenatal substance and alcohol abuse. Before those children are even born, many of their life chances are decided for them, which has a significant impact on their quality of life. That was a very important point to make.

I welcome Rona Mackay's story of a same-sex couple adopting for the first time. That is absolutely wonderful; we need to see more of that, because we should be promoting and supporting any home that is loving and safe.

Alison Johnstone and Gillian Martin both touched on the great success in Aberdeenshire with the PACE programme, where we have seen real improvements, including a reduction in the decision making-time to less than 20 weeks. Other local authorities could learn lessons from what has happened there.

Elaine Smith touched on how we ensure that children's views are taken into account as we go into the root-and-branch review. I, too, look forward to hearing from the minister about how the Scottish Government intends to achieve that.

My colleague Miles Briggs talked about how we as MSPs can work in our regions and constituencies to encourage our constituents to become involved, to become foster parents and to become adopters. It was interesting to learn about what has been happening in Edinburgh and the City of Edinburgh Council's advertising campaign, as well as how we could use social media more to inspire more people to come forward.

In making adoption easier and reducing barriers to adoption, we can attract more people to register so that we can bring children and adopters together in order to secure loving environments in which children and young people can reach their full potential, prosper, have a childhood and—most of all—feel loved.

- **The Deputy Presiding Officer:**

I am so glad that I gave you that extra minute—you squeezed the juice right out of it.

- **Mark McDonald:**

A number of members have spoken about the consensual nature of today's debate. Although that is a fair point to make, there is rather a lot to which I need to respond.

The debate was framed around adoption and permanence for an important reason. Although much of the debate has rightly focused on adoption, with this being adoption week, there are other routes to permanence. The four legal routes are adoption, rehabilitated to return home, permanence orders—which can result in foster or residential placements—and kinship care orders. Throughout the debate we have heard members reflect on those different routes to permanence. It is important that we recognise that all those routes can—and will—deliver substantially better outcomes for young people.

I will begin at the beginning of the debate. Monica Lennon rightly spoke about support for adoptive families. It is important to say that support is available. Last month, I met Adoption UK and have agreed that the Scottish Government will work in conjunction with it and other stakeholders to review the therapeutic support that is available and—crucially—to ensure that it is clearly signposted.

The Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007, which I mentioned in my opening speech, requires local authorities that are asked to do so—by, for example, an adopted child or someone who has adopted a child—to carry out an assessment of need for adoption support services. Where the assessment identifies a need for support services, local authorities are under a duty to provide them. Following an assessment of

need, the support that is available includes information, advice, guidance, signposting, counselling, opportunities for adoptive parents to interact, mediation of contact with the birth family, mediation services where an adoptive family is at risk of disruption—a number of members talked about that—financial support, basic life-story work and short-break care where no therapeutic input is provided. A number of support mechanisms can be accessed; the question is whether they are readily identifiable by adoptive families. I have agreed with Adoption UK that I will look at the issue in more detail.

Members talked about the disparity between the number of children who are seeking adoption and the number of prospective adopters. As of today, there are 140 children on the adoption register and 132 prospective adopters—there is a disparity, but it is perhaps not the gulf that was suggested by some members' remarks. However, we want to do more to encourage people to come forward as prospective adopters.

Jenny Gilruth made important points about the health and wellbeing aspects of the curriculum for excellence and about the need to dispel the myth whereby adoption is seen as being about babies, when in fact it is sometimes young or older children who need to be adopted.

Liz Smith talked about the timescale for adoption, as highlighted in the 2011 SCRA report. A guiding principle behind the permanence and care excellence programme is to reduce unacceptable delays in achieving permanence.

I am not persuaded that we need an adoption tsar. A lot of good work is being done out there to promote adoption.

- **Liz Smith:**

Given the minister's comment about the need to publicise all the facts that people need in relation to adoption, which he rightly said is not easy to do a tsar could in some cases be helpful.

- **Mark McDonald:**

I will be happy to receive more detail or to meet Liz Smith to discuss the suggestion, so that I can understand exactly where the Conservatives think the approach would bring benefits.

Fulton MacGregor brought to the debate some important reflections from his experience as a social worker. He underlined the point that the delays that we heard about can be driven by the best intentions, as people try to ensure that a child has every opportunity to remain in a family structure. When that proves not to be possible, a permanence order is sometimes required. Fulton MacGregor was right to put that into perspective for us.

Fulton MacGregor also mentioned the root-and-branch care review, about which Elaine Smith asked for more detail. We will bring more details to Parliament. Work is under way to ensure that we get the scope of the review right and that we ensure that it is driven by the views of care-experienced young people—a firm commitment that the First Minister gave when she launched the review.

Iain Gray talked about how corporate parenting responsibilities do not simply dematerialise when a child moves into an adoptive placement. I have been keen to consider how we can ensure greater understanding and awareness of corporate parenting, so early in the new year I will set up a couple of sessions at which MSPs can discuss corporate parenting and how best we can support corporate parents in local authority areas and understand our own role. I am also keen to ensure that, following the local elections in May next year, appropriate advice, support, training and guidance are given to newly elected and re-elected councillors about their corporate parenting responsibilities. Given the climate in which we are operating and the focus on looked-after children's experiences, now seems to be an opportune time for us to refresh thinking in that regard.

Iain Gray also mentioned some of the numbers regarding the activity days that we have seen and the mismatch between the number of families and the number of children. Obviously, new approaches are being taken, and my hope—which I hope everybody shares—is that as the approaches embed we will see mismatches being addressed.

Rona Mackay highlighted her experience of the children's hearings system. I decided that one of the things that I wanted to do as a minister was sit in on a children's hearing, so I have sat in on a couple in Aberdeen. I walked into one and found that the gentleman who was chairing the hearing was my former school headmaster, which I do not think was the school reunion that either of us had envisaged. However, one of the issues that the hearings highlighted for me was that the decision-making processes in children's hearings and the court system are sometimes not as aligned as they should be, which results in interim decisions having to be taken in children's hearings and families often having to return repeatedly to hearings before a decision can be made. That obviously adds to the anxiety and trauma that are created as part of the process.

- **The Deputy Presiding Officer:**

Can I ask you to speak to the microphone, please? Thank you.

- **Mark McDonald:**

I apologise, Presiding Officer.

Gillian Martin highlighted the excellent work that is being done by Aberdeenshire Council in relation to the PACE programme, and the awards that the council has won. Being a representative of the city of Aberdeen as well as a minister, I should highlight that *The Herald* society award was won by Aberdeenshire Council in conjunction with Aberdeen City Council for their combined PACE work. I have had the opportunity to meet officials from both local authorities and to see the work that they are doing in that regard. Gillian Martin also mentioned the young people's campaigning group in Aberdeenshire who have taken the step of providing guidance to the education authority on the kind of approaches that they think would work best for them. That is a very encouraging approach, which will ensure that what we want from the care review—young people's experiences driving improvements—is being done in Aberdeenshire.

Tavish Scott made important points about ensuring that we get the balance right in what we are asking teachers to do. It is interesting, however, that for the Education and Skills Committee's meeting tomorrow to discuss teachers' workload, the committee has a mountain of paperwork to get through for its agenda. I am sure that the irony of that will not be lost on many.

Miles Briggs made some sensible suggestions on how best we can get the message out about the benefits of becoming a prospective adopter. There are a number of encouraging points that we can take forward in relation to that, and I am happy to look into it further.

Alison Johnstone mentioned the possibility of a minimum fostering allowance and asked about financial support more generally. The Government has committed to reviewing kinship and fostering allowances and to creating a national scheme. I am pleased to say that I have decided that I will include adoption support within that. Details will follow, but as part of the review process, I will be happy to consult Opposition spokespeople and hear their views.

I will touch on a couple of final points, Presiding Officer, before we come to decision time. Bob Doris referred to the work that is being done by the kinship for the north group. Having recently completed a consultation on the future direction of our nationally commissioned support services for kinship carers, I will be happy to meet Mr Doris and the kinship for the north group to hear at first hand what their issues are and how best they can be captured as we look to go out to tender for support services.

Elaine Smith said that we need to take cognisance of local authority budget areas, particularly in relation to social work. The Audit Scotland report on social work in Scotland identified that social work spending since 2010-11 across local authorities has increased by 3 per cent in real terms. However, beyond that, part of the work that is being done around permanence and care excellence recognises that by driving forward early permanence, we could reduce the pressures that social workers face through case loads that are exacerbated by in which it is difficult to achieve permanence.

The Scottish Parliament has consistently put aside party politics on the adoption agenda; I am grateful that we have been able to do so again today. The positive developments that I have outlined today will go some way towards ensuring that more children benefit from permanent caring homes. I urge members to think about how they could, in their constituencies, get across the message about the benefits of adoption and of achieving early permanence, so that more potential adopters come forward and we achieve better outcomes for all Scotland's children.