

Question: Community Safety in Scotland

[Alasdair Morgan](#) (Scottish National Party)

The next item of business is a debate on motion S3M-5172, in the name of [Fergus Ewing](#), on the future of community fire safety in Scotland.

[Fergus Ewing](#) (Scottish National Party)

The [Scottish Government](#) requested this afternoon's debate in order to give Parliament an opportunity to discuss how we can further reduce fires by working in partnership with local government and the fire and rescue services, and to discuss the recommendations in the "Scotland Together" report.

Although the debate takes place against a long-term decline in the number of fire deaths, Scotland regrettably continues to have the highest number of recorded fire deaths per million population in the United Kingdom. Much of the long-term improvement could be due to improved fire safety education as well as to technological advances and legislative changes. In 2007, 43 people died and 1,530 were injured in dwelling fires. That was the second-lowest number of deaths for 10 years. The number of primary fires has fallen by 9 per cent year on year, but more needs to be done.

It is particularly worrying that the [majority](#) of deaths occurred in homes in which smoke alarms were absent or had failed. That can and should be addressed through education and free home safety visits. The Scottish Government has directly supported that valuable service through its don't give fire a home campaign, but it is the fire and rescue services that spearhead the drive to make our homes safer. [The Fire \(Scotland\) Act 2005](#) placed on the fire and rescue services a new statutory duty to promote fire safety and put prevention on an equal platform with [intervention](#). Prevention is now well embedded in every fire and rescue service and in every firefighter, and it forms an integral part of their training.

Home safety visits are the cornerstone of preventive work. Every visit provides invaluable advice and real preventive measures for individuals and their families—I have attended visits and seen that at first hand. The visits form part of a wider approach as each service develops its own activity aligned to local needs. I stress "local needs" because it is only right that fire and rescue services approach their duties in line with the specific risks that are identified in their areas. However, more should be done to ensure that every member of the fire and rescue services can play a part in achieving more visits and raising fire safety awareness.

To better understand how we could improve our poor record on fires, I commissioned, with our colleagues in the [Convention of Scottish Local Authorities](#), a study into the root causes of such incidents in Scotland. The report "Scotland Together", which was launched last week, was compiled by a study team that was led by Chief Officer [Brian Sweeney](#). It is a wide-ranging review that makes no less than 37 recommendations.

One of the report's key platforms, partnership working, is plainly essential, because no single agency can achieve progress on its own. Colleagues in other areas, such as health and housing, are already working effectively together; I hope that that approach can be extended to include the fire services. After all, we need to work together to develop strategies, share information, work on implementation and think about how action in one area might have consequences elsewhere. Government rightly sets the overall agenda, but we work in partnership with all manner of agencies in the public, private and voluntary sectors and we want these agencies to embrace the partnership ethos even more. That said, safety is as much the responsibility of every individual as it is that of the state, so I will return to personal responsibility.

The Scottish Government will now fully consider each of the 37 recommendations with a view to working with all partners to progress the report's objectives. Today, however, I will focus on two of the primary objectives that were highlighted last week by the study team.

The main contributing factor in the 131 deaths that were analysed in the study was smoking materials, which led to a staggering 40 per cent of all deaths. Although the Government is committed to reducing the health impacts of smoking, it would be unrealistic to introduce controls that stopped people smoking in their own homes, but we can take steps to reduce the fire risk that is posed by cigarettes.

As some members are aware, a certain type of cigarette—perhaps unfortunately known as [RIP](#), or reduced ignition propensity, cigarettes—self-extinguishes when not smoked. Such cigarettes are already mandatory in some states in the United States, Canada and Australia, and there have been calls for their introduction in Scotland. However, because the matter is reserved, we cannot currently legislate for that in isolation. Moreover, we need to take account of the fact that there is no European Union standard for such cigarettes. However, work on producing a standard is under way and is expected to conclude by mid-2010. I am writing to [Shahid Malik](#), Parliamentary Under-[Secretary of State](#) in the Department for Communities and Local Government, to request that legislation be expedited as soon as the EU standard is agreed.

The second primary objective that I want to highlight is the proposal for a safer Scotland unit. The report acknowledges that, although progress has been made, there is a clear need for public, private and voluntary bodies to work more effectively together. We must all work smarter to better utilise current knowledge, skills and resources.

In view of the report's finding that almost a third of recorded dwelling fires occur in the most deprived areas, it is essential that we focus on and prioritise the most vulnerable people in our society, so fire and rescue services must work closely with social services, housing and health services to target better the individuals who are most at risk.

The study suggests that that work would be most effectively coordinated by the formation of a safer Scotland unit. Chief Officer Sweeney and I believe that the report does not seek to establish a new quango, with the panoply of issues and costs that would be associated with such a move. It is only right that we do not go down that route; instead, I am reviewing the range of existing activities within Scottish Government and its partners in order to improve the safety of those who are most at risk, and I want to move forward with work that has already been started on a more effective multi-agency approach to fire safety. By bringing together senior officials across a range of portfolios and drawing on expertise from local government, emergency services and other partners, I would make the safety agenda accountable directly to ministers and ensure that the resource that is available for fire safety is focused where it should be, which is on direct preventive action.

Although I have in the limited time available been able to cover only a relatively small part of the report, I should point out that its very breadth points to how we can achieve our shared outcome of fewer fire deaths. In addition, I want the fire and rescue services to look closely at the most effective approach to community fire safety. For example, they clearly need to improve collaboration, share best practice and better align statistical evidence. [Audit Scotland](#) has already identified the need for more evidence-based working. That is particularly important as we face unprecedented budgetary challenges.

I am pleased that Chief Officer Brian Sweeney has indicated that the [majority](#) of his proposals can be delivered with no additional funding. The fire and rescue services receive more than £300 million a year to meet their obligations, including their statutory role in relation to fire safety. I am also pleased that the report sets a context for that investment rather than a wish list for future funding. That is a pragmatic approach that recognises that there are competing demands for funding in a challenging economic climate. Our aim must be to provide education, information and structures to enable people to act responsibly and to look out for their own safety and that of their neighbours, especially the most vulnerable people in our society. Individuals who are unable to help themselves must be a priority for our resources and activity.

All partners will play a crucial role. The skills, knowledge and resources already exist; "Scotland Together" highlights the fact that we must use them to work smarter and more cohesively. I am committed to ensuring that, where practicable, the objectives in Chief Officer Sweeney's report will be taken forward and given full Government support.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the Scottish Government's commitment to working in partnership with local government and the fire and rescue services to reduce fires and fire deaths in Scotland and that recommendations in the Scotland Together community fire safety study will contribute to a continued partnership approach to fire prevention.

[John Lamont](#) (Conservative)

[In September](#), I spoke in the parliamentary debate on the fire and rescue framework. In that debate I paid tribute—as did members from all political parties—to the immensely courageous and selfless devotion of our firefighters. We can never say too much about the job that those brave men and women do every day, or about their ability to take on the changes and the challenges that the service and society have thrown at them in recent years. We should not forget that fire crews risk their lives to save the lives of others.

The Scottish [Conservatives](#) welcome the "Scotland Together" community fire safety study. The most striking statistic in [Her Majesty's](#) fire service inspectorate for Scotland's annual report for 2007-08 was the 62 per cent increase in deaths over the previous year. That figure is shocking and placed Scotland near the bottom of the league tables on fire statistics in Europe. If there is a way in which we can identify a pattern in fire deaths, we should use it to target people in that group with better education and preventive measures. That is not to say that deaths from fires will be completely eradicated. Accidents will always happen, but we should try to reduce risks wherever possible.

The 62 per cent rise in fire deaths cannot and should not be considered in isolation. Over the past 18 years, the number of fire deaths as a whole has decreased. The study states that Scotland's fire and rescue service

"must be commended on their significant progress in reducing these events over many years."

That is undoubtedly true. It also states that a single event can have a high impact on the fire death figures because of the relatively low numbers that are involved. It is therefore correct to suggest—as the study does—that we should in the future consider the figures as part of an overall package of statistics.

It is also worth pointing out that comparisons between Scotland and the rest of Europe are not as black and white as might at first be thought. The report gives the example of the Netherlands, which highlights the considerable inconsistencies in how countries in Europe record the data.

That said, the report highlights certain fire trends, which can allow our services to focus on problem areas that are within their control, and consider how best to move forward and establish best practice in working with other authorities, agencies and the third sector. To understand fire trends, we must look more widely than fire safety. Health and social factors are identified as key indicators in identifying individuals or groups that may be at risk from fire. For instance, the study concludes that alcohol consumption, smoking, mental health and issues to do with mobility and being older play significant roles in determining the number of people who die as a result of fires each year in Scotland.

Issues to do with the number of people who live in areas of severe deprivation are shown to impact directly on the number of fire incidents. Given the projected increase in the number of people who live alone and the ageing population, it is likely that Scotland's fire and rescue services will require to direct future strategies, resources and initiatives towards those groups. That said, although the report highlights those issues, it does not say how those factors have impacted on the rise in the number of fire deaths since 2005.

It is also worth noting from the study that Scotland has a higher rate of secondary fires than the rest of the United Kingdom. The estimated cost in 2004 of each fire and rescue service response for a secondary fire is £2,000, which equates to £61 million per year for the Scottish fire service, based on the service attending an average 30,000 incidents per year. Furthermore, that total does not include any other costs that may be incurred—not only financial costs, but the costs to communities and the environment. Although we rightly focus on the need to save lives, we should not forget the financial costs involved.

I will focus on a couple of points. The Scottish [Conservatives](#) welcome the study's recommendation for more formal data sharing across agencies in order to identify better those who are at risk, and for measures to create better fire prevention education and to put in place any initiatives that might be needed. In September, when debating the "Fire and Rescue Framework for Scotland", I welcomed the fact that the [Scottish Government](#) had committed not to micromanage all the services. I highlighted the differences between fire brigades in city centres such as Maryhill in Glasgow and those in my rural [constituency](#) in the Borders. However, I went on to say that the report "[In the Line of Duty](#)" stated that due to the differences in definitions and recording across the United Kingdom, it is near impossible to

create an accurate account of on-duty firefighter fatalities. That, in turn, has meant that there has been very little analysis of the figures or attempts to understand or evaluate the causes.

The "Scotland Together" study has also emphasised the need to create better standardisation and ensure that all the services are discussing best practice, not only in recording statistics from firefighting but across all the areas in which they are now involved.

The need to work with other agencies on fire safety should be given greater emphasis in strategic planning. The study talks about areas where joint working arrangements and local partnerships have worked and are working extremely well. If we have to look at a way of prescribing standards or creating a framework or strategy to work within, let us first look at where these relationships are well developed, what they are doing right and how it can be further rolled out to suit local needs in other areas of Scotland. We should also not forget the possible role of the third sector in this important area.

As time appears to be on our side today, I will raise two additional points. I again raise the issue of the impact that the fire safety regulations are having on bed and breakfasts and self-catering accommodation providers throughout Scotland, but particularly in the Borders and in Dumfries and Galloway. I have raised the issue with the [minister](#) in the past. The [Presiding Officer, Alex Fergusson](#), has also raised the matter on behalf of a number of his constituents. The concerns centre around the guidance notes on which compliance and enforcement are based and which are resulting, in some cases, in expensive and unnecessary fire safety measures being put in place that are not proportionate to the risks.

I acknowledge that the regulations were introduced by the previous Liberal-Labour Administration and that the [minister](#) has recognised the difficulties that the regulations are creating for people who are operating in the sector. However, it would be useful to have an indication from the [minister](#) about the direction of travel on those regulations as the industry needs some clarity.

[Fergus Ewing](#) (Scottish National Party)

It might be helpful to [John Lamont](#) and to any members who are concerned about the B and B regulations to hear that we will issue in the next few weeks a consultation paper that will include the details of a new proposed set of guidance, which will be far less onerous and—I believe—far more appropriate to the level of risk in respect of B and B premises, and which will, therefore, I hope be welcomed by other members and the public.

[John Lamont](#) (Conservative)

Indeed, I welcome that news from the [minister](#) and I am sure that many people in the sector in my [constituency](#) and throughout Scotland will also welcome it.

My last point regards costs. The [Fire Brigades Union](#) has raised concerns about the cost implications that an increase in fire safety campaigns will have on other services that the service currently provides. The study raised the point that in Scotland we spend less on community safety than does the rest of the UK. The [FBU](#) made the important point that fire safety programmes are currently unevaluated and the starting point must surely be to look at how well that work is currently being done, what is working well and what is not.

The dramatic rise in the number of fire deaths has perhaps given us a wake-up call; we need to do more to reduce deaths and injuries that are caused by fire. However, it is a complex problem and it cannot be resolved easily. I hope that the debate will allow us to explore some of the options that might be available to us to make Scotland safer by ensuring that all agencies are working together.

I move [amendment](#) S3M-5172.1, to insert at end:

"and calls on the Scottish fire and rescue authorities to consider the benefits of joint working."

[James Kelly](#) (Labour)

I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. I thank [Brian Sweeney](#) and his team for the great amount of work that they clearly put into producing such a comprehensive report. As the [minister](#) said,

there is a job of work to be done to explain how the recommendations will be acted on. It is a pity that there are not more members in the chamber for this important debate—it is unfortunate that it has been scheduled for an afternoon when some members might be gathering in another area of Scotland. It is also unfortunate that we have had only 10 days to assess the report and that the detailed analysis that backs it up will not be published until the end of 2009.

The issue concerns all members. Recently, in Blantyre, which is in the [constituency](#) neighbouring mine, a mother and daughter were tragically killed as a result of a fire. The tragic loss of such young lives and the impact on their family and friends bring home the importance of work on the issue. As members have said, although fire deaths have reduced since 1990, they rose by 62 per cent in 2007-08, which is clearly a cause for concern. That should be viewed alongside the fact that the level of deaths is greater in Scotland than in other parts of the United Kingdom. Despite the fact that, relative to the population, there are 30 per cent more fires in England than there are in Scotland, the level of deaths in Scotland is double that in England.

Some of the statistics in the report bear out Scotland's social problems and their link to fire deaths. Alcohol was a contributory factor in 62 per cent of the fire deaths that were analysed and, as members have said, smoking was involved in 41 per cent of the deaths. Of the deaths, 31 per cent occurred in the 15 per cent of data zones that are most affected by deprivation, so there are clear links to alcohol, smoking and deprivation. I see two tasks for us. First, we must address the policy issues that we discuss often in the chamber about the need to reduce alcohol consumption, the number of people who smoke and the need to tackle deprivation throughout Scotland. Secondly, the fire service has a job to do, particularly through fire safety visits, which must target the areas that are affected by those factors.

The report contains useful suggestions. As the [minister](#) said, the introduction of reduced ignition propensity cigarettes, which self-extinguish, would reduce the number of fire deaths. We must support work to bring about a European standard. My colleague, the Labour [MEP](#) Catherine Stihler, has supported work on that in the [European Parliament](#). The cigarettes are cost neutral to produce and regulations backing them up have already been introduced successfully in [New York](#), Canada and Finland. Another aspect that the report concentrates on is the introduction of sprinkler systems. We had a useful briefing session on that hosted by Alex Johnstone MSP.

[Stewart Maxwell](#) (Scottish National Party)

On the point about European regulation on fire-safe or [RIP](#) cigarettes, the member mentioned that Finland will introduce regulations—it will do so next April. Why do we have to wait for a European directive if countries such as Finland and other countries that the [minister](#) mentioned, as well as individual US states, have gone ahead on their own?

[James Kelly](#) (Labour)

As was indicated to [David Taylor](#), the MP for [North West Leicestershire](#), in a reply to a question, the [UK Government](#) is sympathetic on this issue and is moving it forward. The issue is being taken forward within Scotland and within the UK. We must continue to work to establish the European standard.

The report states that the introduction of sprinklers would have saved 80 per cent of the lives that have been lost. There is a cost issue: the sprinklers cost £3,000 to install, which means that they would incur a cost of £7 billion throughout Scotland. It is not practical to proceed with that, but there is a challenge for the Government to consider how it can reduce that cost. Some experts have suggested that sprinkler systems could be installed for as little as £600. As we embark on social housing programmes, it is worth considering making it incumbent on housing providers to include the installation of such sprinklers.

Education is also important. A lot of work is being done on youth engagement in my [constituency](#). Cambuslang fire station runs a number of successful programmes that get school children in and encourage them to look at team work and discipline.

The [FBU](#) has made a number of important points that have to be borne in mind. At a time when deaths are increasing, we do not want to see a reduction in front-line jobs. We are all aware of the importance of firefighter safety, particularly after the sad death of Ewan Williamson earlier in the year.

As [John Lamont](#) said, we have to be wary of the impact on core budgets of some of the recommendations in the report. There is a job for the [minister](#) to do to work all that out.

It is important to look at the evaluation of fire safety campaigns, so that we can ensure that we are getting into the areas that are affected by the high incidence of fires.

The report is important. We have to examine closely the recommendations and how to take them forward. It is important that we make reducing deaths and injuries by fire our priority and that we provide safety and reassurance to communities throughout Scotland.

[Mike Pringle](#) (Liberal Democrat)

I add my support to the author of the report, and to all the firemen and women throughout Scotland who protect us.

As I think we are all agreed, the 62 per cent increase in fire deaths in Scotland over 2007-08 was an alarming wake-up call. I welcome the findings of the "Scotland Together" report as a valuable blueprint for tackling this vital issue.

Liberal Democrats believe that there needs to be a co-ordinated and coherent approach to reducing fire-related deaths in Scotland through improved preventive education about the dangers, targeted [intervention](#) for high-risk individuals and tackling the underlying problems of social deprivation and alcohol, which are often major contributors to that risk.

Fire is of course not a new problem, so such a high increase in the number of fire deaths was really quite concerning. Explanations of the exact cause of that increase in what, in social demographic terms, is a very short period of time have been varied. As the [FBU](#) noted in reaction to "Scotland Together", a 3 per cent reduction in the number of firefighters across Scotland "has certainly not helped." Union leaders such as regional secretary [John Duffy](#) have highlighted the lack of a co-ordinated direction for the service since the abolition of the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council in 2005.

September's debate on the "Draft Fire and Rescue Framework for Scotland 2009" served to highlight the FBU's concern that the framework document fails to provide strategic direction supported by clear and enforceable standards and responsibilities. Although each fire and rescue service must have the flexibility to respond to and meet local needs, it is important that that does not result in a complete lack of consistency, which would compromise services' ability to co-ordinate robust and effective national resilience.

However, this is not the time to attempt to apportion blame. The root causes of fire death are not policy matters but social matters. There is simply no denying the harsh reality that more than half of Scottish fire deaths in 2007-08 involved alcohol and that, as the [minister](#) has highlighted, more than 40 per cent were due to materials involved in smoking. I welcome the minister's comments about an EU standard for [RIP](#) cigarettes. [James Kelly](#) talked about that. Why can we not legislate now? I hope that the [minister](#) will answer that question, which [Stewart Maxwell](#) also asked. We led the way on banning smoking in public places, and Scotland has the opportunity to lead the way on this issue, too. I am not sure why we have to wait for Europe.

In 2007-08, 53 per cent of fire deaths occurred in single occupancy households, 47 per cent of the victims were over 60 years old and more than 30 per cent of the deaths occurred in Scotland's most socially deprived areas. Those statistics highlight a group of key social demographics that are at risk from fire. The need for targeted interventions aimed at high-risk individuals is emphasised throughout "Scotland Together". Partnership working is key if people and communities who may be at risk from fire are to be identified. Those who are deemed to be at risk are often known to a number of different agencies in different areas; therefore, greater interagency co-operation is vital. The mention of deprivation and alcohol as two major contributing factors must also not be overlooked. The findings in "Scotland Together" highlight further the gross inequalities that are associated with social deprivation and are additional proof of the devastating impact on individuals and society that Scotland's damaging relationship with alcohol is having.

The co-ordinated strategy of [intervention](#) must be reinforced by preventive measures. [The Liberal Democrats](#) believe that the [Scottish Government](#) should consider launching a new advertising

campaign to raise awareness of the importance of maintaining and testing smoke detectors and fire alarms in the home. In 2007-08, it was assessed that 29 lives that were lost in domestic fires could have been saved if working smoke alarms had been present in those premises.

We welcome the recommendations in "Scotland Together" regarding youth engagement programmes as a means of promoting good citizenship and diverting young people away from fire-related antisocial behaviour. I also welcome [John Lamont](#)'s comments about the current fire safety regulations for bed and breakfast accommodation. Many businesses in my [constituency](#) have contacted me about the problems that the regulations create for their bed and breakfast premises. I welcome what the Scottish Government plans to do in the near future to address some of those concerns and problems.

I welcome the findings of "Scotland Together" and endorse its key recommendation for a safer Scotland unit. By fostering a co-ordinated [intervention](#) effort between key agencies—including not only emergency services, but social work, health and the third sector—and then reinforcing that effort through improved education, Scotland has the potential to reduce dramatically its number of fire deaths in the home in the coming years.

[Nigel Don](#) (Scottish National Party)

Like other members, I thank [Brian Sweeney](#) for his extensive report. I also thank the [Fire Brigades Union](#) for its extensive response to the report. We have now seen both sides of most of the arguments and are, therefore, in a good position to discuss what the issues might be.

Let us consider the statistics, which can sometimes get in the way. I will make a couple of observations. Sadly, fatalities are the easy thing to count. They are also, as all parties recognise, the very small numbers in the statistics and show a variability that is sometimes confusing. It would be useful if, in the future, we had statistics not only for the tip of the iceberg, but for the iceberg itself. Having statistics within a comparable timeframe for the number of injuries, rescues and fires would allow us to focus on the general trends of such things instead of having to concentrate on the small numbers, which might be going in the other direction.

The report suggests—we encounter this suggestion often in our statistical analysis in the Parliament—that smoothing out the data over a number of years would remove some of the inconsistencies. I fear that, by and large, that is an illusion. If we were to decide to look at the data on a cumulative basis over a three-year period, we would get a reliable number only every three years. If we were to look at the data over a three-year rolling period, we would merely substitute the variation between 2006 and 2009 for the variation between 2008 and 2009, which would not help much. We need to be careful about the numbers that we quote and what they mean.

Yesterday, like some other members, I had an interesting discussion about sprinklers with Chief Fire Officer Sweeney and Chief Fire Officer Hunter. The clear conclusion that I came away with is that the present specification for sprinklers is probably an overspecification as far as household use is concerned, for the good reason that most sprinkler systems are used in industrial premises or large buildings such as hospitals, where a much higher specification is undoubtedly appropriate. It is entirely clear to me, as a chemical engineer, that there are some interesting engineering challenges involved: there are pressure issues, substantial backflow issues and major issues of bacterial growth in stagnant water. However, it ought not to be beyond the wit of man or woman to overcome them. It would be a good idea for the Government to encourage the engineering profession in all its manifestations to look at ways of coming up with a pretty cheap standard system that could be installed in households, because it is quite clear that such a system would offer substantial benefits to our communities.

It seems clear to me, as it does to others, that [RIP](#) cigarettes have major benefits, but I am sure that members such as [Stewart Maxwell](#) will speak about those, so I will not dwell on the issue.

The main issue that worries me is the information technology that is available to public services. We have talked about the need for cross-departmental working and partnerships, of which we are all aware. People try to work across borders, if they can. By now, we should be getting to the point at which public service databases are interactable—if that is an acceptable word. I am talking about databases that can be accessed by other services so that information that is relevant—a lot of which the report that we are discussing points to—is sharable. I do not know to what extent that is the case, but I am mighty sure that the extent to which it is not the case is no longer acceptable.

That brings us back to the relatively recent but important concept of best value. I have a suspicion that every public service thinks that it must install a computer system that offers best value for that service but completely overlooks the fact that how best value can be achieved would best be looked at on a national basis across all public services. That, of course, is a function of Government—it is not something that we can expect individual public services to do for themselves. It requires Government to decide to standardise its IT systems—or at least the databases within them—over a period of time. That is a challenge for Government.

Another issue is the need for the development of a common language to cover terms such as "risk"—which has at least three meanings in the English language—and "deprivation". If we do not yet have such a common language across the public service, we must address that issue rather quickly.

I turn to alarms. Like others, I was concerned to discover that in a large number of cases, fire took hold without the smoke detector having the desired effect. I do not find that terribly surprising because I have a suspicion that a lot of smoke detectors are still sitting in the cupboard in their box and that quite a number of the ones that are on the wall are in the wrong place on the wall. Moreover, I suspect that an even larger proportion of the ones that are in the right place no longer have a working battery. It would be interesting to know what the statistics are on that. I would prefer some right answers to my guesswork, from which I draw the conclusion that hard-wiring is the only way forward. The challenge—again, it is a challenge for Government, which must lead—is to determine to what extent it is sensible, prudent and good value to insist that, in the right circumstances, hard-wiring be included in building regulations.

[Mike Pringle](#) (Liberal Democrat)

In my speech, I suggested that an advertising campaign is needed. It is about education—we need to tell people not to have their smoke alarm in a box in a cupboard and to check the batteries. Does the member agree that, nationally, we need to do something about that?

[Nigel Don](#) (Scottish National Party)

I endorse entirely the member's suggestion but—it is not the first time that I have had this conversation, even today—the lesson of life, which we well understand, is that the people who are most at risk are those who do not listen to education. Part of the problem is that they do not care. The only way of coping with people who will not look after themselves is to provide a fail-safe system.

[Karen Gillon](#) (Labour)

The member may want to consider the fact that people are faced with choices about how they spend their money and sometimes they cannot afford to replace the batteries. I support the suggestion of hard-wiring.

[Nigel Don](#) (Scottish National Party)

Of course there is a fraction of the population for whom money is the real issue. Some square batteries are not cheap, so I can see why people might decide not to replace them. I fear that time is against me, so I had better stop at that point.

[Alasdair Morgan](#) (Scottish National Party)

I call [George Foulkes](#), to be followed by [Linda Fabiani](#).

[George Foulkes](#) (Labour)

Thank you, [Presiding Officer](#), for calling me, and for the way in which you did so.

I genuinely welcome the [Scottish Government](#)'s initiative in arranging this debate on a vitally important issue. I am even more genuinely pleased to follow a thoughtful, constructive speech by [Nigel Don](#), which helped to set the tone for the debate.

I begin by raising a local issue that is of great concern to many people here and beyond: the death of fireman Ewan Williamson, who was based at the Tollcross fire station and died while bravely fighting fire at the Balmoral bar in Dalry Road on 12 July 2009. On that day, firefighters rescued 20 people, including a baby, from the flats above the pub, as a fire raged below. Along with more than 3,000 other Edinburgh residents who have signed up to the [Edinburgh Evening News](#) campaign, I believe that Ewan should be awarded posthumously the Queen's gallantry medal. His local MP, the [Chancellor of the Exchequer](#), [Alistair Darling](#), has nominated him, [Sarah Boyack](#) and I have written in support and [Richard Baker](#) has expressed his support for the nomination. Members who, like me, travel on Lothian buses will have seen that there are posters in every bus supporting the *Edinburgh Evening News* campaign.

I make a genuine request to the [minister](#). So far, he and the Scottish Government have said only:

"The Scottish Government supports an appropriate form of recognition, not just for Ewan but for all our firefighters."

I hope that the [minister](#) can see his way to going further today. Ewan Williamson lost his life saving lives; many more might be dead now if he had not taken the action that he took. I know that, because of its role in the procedures for dealing with Scottish nominations, the Scottish Government's explicit support could tip the balance. I hope that today the [minister](#) will come off the fence and support the nomination.

On the wider issue, I will make one general and two specific points. Like all other members who have spoken, in general I welcome the report. However, I share some of the reservations that have been expressed by the [Fire Brigades Union](#), especially in relation to cutting fire appliances. Such a measure would be short-sighted and unjustified and needs to be considered carefully.

I share the concern that has been expressed at the high level of fire deaths in Scotland, which is puzzling. Many people have puzzled over the matter and wondered why the level is so high—[John Lamont](#) covered the point well in his introductory speech. That brings me to the first of my specific points, which relates to the contribution of lifestyles to causes of fires; a number of members have raised the issue. The [minister](#) was right to say that 40 per cent of fires are started by cigarettes. Sadly, one of the unintended consequences of the otherwise welcome ban on smoking in public places may be that more people are smoking at home, which results in more fires being started.

[Stewart Maxwell](#) (Scottish National Party)

I am sure that Mr Foulkes means well, and his theory is interesting, but the facts show that cigarettes have been the major contributory factor in fire injuries and deaths for many years, and were so for many years before the introduction of the smoking ban in Scotland. The introduction of the smoking ban has had no effect in that regard.

[George Foulkes](#) (Labour)

I like to think so. I do not know whether [Stewart Stevenson](#)—sorry, I mean [Stewart Maxwell](#). That was not in any way meant to be a compliment to or a slur on either Stewart Stevenson or Stewart Maxwell.

Stewart Maxwell might not know that 30 years ago I introduced a private member's bill in the [House of Commons](#), which would have banned smoking in public places. The idea was laughed at at the time. I am glad that we now have a ban and that Scotland took the lead on that. However, I suspect that more people are smoking at home, and that that might make some, if not a huge, contribution to the incidence of fire. We need a further, major effort to persuade people to stop smoking, not just to reduce fire risk but for the sake of their health and, above all, their children's health.

It was noted that legislation on [RIP](#) cigarettes is a reserved matter. That area, above all other areas, is one on which the [Scottish Government](#), the [United Kingdom Government](#) and other agencies must work together to make progress and take action. I hope that the [minister](#) will pick up on that in his speech.

The chaotic lifestyles of smokers who also take drugs or excessive amounts of alcohol pose even greater risks. More needs to be done to help such people in general, as well as to help to prevent fires.

I want to talk about delays in answering 999 calls. If the fire brigade cannot arrive on time for one reason or another, there can be deaths. Some delays are caused by hoax calls, and I think that all members deprecate the number of such calls that are made. Hoax calls cause terrific problems for the fire brigade as well as for the [Scottish Ambulance Service](#) and the police. However, problems are also caused by the use of the 999 number for non-emergency calls. In spite of repeated calls by the Public Audit Committee, of which I am a member, the Scottish Government has failed even to consider the possibility of establishing a national non-emergency number—one suggestion is 111—which would free up 999 for genuine emergency calls. I hope that the [minister](#) will think again about the implications of his refusal to consider the matter.

I want to say how much I agree with the Conservative [amendment](#). This is a remarkable day, because I agreed with the [Tory](#) spokesman in this morning's debate, and here I am this afternoon again agreeing with the Tories. That is a worrying development—or perhaps it is encouraging to see that the [Conservatives](#), particularly Baillie Aitken, are making such progress.

[Bill Aitken](#) (Conservative)

Does [George Foulkes](#) accept that we find the development equally worrying?

[George Foulkes](#) (Labour)

If not more so, to judge by the worried look on Baillie Aitken's face—I always think of him as Baillie Aitken, because he made such an impact in that role.

We have had a little joke across the chamber, but I want to conclude where I started. The sad death of Ewan Williamson reminds us, above all, of the sacrifice that front-line firefighters make. I hope that it will inject more energy into ministers and civil servants as they deal with the matter, so that we honour the memory of Ewan Williamson.

[Linda Fabiani](#) (Scottish National Party)

[Presiding Officer](#), this is a worrying day, right enough, because I find myself agreeing with both [George Foulkes](#) and [Bill Aitken](#).

Scotland needs many things, and improvements to our record on fires and fire fatalities should be near the top of our list. It is important that we all pay tribute to the fire prevention work that is being done by fire boards and Scotland's firefighters. The report makes it clear that there is a long-term downward trend in fire-related deaths in Scotland, and much of that must be due to the hard work of the fire boards and firefighters in preventing fires and persuading people to take responsibility for their own safety. The downward trend is also due to the continuing improvements in the fire service that have come about through hard work and continuous training. We should note that contribution to the overall health of our nation.

However, I pick up on [John Lamont](#)'s comments, as did the [FBU](#), about the lack of evaluation. Surely we can work towards changing that. I also understand that there is a problem to be addressed in the number of fires that are started deliberately and without concern for others. That must be addressed through the actions of a number of agencies such as our police forces, and the educational efforts of our fire boards.

Looking at the report, I see that there is a bit of an elephant in the room. According to the report, alcohol plays a part in 62 per cent of fire deaths across Scotland. Almost two thirds of all fire deaths are connected to the consumption of alcohol, as far as is known, but the figures might be underreported; in fact, the report speculates that the figure probably is underreported, because there is no requirement on fire investigators to look for evidence of alcohol consumption being related to fire deaths. The figures will report only when there is overwhelming evidence that alcohol consumption was a factor in the fire. We are left to speculate on what the true figure might be; [Nigel Don](#) also referred to that when he mentioned analysing the figures from the top of the pyramid down to the base.

I assume that there is no way of determining how many fatalities are caused by a fire that has no link to alcohol consumption. However, the effects of alcohol on a sleeping resident could have played a part in their death. Senses are dulled by alcohol and lack of awareness certainly precludes precipitate action.

I know that my colleague [Stewart Maxwell](#) will talk more about safety cigarettes, and they can help, but we do not have such things as safety chip pans, frying pans or toasters, for example.

In addition, the report deals with fire fatalities without taking into account injuries that are caused by fire. It might be rather interesting to see how the breakdown of figures shows up circumstances in which the fire does not result in a fatality. A whole load of injuries might be caused by fires, but we do not have a note of them today. It would be instructive for us to have that information, so I encourage the [minister](#) to consider the possibility of pulling together more information to let us all see the extent of the problem. [The Sweeney](#) report majors heavily on joint working and collaboration in prevention, and the alcohol issue cuts across Government portfolios, so it would be useful to have that information. There is no information in the report about fires that cause no death or injury.

[Stewart Maxwell](#) (Scottish National Party)

I appreciate what [Linda Fabiani](#) says about "Scotland Together" not covering that issue. Is she aware that [Her Majesty's](#) chief inspector of fire services for Scotland publishes an annual report of fire statistics that includes much of that information? The annual fire statistics provide a range of information about injuries, the number of fires and other such factors. However, Linda Fabiani's central point—that we cannot tell whether alcohol was a factor in a fire—arises because firefighters are not equipped, nor should they be, to assess whether someone was under the influence.

[Linda Fabiani](#) (Scottish National Party)

I take on board what [Stewart Maxwell](#) says, but in a climate in which we talk about the scourge of alcohol in Scotland's society, we must consider the issues across the board. In reporting on fatalities and injuries that have been caused by fire, when we say that a fire death was caused by a cigarette, we must ask whether that happened because the person who was smoking the cigarette was too drunk to know what they were doing with it. Are deaths in chip pan fires caused when someone comes home from the pub drunk and fancies chips?

As I said, the issue is extremely difficult but we must consider it because there are social and financial costs to the individual and to society. The financial aspect includes the costs of replacing possessions, whether or not they are insured, sending out the firefighters and providing accommodation for those who are rendered homeless.

The report makes it clear that Scotland suffers more fires per head of population than anywhere else in the United Kingdom. There must—I should not say "must" because I do not know; that is the problem. There may be a partial explanation for that in Scotland's relationship with alcohol. There are no recommendations in the report on how to address the connection between alcohol consumption and fire deaths. That is understandable, because it is a difficult area for any firemaster or fire board to tread in, as Stewart Maxwell said. However, it is a matter that we must address, a problem that we have to face up to and a social and financial burden that we could do without.

We must address Scotland's unhealthy relationship with alcohol and I support the [Scottish Government](#) in its efforts to do that. We may have a related problem that we should also examine: the link between alcohol consumption and fire fatalities and injuries. I urge the [minister](#) to investigate what can be done to examine the link between alcohol and not only fire deaths but fire injuries and fires in which no injury or death resulted. There may also be a case for investigating fires that are set deliberately by people who have drunk too much—people who might not dream of doing such a thing in any other case. Is that another result of the booze culture in Scotland and one that puts other people's lives at risk?

I believe that the link between alcohol and avoidable fire fatalities, injuries and damage is worthy of investigation. I hope that the Parliament agrees.

[Margaret Mitchell](#) (Conservative)

The motion highlights the [Scottish Government's](#) commitment to reduce fires and fire deaths by working in partnership with local government and the fire and rescue services. I will focus my speech on the wide-ranging issues that were raised with me on a recent visit to Hamilton fire station.

Having met the officers and been given a very helpful and comprehensive briefing on the various worthwhile initiatives that the fire service was involved in—from home visits and school visits to youth and community engagement to courses for individuals with learning difficulties—I spoke to the duty firefighting team. Those firefighters were clearly demoralised about the problems and grievances that they have experienced in recent years. Their passion for the job was evident, but it was equally evident that every member of the team felt disillusioned about decisions and changes that they considered affected their ability to carry out their core firefighting role properly. Those decisions and changes were the result of legislation, initiatives or recommendations, including some from the community fire safety study.

The firefighters' grievances included not having the proper equipment to do the job. It is not practical or safe for individual firefighters to be asked to share a radio. Torches are provided for tunics but not for helmets, where they are required to ensure that light can be used flexibly. The team complained that it had taken 10 years for the road traffic accident unit to acquire a saw, which is essential for cutting vehicles that are involved in road accidents.

The firefighters trial equipment and report their findings but they complained bitterly that their reports are ignored or receive no response. In fact, lack of communication was a general feature. Questionnaires were completed and returned but no feedback or response was received.

Although a number of the team's members emphasised that they had joined the service to be firefighters, they recognised the need for a prevention role and for them to undertake prevention activities. However, it was clear that the team considered that the current balance between ensuring that firefighters have the necessary equipment, training and skills that they need for operational duties and the preventive work that they undertake was too heavily weighted in favour of the latter. They stressed that team training was essential but said that it is being downgraded in favour of individual personal development training on computer, which quite simply cannot address the job's practical aspects. Furthermore, they considered that rope training once a month was not enough.

On the prevention side, the firefighters maintained that the households targeted for fire safety work were not the most vulnerable and were not in need of it, and that better co-operation and information sharing is required with agencies that can direct fire safety activity to the most at-risk households.

The firefighters emphasised that job satisfaction was absolutely zero. For example, the team had arranged to visit a primary school to speak about fire prevention, but they had to go suddenly, leaving the children disappointed, because they were called out to an emergency. A little thought could have ensured that that scenario was avoided and the situation better managed.

The impact of part 1 of the [Civil Contingencies Act](#) 2004 and health and safety regulations means that firefighters often face a moral dilemma: when they are at an emergency situation that might involve the loss of life, do they stand aside and wait for the appropriate equipment or person who is specifically trained to arrive, or do they act? They indicated that they would almost certainly act. However, in doing so, they would leave themselves completely vulnerable, with no insurance cover and possibly facing disciplinary action and loss of pension. Furthermore, in non-life-threatening situations, regulations have resulted in firefighters being targeted for abuse, with some onlookers criticising their lack of activity while they are forced to wait for the appropriately trained person or appropriate equipment to arrive.

Clearly, a number of issues must be addressed to achieve the objective of reducing the number of fires and fire deaths in Scotland. I look forward to the minister's response to some of the concerns that were raised with me at Hamilton fire station.

[Stewart Maxwell](#) (Scottish National Party)

I welcome the timely report "Scotland Together" and many of its recommendations on how we can make inroads into our unacceptably high level of fires and fire deaths and injuries. Although we must never be complacent, it is worth pausing to reflect on the fact that the number of fire deaths in Scotland has shown a steady decline over the past 20 years. We should congratulate all members of the fire service on their unstinting efforts. However, despite those improvements, we still have a problem with fire deaths. When I started working for [Strathclyde Fire Brigade](#), as it was then known, in the early 1990s, a fire safety rate of more than 100 a year was the norm. I would therefore rather look at the trend over time than at any single year, irrespective of whether the figure is a record low or a record high.

The report makes a number of positive recommendations, including recommendations that recognise the need for close co-operation between fire and rescue services and other public agencies such as health, housing and social work. I turn briefly to the response to the report by the [Fire Brigades Union](#). I agree with some of the [FBU's](#) points, but I was disappointed by its final remark, which was:

"The FBU urges [MSPs](#) from all parties to dismiss this report."

I do not believe that the report should be dismissed out of hand, because it makes many worthwhile points. It is right that we should look at reports with a critical eye, but we should not dismiss this report as suggested. I particularly welcome the report's proposals on sprinklers and the introduction of reduced ignition propensity cigarettes, to which I will return in a moment.

In Scottsdale, Arizona, in the [USA](#), sprinklers were made mandatory in all new buildings in 1986. More than 53 per cent of the city is now protected by sprinklers. There have been no fire deaths in buildings that are covered by sprinklers, while there continue to be deaths in buildings without sprinklers. I am convinced that the introduction of domestic sprinklers would make a tremendous difference—my colleague [Michael Matheson](#) will cover that in more detail.

I will concentrate on a recommendation in the report that I believe could easily be overlooked but which has the potential to have the most immediate and greatest impact on fire safety rates of any of the recommendations: the introduction of [RIP](#) cigarettes. I am glad that the [minister](#) paid close attention to that issue. I thank the compilers of the "Scotland Together" report for giving me the opportunity to talk about that issue and I thank the FBU for its support on the matter. I also thank the [Chief Fire Officers Association](#) in Scotland for acknowledging, in its parliamentary briefing, the work that I have done on RIP cigarettes.

As other members have said, over the past few years in Scotland around 41 per cent of fire deaths have been caused by smoking materials. That means that four in every 10 fire deaths are attributable to smoking. However, I take the very serious point that [Linda Fabiani](#) made about the impact of alcohol on many of those deaths.

[New York](#) state was the first state to make RIP cigarettes the only cigarettes that can be sold. It was followed by Canada in 2005 and by Vermont, Illinois, [New Hampshire](#) and California in 2006. They will be joined by [North Carolina](#) in January 2010. Soon, 99.8 per cent of the US population will be protected from cigarette fires. Australia will introduce a similar measure in March 2010 and Finland will become the first European country to adopt such a measure in April 2010. As I pointed out in my [intervention](#) during Mr Kelly's speech, it is perfectly acceptable for individual American states and European and other countries to introduce such measures, so I am at a loss to understand why the UK has not introduced legislation.

In the four years before the measure on RIP cigarettes was introduced in New York state, 167 deaths were caused by smoking materials. In the four years following its introduction, the equivalent figure was 113 deaths—a decrease in fire deaths of 54, or 32.34 per cent. In other words, fire deaths fell by one third after the introduction of the law on RIP cigarettes. Between 1999 and 2006 in Vermont, smoking materials were the leading cause of fire deaths—they were responsible for 19 per cent of such deaths. In the two years since the introduction of the law on RIP cigarettes in Vermont, there have been no fire deaths attributable to smoking materials.

Why has a law on RIP cigarettes not been introduced here? It cannot be due to lack of knowledge, as such [laws](#) were first introduced in the US some years ago. Over the past five years, I have lodged five motions on the issue of RIP cigarettes. The first was in April 2004 and the latest was in June this year. Although progress has been made over those five years on people's acceptance of the idea, I am disappointed—to say the least—that no law has yet been introduced in Scotland.

It is doubly disappointing that the [UK Government](#) has known for some years about the potential of RIP cigarettes to save lives. In a September 2009 letter to all chief fire officers, Sir Ken Knight, who is the chief fire and rescue adviser to the [Department for Communities and Local Government](#), talks about research into RIP cigarettes that was carried out in 2004. He states:

"This research estimated that had cigarettes in the UK conformed to the US standard, introduced in New York in 2003, the number of smoking-related fires would have been reduced in that year by nearly two thirds."

His letter goes on to say that RIP cigarettes

"could potentially reduce the number of fire deaths and injuries by up to 68%, meaning that in the UK, in 2007, up to 75 lives could have been saved."

The question why the UK Government has failed to introduce such a vital and life-saving measure, despite knowing its potential to cut dramatically fire deaths and injuries, remains unanswered. It is for UK ministers to explain why, years after New York introduced such a measure and five years after that research was carried out, people in the UK are still dying needlessly from fires that are caused by cigarettes.

When John McKay introduced his private member's bill into the [Canadian Parliament](#), which resulted in a requirement for RIP cigarettes, he said:

"Cigarette companies have known for years how to eliminate death and injury by changing the density of tobacco and/or making modifications to the paper. They don't do it because they don't have to do it. There is no requirement to force tobacco companies to make fire-safe cigarettes."

He was right when he said that seven years ago. In Scotland, we can see the impact of what he talked about and what failure to legislate for the introduction of RIP cigarettes has meant. Similarly, [ASH](#) Scotland has stated:

"It is scandalous that tobacco companies have failed to make their products less of a fire hazard. They have had the technology to make fire-safe cigarettes for almost 20 years and yet failed to market them to avoid costly law suits. This shows their callous disregard for public safety".

The tobacco companies will not introduce fire-safe cigarettes unless they are forced to do so. There is no voluntary route to such a measure. Legislation must be enacted as soon as possible so that we too can dramatically cut our stubbornly high fire safety rate.

[John Farquhar Munro](#) (Liberal Democrat)

Like many people in the chamber, I am delighted that we are having this debate on community fire safety, because anything that we are able to do to help to reduce the sad incidence of fire deaths in our community is to be welcomed and supported with all the means that are available to us.

I am sorry to say that, some years ago, I experienced the trauma of fire in my home. I should say that it was caused not by smoking or alcohol but simply by the negligence of a young heating engineer. I am glad to say that I did not become homeless. Due to the grace of God and the ingenuity of my wife—two good people, you will understand—the fire was brought under control quickly.

Did we learn lessons from that? Indeed we did. The first lesson was that it is important to read the instructions on the fire extinguisher before being overcome by the smoke. Many people who have an extinguisher in a corner never read the instructions. However, when it is dark and there are fumes and smoke in the room, the instructions are difficult to read.

We also learned that, even after the fire extinguisher has been made to work, there are only 15 seconds in which to direct it to the base of the fire, which is not always possible to find in a darkened room, especially when there are only 15 seconds in which to do so. However, I am sure that people learn these little things with the experience of life.

[Brian Sweeney](#), the chief officer of [Strathclyde Fire and Rescue](#), who has been mentioned a few times today, was commissioned by the [Scottish Executive](#)—under the auspices of [Fergus Ewing](#)—to examine and report on how the number of fire deaths and related hazardous incidents could be reduced in the home. "Scotland Together", the resultant report, was published recently. It examines not only the causes of death but proposes ways to tackle those causes and reduce the sad incidence of fire-related deaths. It highlights the need for a co-ordinated and coherent approach to tackling fire-related deaths in Scotland. It mentions deprivation and alcohol as being two major contributing factors that must not be overlooked. I wonder whether we might make too much of that finding, as I am sure that there are other contributing factors as well.

The findings highlight further the gross inequalities that are associated with deprivation, which have been mentioned today already, and supply additional proof of the devastating impact on individuals and society of Scotland's damaging relationship with alcohol. That is, perhaps, a dramatic statement, but there is a lot of truth and merit in it.

Other health and social factors, such as mental health problems and mobility issues, are also highlighted as key indicators when identifying individuals or groups that might be at risk from fire. People do not always know that they are at risk until they are overcome.

Ministers, the emergency services and partner agencies must work together to tackle the root causes of these problems and deliver preventive solutions if we are to make a lasting difference.

Targeted interventions are important. In my area, the [Highlands and Islands Fire and Rescue Service](#) has visited all buildings to which the public have any access, examining fire safety arrangements and suggesting ways of meeting fire safety obligations.

The more that fire brigades get involved with schools, youth groups and organisations across the country to advise people of the dangers that they face in their daily activities, the better.

I am proud to say that we in the Liberal Democrats welcome the emphasis on youth engagement programmes as a means of promoting good citizenship and diverting young people away from antisocial behaviour. The more the youth teams get involved with the groups and organisations in their localities, the more information young people will have, and the more they will realise the dangers that fire presents to them.

We have heard quite a bit about the challenges around smoking, and it has been suggested that we tackle the issue in a co-ordinated way to combat the single largest cause of fire fatalities in Scotland. I am glad that members' criticism of cigarettes did not incorporate any criticism of my beloved pipe; I do not know whether pipe smokers are exempt, but we certainly exercise a degree of caution.

The [Scottish Government](#) should consider a new advertising campaign to raise awareness of the importance of maintaining and testing smoke detectors and fire alarms in the home. In many homes—I have seen it time and time again—the battery has been taken out of the smoke detector to energise one of the kids' toys, especially at Christmas time when batteries run flat. There is little point in having a smoke detector or a fire alarm on the wall if it is not operational. We should introduce a regulation to insist that all smoke detectors are wired to the mains electricity in the building. That would ensure that no matter how often the battery was removed, the detector was still operational.

[Stewart Maxwell](#) (Scottish National Party)

I am sure that [John Farquhar Munro](#) is aware that hard-wired smoke detectors are the norm in new buildings. On his point about the batteries in smoke detectors, although regulation and advertising are always useful, I will give members a practical suggestion. I change the smoke alarm battery at least once a year for my older relatives—I will not call them elderly—as it is awkward for them to do so and, if left alone, they would not do it. All of us, individually, can do that for our older relatives.

[John Farquhar Munro](#) (Liberal Democrat)

That is good advice, because it is difficult even for adults with all the facilities to change the batteries with ease, and older people can find that particularly difficult. I will support anything that is done to ensure that all smoke detectors are hard-wired into the house wiring.

[Karen Gillon](#) (Labour)

This is an important debate. Day and daily, people throughout Scotland are faced with the devastating reality of fire. [George Foulkes](#) brought home to us the risk at which our firefighters place themselves to provide us with our safety. The death of the young firefighter in Edinburgh has impacted not only on that city but throughout Scotland, and I associate myself with George Foulkes's comments about recognising that young man's sacrifice at a UK level.

As other members have said, the increase in fire deaths in the wider population in 2007-08 is startling. We also need to recognise that, above and beyond that, many people are injured physically and mentally and sometimes bear the scars for a lifetime from the fire that they have been through.

We need to focus resources better to ensure that we prevent as many fires as possible. It is clear from what other members have said that there are major socioeconomic factors that impact on fire death and injury.

I appreciate the points that [Linda Fabiani](#) made about alcohol. We cannot get away from the fact that, when people have had a drink and they come home, they sometimes want something to eat. Perhaps they foolishly put on the chip pan or frying pan and then go through to the living room and fall asleep. The rest is left to unfold in tragic circumstances. We need to understand better how alcohol impacts on fire deaths and injuries in Scotland.

Many others have mentioned partnership working, which is key. One group that is important in that regard is the fire boards, because they are made up of local elected members who know their own communities. They are linked to local authorities and are often involved in the voluntary sector in their local area. They are therefore ideally placed to be at the heart of ensuring that that co-ordination and information sharing takes place. That will be important if we are genuinely to tackle the socioeconomic factors that influence fire deaths and injuries.

In the development of partnerships, the other important group is the fire service staff. If we are serious about walking the walk and talking the talk, rather than just talking the talk, we must use the knowledge of our fire service staff to best effect. We must learn from the experience of the men and women who make up our fire service. We must move forward in collaboration with them to build the best and most effective programmes to prevent further deaths and injuries.

I commend the work that is done in schools. We should not underestimate it: one of my boys took part in a session at school recently and when he came home he was keen to ensure that we all knew what he had learned and what we needed to do. He wanted us all to learn about making a safe route out of the house. For some of our hard-to-reach groups, that peer education is an important part of the work, given the way in which children badger their parents and make them listen.

I also commend the work that is already being done. I will speak briefly about one area that I represent. The volunteer firefighters in Leadhills have undertaken an impressive programme of work in the village, going to each and every household and providing the families with the advice and information that they need to avoid fires and information on planning a route out of their home should a fire occur. In villages such as Leadhills, which is quite isolated from the wider population, response times will always be longer than those in more urban areas, so fire avoidance and safe routes out are vital.

In my [constituency](#), there is no slack. There are no spare vehicles, and I would be concerned if the partnership programme was seen as a cost-cutting exercise or a move of resources away from the fire service that affected its ability to respond to fires and other emergencies when they occur. With the best will in the world, there will be fires, and the fire service must be able to respond quickly and effectively to emergency situations. I would like it to be able to respond more quickly than it does in some of our rural communities, so I want to see more resources rather than fewer for some of the areas that I represent.

On a slightly different issue, as the M74 runs through the centre of my [constituency](#), I am acutely aware of the need for specialised kit and training to deal with incidents that might happen there.

I welcome the recommendations on domestic sprinkler systems and the points that [Nigel Don](#) made about hard-wiring. We have all been in the situation when the battery runs out and the smoke detector goes "beep, beep, beep". We take the battery out, maybe we do not have another one, and so we forget to put a battery back in. We need to avoid that situation as much as possible.

There is merit in publicity programmes, which are important, but hard-to-reach groups will not always be reached by such programmes. It is often those with the most chaotic lifestyles who are the most vulnerable to the risk of fire. I say to Nigel Don that I am not convinced that they do not care. It is just that they have so many other things going on in their lives, and so many other challenges to face, that their smoke alarm does not always factor in that lifestyle. We need to be more imaginative about how

we reach those groups. As I have said, children will be crucial in that work, and we should also try to get into the networks of other local authority agencies and health boards.

With more and more people choosing to stay in their own homes as they get older and have to live with age-related illnesses, the issue of mobility is going to come into sharper focus. [Stewart Maxwell](#) is right to highlight the practical measure of changing the batteries of elderly relatives' smoke alarms but, of course, not every old person has family who will do that for them. Perhaps another area of partnership working might be to ask home care staff to check the batteries of smoke alarms annually and ensure that the equipment is working effectively.

Firefighters are indeed brave people. I have previously highlighted in this chamber the sickening and unnecessary attacks that happen in many of our communities and for no reason whatever to these people, who go out every day to save lives. I hope that we in the Parliament can continue to collaborate on ensuring that such attacks are seen as completely unacceptable and are minimised and that we can support our fire service workers, who, after all, will be there to save us on the very day that we need to be saved.

I commend the motion to the chamber.

[Michael Matheson](#) (Scottish National Party)

Earlier, the [minister](#) mentioned the approach that is now being taken to fire safety regulations for bed and breakfasts. Having made representations to him on the matter, I put on record my thanks for the way in which he has handled it. There are a limited number of bed and breakfasts in my [constituency](#), but the owners of these establishments very quickly raised with me their concerns about the apparent heavy-handedness of the new regulations. The minister's pragmatic approach, which included convening a cross-party group to discuss the matter, has resulted in a more proportionate application of the regulations and is exactly the type of response that members across the chamber should expect when they raise concerns with ministers.

A number of speeches in the debate and, indeed, the report itself illustrate the complexities of trying to reduce the number of fire deaths in Scotland. As members have pointed out, significant progress has been made in the past 10 to 20 years. However, the figures for Scotland remain stubbornly high compared with other parts of the United Kingdom, and we need to do more to bring the numbers down even more.

Like other members, I very much acknowledge that Scotland has an extremely professional and highly skilled fire service that we can rightly be proud of. However, I think that people too often overlook the job's real risks and perhaps think that it is not quite as dangerous as it actually is. In that respect, [Lord Foulkes](#)'s speech about the sad loss of the firefighter Ewan Williamson illustrated the real dangers of the role.

The [minister](#) will be aware of my long-standing interest in fire sprinklers. Indeed, a number of years ago, I sought to introduce a member's bill to encourage the installation of fire sprinklers in a range of properties. I have to confess that, when I first made the proposal, I got almost the same reaction as Lord Foulkes got 30 years ago when he tried to introduce a bill to ban smoking in public places. Many people laughed at me and wondered why big ugly things like sprinklers should be installed in domestic premises; after all, they would only soak everything when they went off.

Most people perceived domestic fire sprinklers as being like industrial fire sprinklers, and I recall many people questioning the logic of my proposal. However, having pursued the bill, I welcomed the fact that the [Scottish Executive](#) at the time took on roughly 80 per cent of my proposals and introduced new fire regulations through the Building (Scotland) Act 2003 to provide for fire sprinklers in properties such as residential homes and sheltered housing. When such places are built now, fire sprinkler systems must be installed in them. When I go to primary schools, I am often asked to talk about one thing that I have done in politics. In reply, I often refer to the fact that I will be able to lie in my nursing home bed, point to the ceiling and say, "I helped to make sure that these places are a bit safer by having fire sprinklers installed in them." An overly cautious approach to fire sprinklers has been taken in Scotland and throughout the UK, although experience in Scotland, the UK and internationally clearly shows that fire deaths simply do not happen in domestic premises with fire sprinklers installed in them. Given the stubbornness of the high numbers of fire deaths in Scotland, we must be prepared to take a much more robust approach to introducing such things.

Some fire services in Scotland have taken a much more enlightened position on fire sprinklers than others. [Central Scotland Fire and Rescue Service](#), which covers my [constituency](#), has always been proactive in pursuing and encouraging their introduction. When architects are looking to build new houses or buildings, for example, Central Scotland Fire and Rescue Service is often willing to compromise on fire safety regulations, building control and so on if fire sprinklers are installed. That often allows architects much greater flexibility in designing buildings.

The problem is that not all council building control offices are prepared to offer such flexibility with the fire service. Given that the report recognises the value of fire sprinklers, I hope that it will result in fire services in Scotland having a more consistent approach to encouraging their use in premises where that use is appropriate. The ministerial advisory group could have a role in encouraging fire services in the country to take a much more consistent approach.

I fully recognise the cost implications of introducing fire sprinklers in premises on a retrospective basis, but we could make clear progress on introducing them in new-build properties. Specifically, the Government could intervene in new-build council and publicly owned buildings. We are still building schools and hospitals with no fire sprinkler systems installed in them. Let us keep in mind that, when we lose a school as a result of a fire, we are left with the disruption that is involved in all the children having to be relocated to other schools. We should have regulations that mean that fire sprinkler systems are installed in all new-build schools. If they are installed when schools are being built, our public infrastructure will be much more effectively protected.

Central Scotland Fire and Rescue Service asked for a sprinkler system to be installed in the new hospital that is being built in my [constituency](#), but the health board and the public-private partnership company refused. We should be clear: all new hospitals should have fire sprinkler systems installed in them.

The sprinkler challenge is set out in the report. A big part of it is to change public perceptions about sprinklers. I hope that the Government will consider what it can do to address the misconceptions that many people have about domestic sprinklers.

[Margaret Smith](#) (Liberal Democrat)

The debate has been a very good one and there have been some excellent contributions. I put on record my appreciation of two of them, from [Michael Matheson](#) and [Stewart Maxwell](#), two of our colleagues who have track records on these important issues.

I pay tribute to the excellent work done throughout Scotland by the men and women of the fire and rescue services; we owe them an incredible debt of gratitude. [George Foulkes](#) reminded us of the tragic death of firefighter Ewan Williamson. Over the past few days, we have been remembering those who have sacrificed their lives for us in wars. It is no bad thing for us to remember today the dangers that firefighters face on our behalf and the sacrifice that Ewan Williamson made on behalf of the people of Edinburgh. I certainly agree with George Foulkes that he should be awarded posthumously a Queen's gallantry medal—those comments were very well made.

The [Chief Fire Officers Association](#) Scotland tells us that the cost indicator for fire deaths is £1.55 million per fire fatality, but we know that the cost is far higher than that. In my 14 years as an elected representative, my most upsetting case has been on behalf of a constituent who lost her entire family, including her four children, some years ago. The consequences have lived with that woman ever since; it is a tragedy beyond words for her and her family.

Progress has been made over the past decade, but it is shocking that people living in Scotland are twice as likely to die in a fire as people living elsewhere in the UK. The fact that deprivation and alcohol are two of the major factors in the disparity is equally if not more shocking. Several members have highlighted the importance of lifestyle issues, and a number of partner bodies can play a part in addressing those issues. I put on record that I think that local authorities have a key part to play, as some practical issues might be taken into account. For example, I highlight to local authorities that, when they are clearing areas for demolition and a small number of tenants or homeowners are left within the buildings, those buildings and the tenants and owner-occupiers are at particular risk.

The fact that 81 of the 131 fire fatalities in the home are identified as involving alcohol is further proof of the devastating impact of our country's relationship with alcohol. A number of members—[John Lamont](#), [Linda Fabiani](#) and others—have rightly highlighted the issue.

[Brian Sweeney](#), the chair of the group that carried out the community fire safety study, said that he believes that the vast [majority](#) of fire deaths are preventable, which should give us some cause for hope and is clearly a call to action for Government and the [Scottish Parliament](#).

We read in the study and have heard during the debate about a number of ways in which we can move forward. [Nigel Don](#) made a very good contribution on sprinklers; he put forward the possibility of reducing the specification for sprinklers in households. Michael Matheson also made some very interesting points about sprinklers, and he is right that the public perception of sprinklers must be tackled. There is also an issue about alarms. I have to put my hand up, as someone who has a couple of rental properties, and say that we must hard-wire those devices into rental properties. That is an important safety measure and we should look to extend provision beyond what is provided for in the current regulations.

We agree with the [minister](#) and with Chief Fire Officer Sweeney's report that prevention needs to be on an equal footing with [intervention](#). Crucial in that is the fact that resourcing needs to be maintained for both approaches. [Mike Pringle](#) and others have rightly raised [FBU](#) concerns at falling numbers of firefighters and appliances at a time of increased fire deaths.

As with many issues, prevention and early [intervention](#) are both key; it is vital that action is targeted at high-risk individuals—that is emphasised in the report's recommendations. It is clear that issues such as mobility, disability, mental health, alcohol and smoking impact greatly on a person's vulnerability to fire. High-risk individuals will be known to a number of agencies, so improving interagency co-operation is crucial. We agree that there is a need for greater joint working and data sharing, we welcome the minister's comments about a safer Scotland unit, and we will support the Conservative [amendment](#) on joint working.

It is a positive sign that the number of accidental fires in homes is falling, but the rate is still worryingly high. Outreach and community work is an important tool for fire and rescue services, whether it is at pride marches, local galas or whatever. I have come across members of the fire and rescue services in many different locations, and the work that they do is to be recognised and welcomed.

We welcome the work that is done in our schools. The cost to the Scottish fire and rescue service of dealing with deliberately set fires is about £61 million a year. Tackling those fires takes firefighters away from dealing with potentially more serious incidents or from carrying out vital preventive work. With every reduction in such fires that we achieve, we can shift more resources to preventive measures and to tackling accidental fires. We therefore welcome the emphasis on youth engagement programmes as a means of providing alternatives to young people and promoting good citizenship. Such programmes give people an idea of the consequences of their actions. As part of a restorative justice programme, [Strathclyde Fire and Rescue](#) runs courses for young people who have an abnormal fascination with fires, in which firefighters get fire setters to face up to the consequences of their actions. Such programmes are to be welcomed and supported.

We have heard that a staggering 40 per cent of fire deaths result from accidental fires involving smokers' materials. We therefore support action on the introduction of reduced ignition propensity cigarettes, which are designed to self-extinguish. They cost the same to produce as normal cigarettes and legislation mandating their production and sale elsewhere has proved successful. We welcome the minister's comments on that and give our support for such measures here. I hope that the cross-party support that the [minister](#) has received on the issue will give him the power to make progress on a UK basis.

I welcome the motion.

[Bill Aitken](#) (Conservative)

In what has been an entirely consensual debate, all members have praised the fire services. We have been extremely fortunate that the basis of the debate has been the excellent report that was prepared by [Brian Sweeney](#). We have also had an important contribution from the [Fire Brigades Union](#), through the documentation that it provided.

The fire service plays a vital role in the preservation of community safety and public health. Firefighters deal with a multitude of emergency situations, ranging from fires and chemical spills to road traffic accidents and floods, en route to saving lives and property. We are greatly indebted to them. Sometimes, as [George Foulkes](#) eloquently set out, those situations end in tragedy. I join him in his tribute to Ewan Williamson and I hope that the appropriate recognition is provided, although sadly it will be posthumous.

Regrettably, fire safety is a very real issue in Scotland. Although, on average, the number of deaths has decreased since 1990, we must remember that, as illustrated by the 2008 Scottish community fire safety study, there was a 62 per cent increase in fire deaths in Scotland for the fiscal year 2007-08. Members have commented that Scotland suffers higher rates of fire deaths, accidental dwelling fires and secondary fires than the rest of the United Kingdom. Secondary fires are defined as those that involve refuse, derelict buildings, vehicles and grass or heathland and generally do not pose a risk to life. However, they are not without financial cost to the community and they are not extinguished without risk.

The issue that mainly concerns us is the death, largely in domestic fires, of so many of Scotland's citizens. The prevalence of fire-related incidents is strongly influenced by a variety of health, economic and social factors. As has been said, those include alcohol consumption, smoking prevalence and the insatiable urge that some people have to get the chip pan out late at night after consuming a considerable amount of alcohol. We must recognise and insist that everyone has a degree of personal responsibility. People must acknowledge that such actions have risks, not only for themselves but for their families and neighbours. However, we must also acknowledge that social factors come into play in some cases. The frequency of fire-related injury or death is much higher among the lower socioeconomic groups.

Of all accidental dwelling fire deaths, 31 per cent occurred in the 15 per cent most deprived areas in the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. Forty per cent of such fires occurred in social rented housing. Disturbing social factors have also been discovered in relation to the number of fire-related incidents in Scotland. Forty-seven per cent of all accidental dwelling fire deaths involve people aged 60 or older. In many cases, the alarms were not functioning, which adds a degree of urgency to the point that [Stewart Maxwell](#) made about the replacement of batteries. Where the elderly are unable to access the battery in order to replace it, someone should do it for them.

[Karen Gillon](#) dealt with the importance of fire safety particularly in areas that are more remote than others from fire services. If it is going to take quite a long time for the firefighters to arrive, it is imperative that the people who live in the area have a more heightened state of alert with regard to potential fire risk.

Other members made exceptionally interesting contributions. Stewart Maxwell demonstrated a degree of expertise, which I think he garnered in a previous occupation, in dealing with the question of sprinklers. Mr Matheson talked about that in somewhat greater depth and also demonstrated a considerable degree of expertise, if I may say so.

Although sprinklers are highly desirable—and I heard what Mr Matheson had to say about their installation in new-build properties—there is still a significant cost in respect of existing properties and even in new builds. However, the issue is worthy of examination and Mr Matheson was certainly correct to bring it before us.

We have to get across the message that fire is dangerous. It is appalling that firefighters should sometimes find themselves under attack by those who light fires deliberately and who resent the operation of the fire service in trying to put out bonfires, on [Guy Fawkes](#) night and at other times of the year, when they are dangerous. We have to get across the message that attacking firefighters is totally unacceptable.

I am attracted by the idea that, in schools, we should make children wiser as to the risk of fire and underline for them the importance of fire protection.

Like [John Farquhar Munro](#), I suffered a small house fire last summer, which was caused, believe it or not, by a heater that had not been on for years and in which a great amount of ooze and other debris had accumulated. I did not realise that that presented a fire risk.

This has been a consensual debate. A number of interesting ideas have been raised and I look forward to some of them coming to fruition in the years ahead.

- [Link to this](#)
- [Official Report source](#)

[Richard Baker](#) (Labour)

I join all those who have acknowledged the work of [Brian Sweeney](#) and his team in drawing together their comprehensive study into fire deaths and injuries.

The key question has been why there are significantly more fire deaths in Scotland than there are in the rest of the UK. The overall trends of fires and fire deaths are down, but they are still far too high and too many families in Scotland still suffer the devastating consequences of fire fatalities. That is why, as the motion states, there must be partnership working by all the agencies in our communities to prevent fire deaths, damage and injury.

At the centre of the report is community involvement by our fire services. We should always look to see what more can be done to prevent fires, as well as ensuring that our firefighters are properly supported in the courageous work that they do in tackling fires when they occur.

The debate has been good and there has been broad consensus. I share [George Foulkes](#)'s angst about agreeing with [Bill Aitken](#), which for some of us is an occupational hazard. Mr Aitken made a good speech again today.

The debate follows other good debates that we have had on fire services. However, we should return to the issues that we have discussed today. The debate has come rather soon after the publication of the report and we still await the publication of the supporting evidence. I hope that the [minister](#) will agree that today's debate should be only the first debate on some of these issues.

The key issue is how we make progress on the challenges that have been identified. There will be important work for the ministerial action group to do in overseeing that. I hope that the [minister](#) will return to Parliament to update us on the progress that we hope will be made—I am pleased that he is confirming that he intends to do that—and give us another important opportunity to debate these issues.

Other members have spoken in detail about the key recommendations in the report, and we have heard some well-informed speeches about the need for additional community safety initiatives to promote fire prevention awareness. I have discovered that we have such initiatives in schools and even in nurseries. The information is also available through home fire safety visits.

We must ensure that that prevention work is properly targeted at those who are most at risk of being the victims of fires. Again and again in the debate, members have referred to the link between deprivation and the risk of fire accidents, with all the problems that are associated with smoking and alcohol misuse. [Linda Fabiani](#) and [Karen Gillon](#) spoke of the link between alcohol misuse and the causing of fires, as well as the issues around cigarettes. With [James Kelly](#), I hope that progress can be made on [RIP](#) cigarettes through a collaborative approach by the [minister](#) and the [UK Government](#). I think that there will be consensus that we want to see progress made on that issue.

It is not just public sector and local government agencies that have a role to play in a collaborative approach; voluntary organisations have a key role to play. Bill Aitken mentioned that 47 per cent of accidental fire deaths involved people aged over 60. The Lightburn Elderly Association Project—[LEAP](#)—is a voluntary sector organisation whose hands-on project involves its staff who go into older people's homes also checking whether they have smoke detectors. That is one example of a programme that could be productive. [Mike Pringle](#), too, spoke about the number of lives that could be saved through having proper smoke detection in homes. The issue has, quite rightly, been raised that more smoke alarms should be hard-wired. [Nigel Don](#) spoke about that. There is consensus on which I hope we can move forward.

[Stewart Maxwell](#) and [Michael Matheson](#) spoke in detail about the need for sprinkler systems. The report identifies the importance of fire and rescue services working with the building standards [division](#) to

improve fire detection in the home. The progress that can be made on the installation of low-cost sprinkler systems should be an important part of that collaborative work.

Another theme that runs throughout the report is the need for improved training in community safety and home fire safety advice, and for the adoption of new common models for community safety initiatives. As [John Farquhar Munro](#) knows, we need to undertake more high-profile educational initiatives. We have often said in these debates that we want more integrated and common approaches from fire and rescue services throughout Scotland, and that logic must hold with fire prevention, too. We must share best practice throughout the country, with local agencies working properly together and targeting effectively those people who are at most risk of being victims of fire.

The report also goes into the sometimes thorny issue of common data collection methods in assessing success and creating new performance targets. It is important that we are able to assess performance, but it is also important that we have the right targets. Cross-party concern has been expressed previously in the chamber on the question of response time targets. I have no doubt that we will return to that issue. Karen Gillon was right to talk about the importance of response times in emergency situations.

I met the [FBU](#) yesterday. I was told that it had wanted a greater emphasis in the report on firefighter safety. That must be a consideration in whatever work follows on from the report. In his excellent speech, George Foulkes spoke of the brave sacrifice of Ewan Williamson, whose bravery reminds us of the need to have firefighter safety at the heart of our fire and rescue services and whatever work we undertake on the structures and policies in these areas. I associate myself entirely with George Foulkes's request for Ewan Williamson to receive the Queen's gallantry medal. I am sure that that hope is echoed throughout the chamber. Whatever changes are made to the service, the goal of improved safety for our firefighters must always be central.

The other key concern is about resources, which Karen Gillon touched on. The report does not shirk from pointing out that its recommendations will require to be properly resourced, and it is quite right to do so. We, too, want the recommendations to be properly resourced but, again and again, the report says that resourcing will come from the core budgets of our fire brigades and, in some cases, of partner agencies. We believe strongly that investment in the appropriate measures should not come at the expense of front-line firefighters but should be additional to investment in the crucial life-saving work that they carry out in emergency situations.

I would welcome the minister's views on that and on how we can take forward the vital work that the report identifies. I hope that Parliament will have the opportunity to discuss the issue again. We have had an excellent debate, and it is clear that a broad determination exists among members to bring about a Scotland in which we are better at preventing fires and have far fewer fire deaths.

[Fergus Ewing](#) (Scottish National Party)

It has, indeed, been an extremely useful and positive debate. It has also been one in which we have had some revelations about the narrow escapes of [John Farquhar Munro](#) and [Bill Aitken](#) from domestic fires. I am pleased to hear that an alliance of the good Lord and Celia Munro secured John Farquhar Munro's continued presence with us. My good friend is very welcome, and we thank both the parties involved. I am pleased to hear that the good Lord is looking over Bill Aitken as well—I was not aware that that was the case, but we have been put right.

There are 8,082 firefighters in Scotland, of whom 4,477 are whole time, 3,013 are retained duty system firefighters and 492 are volunteers. Let us remember the role that retained and volunteer firefighters play. There are nearly 400 fire stations and 800 emergency response vehicles. The fire service, to which £331 million of public money is devoted, has attended 112,000 incidents over the past year. A great deal of effort is put into training our firefighters, principally at the national college in Gullane, where 390 firefighters have undertaken basic training since 2007. Over the same period, 800 fire and rescue personnel have attended specialist training. The [Scottish Government](#) invests £6 million annually in training. In the past year, 49,703 home fire safety visits have been made in Scotland and 95,000 other community fire safety activities have been carried out. The record of the work that goes into protecting our communities is huge and impressive. Like all other members, I pay tribute to all those involved, especially the firefighters on the front line who provide services that keep us safe and offer reassurance to our people.

I will deal with as many of the points that have been made in the debate as possible. I begin by giving [Richard Baker](#) an assurance that is not in my script—in fact, I do not have a script. I assure him that I will report back to Parliament on how we make progress on the issues that the report identifies. In addition to today's debate, we recently had a debate about the fire and rescue framework. Next month, we will, I hope, have an opportunity to debate [Paddy Tomkins](#)'s report on water safety. It is my intention that the ministerial advisory group, which is due to have its next meeting in February, will consider all those issues. That timescale seems to be appropriate, although we have not reached a decision on that. I am happy to engage with spokespeople from all parties and all [MSPs](#) on the issues, which go way beyond party politics.

One issue that has been raised in the debate is reduced ignition propensity cigarettes. Paragraph 5.49 of [Brian Sweeney](#)'s report says:

"it is possible that up to 36 lives could have been saved had Reduced Ignition Propensity cigarettes been mandatory ... since 2005."

That underscores the point that has been made by members of all parties, which I detect has cross-parliamentary support: that we should have safe cigarettes in Scotland as soon as possible.

[Margaret Smith](#) graciously acknowledged and many other members alluded to the fact that [Stewart Maxwell](#) has campaigned on such issues for many years. In an articulate and comprehensive fashion, he gave us estimates for the number of lives that have been saved in [New York](#), Vermont and other places where standards are in place, and he quoted from politicians who suggest that the tobacco companies are able to tackle the problem but must be forced to do so. That is unfortunate, but I suspect that it is the reality of the matter.

The issue has been raised by members from all parties, including Labour members. I reassure Mr Maxwell and all other members that the Scottish Government believes that [RIP](#) cigarettes should be introduced. I have been assured that that is also the [UK Government](#)'s view. I wanted first to gauge the Parliament's feelings in this debate, but I will now write to [Shahid Malik](#), my counterpart in the UK Government, to seek a meeting with him on how best we can take the matter forward. We should do so as swiftly as possible. There is no reason why we in Scotland cannot lead the way, no reason why we cannot work in co-operation with and with the full support of the UK Government, and no reason why lives should not be saved in Scotland and south of the border.

The second main issue that was raised throughout the debate was sprinklers and smoke alarms. The issue is covered in the report, to which I now return. Brian Sweeney made the key point that currently it costs around £3,000 per household to install a sprinkler system. That huge cost is the root of the problem that has been identified. Plainly, we are unable to spend £3,000 per house; so far as I have noticed, that kind of money is generally available only to banks. However, the sprinkler challenge has been issued and will be taken up. It is a technical matter on which the UK Government has done work. We are committed to analysing all the research that has been conducted both in the UK and abroad to determine whether a low-cost sprinkler system could be economically and technically viable.

Reference has been made to particular types of properties. Mike Matheson concentrated on that issue in his speech, and it was touched on by Margaret Smith and other members. Sprinkler systems are already a mandatory requirement for specific new properties such as care homes, sheltered housing and high-rise flats. I inform Margaret Smith that, from April 2010, the provision of fire detection equipment in new-build properties will be extended to the provision of an additional smoke alarm in the principal habitable room and a heat detector in the kitchen. I was reading from a script there, to ensure that I got it right.

[Margaret Mitchell](#) (Conservative)

Given that the [minister](#) is almost in his last minute, will he address specifically the issues that were raised with me at Hamilton fire station? If he is not able to do so in depth today, will he accompany me to the fire station to hear the concerns at first hand?

[Fergus Ewing](#) (Scottish National Party)

It is difficult to see how one could refuse such an invitation. However, the member should raise the issues first with Strathclyde fire and rescue service. [Karen Gillon](#) highlighted the work of fire boards, which exist to provide democratic accountability and scrutiny of the work that fire services do. Firefighters need to and do continuously train and develop their skills. The use of computers is a perfectly acceptable approach to supporting skill development and competency. I am happy to pursue the issues further with [Margaret Mitchell](#), either in the way that she described or by other means.

We value the contributions that we have received from the [FBU](#), many of the points that it makes, the forthright representation that it provides and the help that it gives to the [Scottish Government](#). A number of chief fire officers—I could not identify all of them—are at the back of the public gallery; I thought that the collective noun might be a sprinkling of chief fire officers. I thank them for the work that they have done. In particular, I thank the team who produced the report: [Paul Stewart](#), John McGarvey, Cathy Barlow and Kirsty Bosley. Of course, I also thank [Brian Sweeney](#) for bringing forward the report, which has enabled this highly positive debate to take place.

Question: Safer Scotland Unit

[John Wilson](#) (Scottish National Party) | Question S3W-28653

To ask the [Scottish Executive](#) whether it will establish a safer Scotland unit to simplify and co-ordinate community safety as recommended in the report, *Scotland Together: A study examining fire deaths and injuries in Scotland*.

[Fergus Ewing](#) (Scottish National Party)

It is the view of the [Scottish Government](#) that the report does not seek to establish a new quango, with all its associated costs.

Instead, we are committed to reviewing the range of existing activities within the Scottish Government and its partners to improve the safety of those most at risk. We will also look to move forward work already started on a more effective multi-agency approach to fire safety.

By bringing together expertise from central and local government, emergency services and other partners, we can ensure that the resources available for fire safety are focused on preventative action.

Question: Water Rescue

[Richard Baker](#) (Labour) | Question S3W-28736

To ask the [Scottish Executive](#), following the flooding in the north east on 1 November 2009, whether it shares the concerns expressed by the [Fire Brigades Union](#) in a press release on 2 November 2009 that firefighters were working waist deep in water without the specialist training required to undertake that task safely.

[Fergus Ewing](#) (Scottish National Party)

All fire and rescue services have a statutory duty to respond to major flooding incidents and the [Scottish Government](#) has made over £1.3 million of funding available to support the purchase of related equipment and training. The Scottish Government would therefore be concerned if any firefighter was asked to perform a role without the right training.

While the provision of training and resourcing is primarily the responsibility of each fire and rescue service, additional support and guidance is also provided by the Scottish [Fire Services](#) College and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Advisory Unit.

In this instance, we encourage the [Fire Brigades Union](#) to present their evidence directly to the relevant fire and rescue service, with a view to reaching resolution at a local level.

Question: Flooding

[Richard Baker](#) (Labour) | Question S3W-28738

To ask the [Scottish Executive](#) what assessment it has made of compliance with section 5 of [The Fire \(Additional Function\) \(Scotland\) Order 2005](#); whether it intends to take action, and, if so, what action.

[Fergus Ewing](#) (Scottish National Party)

Scotland's fire and rescue services have a statutory duty to respond to major flooding incidents. As such, the legal responsibility for ensuring that these duties are carried out safely and effectively rests with the relevant fire and rescue authorities.

Additionally, the Scottish [Fire Services](#) College and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Advisory Unit provide the fire and rescue services with practical training and guidance on a range of operational issues for flood rescue.

Question: Fire Death Research

[John Wilson](#) (Scottish National Party) | Question S3W-28654

To ask the [Scottish Executive](#) whether it will initiate research to investigate the link between deprivation, including social trends, and fire, as recommended in the report, *Scotland Together: A study examining fire deaths and injuries in Scotland*.

[Fergus Ewing](#) (Scottish National Party)

Substantial evidence already exists of the links between a range of socio-economic factors and dwelling fires. The Scotland Together report highlights that those agencies already tackling such factors should consider how fire prevention can become an integral part of their wider planning and individual case management.

At ministerial level, the [Scottish Government](#) is also committed to establishing the mechanisms required to facilitate effective cross-agency working.

Question: Data sharing

[John Wilson](#) (Scottish National Party) | Question S3W-28655

To ask the [Scottish Executive](#) whether there are plans to develop common data-sharing protocols to facilitate information sharing among all agencies involved in community safety, as recommended in the report, *Scotland Together: A study examining fire deaths and injuries in Scotland*.

[Fergus Ewing](#) (Scottish National Party)

We support the principle of professionals from all disciplines, including fire, legally sharing relevant information which contributes to the safety of our communities. We would encourage local government to work towards an appropriate data-sharing solution that meets their needs.

Question: Community Safety Toolkit

[John Wilson](#) (Scottish National Party) | Question S3W-28656

To ask the [Scottish Executive](#) whether it will develop a Scottish community safety toolkit as an electronic resource for the fire and rescue services, as recommended in the report, *Scotland Together: A study examining fire deaths and injuries in Scotland*.

[Fergus Ewing](#) (Scottish National Party)

The Scottish Government welcomes the principle of a central resource and will work closely with the fire and rescue services to establish how we might support the hosting facilities for an online resource.

But in doing so, we need to ensure the delivery of a cost-effective solution, which draws on resources already available, and is regularly updated and utilised by the eight fire and rescue services.