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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 2 December 2025

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Emily Nicholl, Scottish Thistles captain.

Emily Nicholl (Scottish Thistles): Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament, thank you for the opportunity to address you this afternoon.

As captain of the Scottish Thistles and a proud representative of Netball Scotland, I wanted to speak to you today to share how netball, and sport more broadly, has the power to shape lives, build resilience and inspire ambition across Scotland as we look ahead to Glasgow 2026.

Very recently, in East Kilbride, the Scottish Thistles welcomed New Zealand's Silver Ferns, who are ranked number 2 in the world. This was a historic moment that brought world-class netball to Scottish soil.

We have also just hosted the Celtic cup, a celebration of home-grown talent, the Celtic nations and fierce competition from some African countries. However, these events were not just fixtures on a calendar; they were statements of intent. They showed that Scotland is ready—ready to compete, ready to inspire and ready to host the Commonwealth games with pride and passion.

Beyond the scorelines of these recent competitions, although we did get some historic results, something much more powerful happened. The stands were full of young boys and girls who saw athletes who looked like them, spoke like them and wore the thistle with honour. They witnessed at first hand what can happen when we dream big and work hard.

As we prepare for the Commonwealth games, the Thistles want not only to deliver on the court and show our athletic prowess but to inspire the next generation and leave a legacy—to inspire others to chase their dreams.

I know at first hand how powerful watching your role models in person can be. At Glasgow 2014, I was a spectator in the stands, having never competed for Scotland. However, I saw my dreams reflected back in the faces of my heroes and, two years later, I was taking to the court for my first cap. I hope that, next year, I will get my full

circle moment of running out in front of a home crowd at the Hydro and leading my team.

As the only team sport being showcased at Glasgow 2026, we are well aware of the responsibility that comes with that, but trust me—the future of Scottish sport is in safe hands with the Thistles. We are a group of fiercely passionate, disciplined and educated women, and we are ready to be at the forefront of inspiring the next generation. We are the Thistles and we are just getting started.

Topical Question Time

14:02

Female Genital Mutilation

1. Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reports that over 1,200 women have been treated for female genital mutilation in Glasgow in the past five years. (S6T-02780)

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): Female genital mutilation—FGM—is an abhorrent practice and it has been illegal in Scotland since 1985. The figure stated in *The Herald* does not represent the number of women who have been subjected to FGM in Glasgow; it reflects the number of women with FGM who have received treatment in the area.

Such figures show that FGM remains a concerning reality for many women and girls in Scotland. I am glad that medical professionals recognised the symptoms or that the women have had the confidence to come forward and seek the medical attention that they need. We continue to work closely with stakeholders to implement the Female Genital Mutilation (Protection and Guidance) (Scotland) Act 2020. That will strengthen the existing legislative framework to offer extra protection to women and girls who are at risk of FGM.

Annie Wells: This Parliament unanimously passed the 2020 act five years ago, and I am dismayed that, five years on, it is still not in force and that these are the results that we are seeing. In five and a half years, 1,247 women have been treated and 57 deinfibulation surgeries have been carried out. There have already been seven surgeries in the first half of this year.

We are talking about real women, not statistics. Can the minister tell them why the 2020 act has still not been implemented?

Kaukab Stewart: I thank Annie Wells for that important question and for giving me the opportunity to reiterate my concern and agreement that we are talking about women and girls, not statistics.

I stress that the Government is resolute in its commitment to implementing the 2020 act. Successful implementation requires co-ordinated action from multiple stakeholders, including local authorities, health boards, justice agencies and specialist services. Those organisations need time to develop processes, train their staff and ensure that the resources are in place to meet their statutory duties. We are working closely with those

partners to provide guidance and support, so that implementation is effective and sustainable.

Although I want the act to be implemented as soon as possible, we have to implement it in a way that is sustainable and that ensures that it can deliver protections for women and girls without placing unmanageable pressure on those who are responsible for delivering those protections.

Annie Wells: The Scottish Government has had five years in which to implement the act, so I am afraid that that is not good enough. On the day of the vote on the bill, the Scottish National Party Government minister who was in charge of the bill said:

“I am confident that, if the Parliament votes to pass the bill today, we will be protecting more women and girls than we were yesterday”.—[*Official Report*, 19 March 2020; c 89.]

However, that has not happened. Who knows how many women may have avoided this traumatic experience if the act’s provisions had already come into law? I hope that the minister will commit today that the act will be implemented as soon as possible and that she will tell us what else the Government is doing to stop this barbaric practice once and for all.

Kaukab Stewart: The act will allow courts to impose new FGM protection orders to safeguard individuals. As of November 2025, the protection orders are now sitting with the courts. Officials sent over a civil court rules proposal paper to the Scottish Civil Justice Council, and we are waiting to hear when the paper will be considered by the council. Regarding criminal court rules, officials will send over a rules proposal paper to the Scottish Criminal Cases Review Commission in early 2026. A revised draft of the statutory guidance will be sent to relevant stakeholders such as specialist organisations, health and child protection colleagues and internal colleagues for review in December—so, this month.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I agree with Annie Wells that female genital mutilation is a completely barbaric practice. I welcome the Scottish Government’s continued work to understand the legal and technical changes that are required for the implementation of the FGM act. During this year’s 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, will the minister tell us a bit more about the measures that the Scottish Government is taking to ensure that legal protections against violence towards women and girls are strengthened?

Kaukab Stewart: I join my colleagues on the Government benches in stressing that the Government is resolute in its commitment to implementing the 2020 act. As I said, it requires a

co-ordinated approach, and we are on track with the timeline that we set earlier this year. The first draft of the statutory guidance has been completed, civil court rule proposals have been submitted to the Scottish Civil Justice Council and we continue to work with stakeholders on all aspects of the implementation. I want to make sure that we can deliver the protections to women and girls that members have mentioned, and in the way that was intended, but without placing unmanageable pressure on those who are responsible.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): It is very concerning that the legislation that was passed by the Parliament five years ago to give women and girls extra protection from genital mutilation remains unimplemented. That failure has directly impacted women and girls in Scotland, including the more than 1,200 who have been treated for genital mutilation in Glasgow over the past five years. Will the minister commit to meeting members from all the front benches, to discuss how we can ensure that the legislation's implementation happens before the parliamentary session ends? Will she also accept that, if that is the timetable, it is completely unacceptable?

Kaukab Stewart: I am happy to meet any members who are interested in pursuing the issue at their convenience.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): The figures from Glasgow alone are shocking—1,247 women were treated for FGM in just five and a half years, and there have been 57 deinfibulation surgeries, with seven more already having been carried out this year. Those figures apply to one health board only, but we know that women across Scotland are affected by the issue. Will the minister tell Parliament how many women have required FGM treatment nationally over the same period and whether the figure is increasing?

Kaukab Stewart: I am afraid that I do not have those figures to hand, but I will take the opportunity to reiterate that the article in *The Herald* misleadingly suggests that 1,200 women were subjected to FGM in Glasgow. That figure represents those who received treatment for FGM in NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde between 2019 and June 2025. FGM is illegal in this country, so it is highly possible that the procedure was performed overseas.

National Timber Group (Administration)

2. Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking in response to the National Timber Group entering administration. (S6T-02782)

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): Ministers were very

concerned to hear that the National Timber Group has gone into administration, particularly at this time of year, and my thoughts are, first, with the affected staff and their families. The administration has resulted in the closure of six outlets and 169 redundancies in Scotland. That has happened as part of the wider administration of a United Kingdom business that is based in Sheffield. It is important to note that the administrators have said publicly that they hope that they will be able to find a buyer for all or parts of the group, and the Scottish Government will keep a close eye on any news of a buyer for the group. Meanwhile, the Scottish Government's partnership action for continuing employment—PACE—team is engaging with the administrators and affected employees to provide advice on skills and employability support.

Emma Harper: A month before Christmas, 169 jobs have been lost in Scotland, including seven in my region. Losing seven jobs in my region is like losing 70 in the central belt.

It has been reported to me that staff were not informed—only the manager was emailed—ahead of being told to leave the site. The locks were changed, with personal belongings left behind. The site is now being guarded by 24-hour security. Referral to PACE has been cursory at best.

The employees deserve better. What discussions have taken place with the administrators about the future of the Newton Stewart site and other sites? Will the minister engage with the workforce representatives at the earliest opportunity to ensure that support is given? That does not appear to be a priority for the administrators.

Richard Lochhead: I am very concerned to hear about the workplace reports that Emma Harper outlined. I assure her that discussions will be on-going with the administrators, and we will feed that into the next set of discussions, as she requests.

I fully understand Emma Harper's concerns, and I reassure her that colleagues at PACE are working hard on the issue and are fully engaged with the administrators to offer support to former employees. That is happening. Individuals can also obtain support via the PACE website or a dedicated helpline.

As I said, my understanding is that the administrators are also in discussion with potential buyers, so there is a chance that the companies that make up the National Timber Group can be saved.

Emma Harper: I am pleased to hear that PACE is involved.

The National Timber Group is the United Kingdom's largest independent timber distribution and processing group, and it is a leading supplier to house builders, joiners and contractors. Does the minister share my concerns about the potential wider impact on the supply chain and the construction industry in Scotland? Will the Scottish Government engage to ensure that the business will work constructively and collaboratively on the next steps?

Richard Lochhead: I am happy to keep the member up to date as we go forward.

On the background, of the 13 outlets that closed in recent days, six are in Scotland. They are located in Dumbarton, Forfar, Newton Stewart, Stirling, Hawkhill in Edinburgh and Anniesland in Glasgow.

Scottish Forestry officials in the Scottish Government are engaging with the Scottish forest and wood-based industries leadership group to get a fuller understanding of National Timber Group suppliers and the potential wider impact, as was mentioned by Emma Harper. I am happy to keep her up to date with that.

Private Residential Childcare (Public Contracts)

3. Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking in response to reports that private residential childcare providers are making an estimated £10 million a year in profit from publicly funded contracts. (S6T-02777)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): There is no place for profiting in how Scotland cares for its children, which is why we are legislating to limit the ability to generate and retain profit from providing residential care. The provisions in the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill strike a balance between reducing excessive profit in residential childcare and ensuring that vital services for children are maintained. If the bill is passed by Parliament, it will accelerate progress towards ensuring that all children and young people receive the compassionate and considerate care that they need throughout their care journey, so that they grow up loved, safe and respected.

Martin Whitfield: It was revealed last year that local authorities gave £200 million to private companies between 2020 and 2023 to provide residential care for children and young people. That money was being used to pay for senior executives' earnings of more than £750,000 a year—public money has been used to pay for those earnings. Was that an appropriate use of

taxpayers' money? What action will the minister commit to today to address the matter?

Natalie Don-Innes: Some of the figures that have been highlighted are shocking, but we will need to look into them further. Mr Whitfield's question and the Common Weal report are very important in highlighting the concerns that have led to the provisions in the bill. I have heard a fair amount of concern about the provisions, but we need to be clear about why we are doing this: there should be no profiteering from the care of children.

It is very important that we understand levels of reinvestment and where profit is being spent appropriately. That is exactly why we are taking steps to understand the picture more clearly, with the aim of limiting excessive profits.

Martin Whitfield: I welcome the minister's considered approach in that answer. She is right, because, as the Promise stated,

"There is no place for profiting in how Scotland cares for its children."

We have known for years that chief executives' bonuses are being paid for with public money that is meant to support our most vulnerable children. What does the minister think that care-experienced children will think when they hear that good public money is being used on those bonuses?

Natalie Don-Innes: I imagine that, in line with the comments in my previous response, the thinking would be that some of the figures are really disappointing—if they are, in fact, the correct figures.

As I also said in my previous answer, there is a fine balance to strike when it comes to looking at excessive profit and, equally, understanding where profit is being reinvested. As I said, I believe that the provisions that we have put in the bill strike a balance that will allow us, in time, to ensure that there is not the excessive profit that the member has referred to.

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Will the minister set out what the Scottish Government is doing to reduce the need for children to access residential care? What progress has been made in that area?

Natalie Don-Innes: Through programmes such as the whole family wellbeing fund, we are working to provide better support for families and to reduce the need for children to go into care. I see the outcomes of that work daily, including through my visits to Includem, Circle Scotland's whole family support and the open kindergarten project, to name just a few examples. I have heard directly from families how important and transformative

those services are, so I am confident that we are moving in the right direction.

Children's social work statistics report that the proportion of children in care in July 2024 was the lowest that it had been since 2005. Although there will, of course, always be a need for some children to go into care, we want to provide the maximum support possible to families at the earliest point in time.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):
That concludes topical question time.

Commonwealth Games (Glasgow 2026)

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):
The next item of business is a statement by Neil Gray on the Commonwealth games in Glasgow in 2026. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of his statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:19

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): I am delighted to be here this afternoon to address the chamber ahead of the Commonwealth games next year. Today marks 233 days until the opening ceremony of the 2026 Commonwealth games in Glasgow—that is only eight months away—and just over a year since Scotland agreed to take on the event at short notice, safeguarding the future of the Commonwealth games. Today, I will reflect on how the games came back to Scotland and how we have secured their future, and I will confirm how we will support the success of the games in Glasgow.

Many colleagues across the chamber will remember fondly the huge success of the 2014 games—I do. In 2014, we had years to prepare. This time, everything has happened at lightning speed. This will be the fourth time that Scotland has hosted the games, and I thank the organising company, Commonwealth Games Scotland and Glasgow City Council for their tireless work in bringing Glasgow 2026 to life at such short notice. We have been able to do that because Scotland, and Glasgow in particular, has such a strong track record of successful event delivery, including being the first to host newly modelled events such as the European championships in 2018 and, more recently, the cycling world championships in 2023.

However, this is not just about the Glasgow 2026 games. By stepping up now, Scotland is helping to secure the future of the Commonwealth games for decades to come. Our new reimagined approach makes hosting more affordable and sustainable, opening the door for more nations to be able to take part in the future. Last week, I had the pleasure of hosting representatives from across the Commonwealth during their general assembly, when the 2030 host was announced as Ahmedabad in India. This is about partnership and continuity, and it is about ensuring that the games continue to inspire athletes and communities across the Commonwealth.

The passing of the games baton from Glasgow to Ahmedabad is a wonderful opportunity to celebrate that connection and take advantage of

the opportunities for both countries. I spoke with colleagues from India about how Scotland can support a successful centenary games, and I was keen to share our extensive experience of hosting major international events. That is the legacy of Glasgow 2026—it is not just about a world-class event here at home; it is about a future for the games that every nation can share.

At home, the benefits for Scotland are clear—economic opportunities for businesses, upgrades to venues and an opportunity for local communities to come together and celebrate. Indeed, the games are expected to bring more than £150 million of economic benefit to Glasgow and Scotland, supporting local businesses and jobs. Public support is strong, too. I am delighted to see the huge demand for tickets, not just here in Scotland but across the Commonwealth—people are supporting the games.

I am also pleased with the progress that has been made this year on our venues. The first phase of work at Scotstoun's track is now complete, and Tollcross swimming pool is undergoing important upgrades to meet the highest standards for athletes and spectators. Those improvements will not only support the success of the games but leave a lasting legacy for local communities, providing world-class facilities for years to come.

Commonwealth Sport's co-ordination commission has recognised the progress that has been made at such pace. In August, I was hugely encouraged by the feedback that was received from Commonwealth Sport, which praised the organising company for demonstrating "innovation at its ... best" and commended the preparations progressing at pace. I am pleased to see the proactive engagement that has been undertaken by Glasgow 2026 Ltd, which is working closely with local community groups, the third sector and public and private sector partners to ensure that the benefits of the games are felt by communities in the city. That approach to collaboration is vital to ensuring a lasting impact and successful games.

I know that I do not need to remind colleagues of the immense national pride that each of us felt when the Scotland men's football team qualified for the world cup just a few weeks ago. As I said in response to an urgent question on that, I am determined that we catalyse the same sense of hope, opportunity and support for our nation's athletes with the Commonwealth games as we do with the world cup next summer. Our focus on team Scotland remains at the heart of the games. We know that our athletes have the games marked in their calendar and are ready to do us proud.

The Commonwealth games give Scottish athletes the chance to compete under their own

flag—a tradition that we are proud to continue. Glasgow 2014 was a springboard for success, with 25 of the 34 Scots on team GB at the Paris Olympics having competed for team Scotland at the Commonwealth games, including six of nine medallists.

I am thrilled to see Duncan Scott return to the pool where his Commonwealth journey began in 2014 and to welcome rising stars such as Megan Keith in the 10,000m, joining established legends such as Jake Wightman, Neil Gourley and potentially Josh Kerr in the historic Commonwealth mile, which will make its first appearance since 1966. That shows the vital role that the games play in developing talent and giving athletes the experience that they need to succeed on the world stage.

Glasgow 2026 will host the most inclusive programme ever, and it will make history as medals for para powerlifting will be the first to be awarded, which is a first for any Commonwealth games.

It is not only athletes and their supporters who will get hands-on experience at the games. The games volunteer programme recently closed, exceeding expectations with thousands of people applying. I was pleased to see that the minimum age to volunteer was lowered in order to give our young people an opportunity to be part of the programme.

As exciting as those 11 days of world-class sport will be, the Commonwealth games are about so much more. We are determined to deliver a meaningful legacy that reaches beyond the competition itself, even with a streamlined games. That legacy will focus on creating lasting benefits for communities, inspiring participation and strengthening connections across Scotland and the wider Commonwealth.

Alongside that, the King's baton relay has been reimaged for these games. We are really looking forward to welcoming the batons back to Scotland in July 2026, and we are planning our own programme of activity, working with partners across Scotland and inviting our communities, local businesses, athletes and artists to join in.

All 74 Commonwealth nations, including Scotland, will receive their own baton and have the opportunity to decorate it themselves to reflect their culture and creativity. All the batons will be present at the opening ceremony, and as they converge in Glasgow they will carry with them a message of hope and friendship.

Welcoming thousands of visitors to Scotland gives Glasgow another chance to shine and showcase the very best that we have to offer, and the Scottish Government is committed to

maximising every social, cultural and economic opportunity.

That is why I am delighted to announce today that, working with our partners, the Scottish Government will provide £150,000 to create and run Scotland house during games time. It will be a welcoming hub for athletes and their families to use and a platform to celebrate Scotland's sporting, cultural and economic strengths. Located at the Corinthian in the centre of the city, Scotland house will host an ambitious programme of events, from sport to creative industries. It will be open throughout the games to showcase the best of Scotland.

A series of targeted events is planned to showcase Scotland and Glasgow's strengths and expertise across a range of sectors. Scotland house will serve as the central hub for business engagement during the games and offer a platform to facilitate trade and investment opportunities by hosting networking events, business forums and sector-specific showcases. It will also promote Scottish sectors such as renewable energy, fintech, tourism and food and drink. Those events aim to attract national and international leaders and forge connections that will benefit our economy long after the games. Scotland house will demonstrate our ambition, creativity and commitment to building lasting partnerships. By bringing together sport, culture and business under one roof, we will ensure that Glasgow 2026 delivers benefits that extend far beyond the games themselves.

Glasgow 2026 is about more than hosting a world-class sporting event; it is about supporting team Scotland, strengthening international partnerships and creating a lasting legacy for communities across our country. It will be an incredible summer of sport in Scotland. We have eight months to help build momentum and eight months with Finnie the unicorn, the games mascot, who will pop up across Scotland to bring colour and excitement to communities. It is eight months until thousands of spectators descend on Glasgow to fill our shops, support our local businesses and celebrate our great city. It is eight months until our athletes take their first step, leap, jump and dive into what I am sure will be Scotland's best performance yet.

When Scotland stepped up to safeguard these games, we set a new course for the future. Now, we take the next step in showcasing our nation to the world. I hope that the whole Parliament will join me today in wishing our Scottish athletes the very best in their preparations and letting them know that we stand ready to cheer them on as we make the Glasgow 2026 Commonwealth games another one to remember.

The Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues that were raised in his statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions, after which we will move on to the next item of business. I would be grateful if members who wish to put a question could press their request-to-speak buttons now.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): As a proud Glaswegian, I look forward to welcoming all the world-class athletes who will be competing in the games and all the visitors. Furthermore, I would like to welcome the sun, which will, no doubt, be shining for the full 11 days of the Commonwealth games.

I have no doubt that the international athletes will have a seamless experience in the pool and on the track, because the Commonwealth Games Federation will be organising that. My concern is about everything that Glasgow City Council, which is led by the Scottish National Party, is in charge of. *[Interruption.]* Volunteers, spectators and the local community all need to have the same seamless experience of our great city. Clearly, SNP members do not agree with that.

Business leaders are telling me that Glasgow City Council is woefully underprepared and has not progressed work as expected. Our city centre is choked with roadworks, making it virtually impossible to get in and out of the city centre, and there is rubbish everywhere, with rats that are big enough to compete at the games.

The cabinet secretary said that £150,000 will be given to run Scotland house, which will be located in the Corinthian. For those who do not know Glasgow, that is about 50 yards away from the iconic George Square, which is currently closed for construction work. The greatest example of farce by Glasgow City Council is that it will not accelerate the works in order for George Square to be open for the games. That would literally involve accelerating the programme by a few weeks. Will the Scottish Government commit to ensuring that George Square will be open by providing the required resources? Does the cabinet secretary agree that the only traffic cone that spectators should see should be the one on the Duke of Wellington's head?

Neil Gray: No—because there is also a cone on the head of Finnie, the mascot, who is on the badge that I am proudly wearing.

I will answer Sandesh Gulhane's points, because they are serious ones, but I hope that, as a Parliament, we can also get into the spirit of what we are seeking to achieve next summer in Scotland. There will be the football world cup, which Scotland's men's team has just qualified for, and the Commonwealth games will come to Scotland. The games were literally saved by

Glasgow stepping in in the way that only Scotland could. At the Commonwealth Sport general assembly event that I held last week, Maree Todd and I were approached by a number of delegates who told us that there had been no plan B—no other alternative—so, if Glasgow had not stepped in, there would have been no Commonwealth games. We must recognise and celebrate that.

We should also recognise the work that is being done by Glasgow City Council. The work at George Square has been some years in planning, and it is for the council to work through delivery in that regard. From my discussions with the likes of the Commonwealth Sport president, Donald Rukare, I am confident that, regardless of whether the work at George Square has been completed, given the facilities that people have seen and the engagement with the organising company—it, not the federation, is responsible for the delivery of the games—they are confident of Glasgow's success, including its onward success in relation to the Commonwealth games to come.

I promised Donald Rukare that, by the summer, the weather would be better than it was last week, when he arrived, but, unfortunately, I do not have complete control over that.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of his statement.

Scottish Labour fully supports the Commonwealth games in Glasgow in 2026. That is why we encouraged the Scottish Government to step in and bid for the games.

I agree that the games provide us with fantastic opportunities, and we cannot afford to miss them, so I will focus on some of the issues that were omitted from the cabinet secretary's statement. Given that there could be a £150 million boost to the city's regional economy, what does the Government intend to do to support businesses, particularly those in hospitality, to make the most of the games? Given that we are expecting thousands of visitors, what additional public transport will be provided in the city and from the airport to assist spectators?

In 2021, the SNP promised to double the sports budget to £100 million a year, but that budget stands at less than £50 million today. Sports governing bodies tell me that they are running on empty, so will that SNP manifesto promise be delivered before the games?

Neil Gray: In relation to business engagement and what can be done to maximise the business opportunities from the summer of sport, it is important that we recognise that the lead-in to the Commonwealth games will be dominated by the success of Scotland's men's team at the football world cup. There will be significant business

opportunities, particularly for hospitality businesses, as we touched on during the urgent question the other week. We are engaging with businesses on what we can do to maximise the opportunities from the world cup and the Commonwealth games.

In my statement, I touched on the investment that we are making with partners through business engagement via Scotland house, which is a huge opportunity for those Glasgow-based businesses that export and have links with Gujarat or wider Indian business networks to ensure that those trade links are strong, and I am very much looking forward to that on-going success.

What the public transport regime is going to look like is for the organising company to decide. We are engaging with that company on what plans they have in place.

I look forward to the discussions on the sport budget and Labour's asks that we will have in the build-up to the budget. We are looking to make sure that we can continue to invest in sport to realise the preventative benefit of participation, but also to support team Scotland as it prepares for major events such as the Commonwealth games and other events like it.

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): After Scotland, the next host of the Commonwealth games will be India. Can the cabinet secretary say a little bit about the opportunity to build economic and cultural links with India and how the Scottish Government is working to enhance that relationship?

Neil Gray: That is an important aspect. We recognise that the delivery of the games is fundamentally important, as they are a major sporting event that can showcase the best of Scotland and Scottish sport, as well as international athletes who are coming and the links that we can have with other countries. I extend publicly my congratulations to Ahmedabad in Gujarat in India on being recommended as hosts for the 2030 Commonwealth games. I was able to do that in person with the Deputy Chief Minister of Gujarat, Harsh Sanghavi, when he led the Indian delegation that was visiting the General Assembly.

The Scottish Government is very much looking forward to continuing with collaboration and further strengthening bilateral relations, and I was pleased to have the opportunity to say so during the discussions that we had on the fringes of the General Assembly.

I recognise from a previous visit that Scottish Development International has a strong presence in India. The Indian delegation, including Mr Sanghavi, and the consulate in Edinburgh are keen to maximise the opportunity to build and grow our deepening relationship with India in

general, and Gujarat in particular, by using those links. The announcement that was made today about Scotland house for the games will be an opportunity to facilitate that.

Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary rightly spoke about the opportunity that the Commonwealth games bring to Glasgow and Scotland. The legacy of the games, however scaled down, must include a committed effort to support Scottish sport. However, we have Glasgow school of sport closing down, and sports facilities such as the national hockey centre are in really poor condition, with players being unable to access changing rooms, and we have organisations representing more than 30 different sports across Scotland writing to the Scottish Government to say that funding is now critically low. All the while, the First Minister stands in the chamber refusing to repeat his manifesto commitment to double sports funding. How does the cabinet secretary propose that the games will deliver a meaningful legacy when funding cuts by his Government have left so much of Scottish sport finding it harder and harder to stay afloat?

Neil Gray: There are a couple of points to respond to, and the first is the point about the scaled-down games. They were scaled down so that we can work with Commonwealth Sport on reimagining what the Commonwealth games can be and to encourage others to bid to hold them. The fact that Nigeria was in the running and that, for the first time, there was the prospect of an African nation being able to host the Commonwealth games is a legacy of Glasgow that we hope can be sustained towards 2034. We hope that we will see more nations being able to bid to hold the games.

The reimagining is not necessarily through choice or because we want the games to be smaller, but in order to ensure their sustainability into the future. We are all aware of why we are hosting in 2026 and why others have had to step in in the past.

The opportunity to enhance sport is absolutely at the heart of what I will be looking to do alongside the minister for sport, Maree Todd. Through the budget process, we will be looking to ensure that we can support team Scotland going into the games. The issues that Mr Whittle has raised have been raised with us at meetings with sports governing bodies, and we will give them serious attention during the budget process.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I remember when Mr Whittle was a sporting hero, running the anchor leg for Scotland in the 1990 Commonwealth games and winning silver for his nation. I watched that when I was a wee boy—*[Laughter.]*

I watched it on television with my family—that is the important part, because there is growing concern about the availability of free-to-air coverage, which allows us to have those moments with our families around the television. Can the cabinet secretary say any more about any engagement with the BBC; the Minister of State for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, Ian Murray; or the Secretary of State for Scotland, Douglas Alexander, to ensure that everyone can support our athletes and have those TV moments?

Neil Gray: Mr Whittle was someone I looked up to when I was a 400m runner—and I can say with a straight face that I genuinely was a wee boy in 1990: I was four years old.

The point that George Adam makes is a serious one. It is hard for people to be inspired when they cannot see inspiring performances. That is why broadcasting will play a vital role in sharing the excitement of the games, bringing every moment of sporting excellence into homes across the Commonwealth. I am aware that Commonwealth Sport and Glasgow 2026 Ltd—the organising company—is still in the process of agreeing a domestic United Kingdom rights holder for broadcasting.

Last week I met the president of Commonwealth Sport, Donald Rukare, to reiterate the importance of showing the Commonwealth games on free-to-air television. I and my colleague Angus Robertson have written to UK ministers to encourage a resolution, and I will continue to press them for that. Negotiations are on-going, but it would be a significant missed opportunity for people here in Scotland and across the UK, and for the BBC, were it not to step up and be the domestic broadcaster for the games.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I volunteered as a member of the medal ceremonies team for 2014. It was a fantastic experience, and the city was buzzing. The opportunity to recapture that feeling next year is really exciting. As someone who called for Glasgow to host the games as early as July 2023, when Australia pulled out, I am pleased that the Scottish Government eventually got behind the idea.

The key item that has been announced today is the £150,000 funding for Scotland house, which is a great idea. The Corinthian is a fantastic venue, and a very successful one, but I was curious about why it was chosen when there are other venues in Glasgow city centre, such as the Centre for Contemporary Arts, which is a charitable organisation that has been through difficulties recently and could perhaps have benefited more from that investment. Perhaps it is worth considering what could be done to support charities in that respect.

Last month, Phil Batty, the chief executive officer of Glasgow 2026, told me that the transport issue is still a big problem and raised the issue of what was done in 2014 on concessionary travel for ticket holders and people with accreditation. The Government does not seem keen to support that approach again, but could it be looked at? That would be an important incentive for people to use public transport for the games next year.

Neil Gray: We went through extensive searches for potential venues, and the Corinthian was viewed to be the best according to the criteria that were set out at various levels. I am sure that Mr Sweeney will understand the issues of suitability, not just concerning the space available, the scale of the activity concerned and the background that Mr Sweeney pointed out regarding that particular venue, but in relation to security and other implications that we need to be mindful of.

I have already responded to Mr Bibby that transport is ultimately the responsibility of the organising company. However, we are in regular dialogue with Transport Scotland, and I know that Mr Batty is, too. Those are areas on which we continue to engage.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): All eyes will be on Glasgow as the games get under way and huge numbers of visitors and athletes are drawn to the city. The cabinet secretary touched on this in his statement, but can he say more about the expected economic impact on Glasgow and how the Scottish Government is working to ensure that the maximum benefit is delivered for local businesses and the regional economy?

Neil Gray: The Commonwealth games will bring significant economic opportunities to Glasgow and the wider region, as well as to the whole of Scotland. Major international events of that scale typically generate substantial benefits through increased tourism, hospitality and spending in local businesses. The games are expected to bring more than £150 million of economic benefit to Glasgow and Scotland, supporting local businesses and jobs. We are pleased to support Scotland house in the centre of the city, which will bring together national and international businesses to forge new connections.

There are growing international links between Scotland and India, and they are already very strong in a number of sectors. The UK-India trade deal offers us opportunities in that space. It will be a central part of the Government's agenda to ensure that the economic opportunities are maximised for Glasgow and Scotland as well as for Gujarat and India.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I am grateful for the advance copy of the statement,

but, like a couple of members, I was a little surprised that the cabinet secretary did not mention some of the transport issues when he mentioned other matters that are also the responsibility of the organising company. He will be aware that, unlike in 2014, there will be a trial in 2026 of free public transport during the games for a limited number of Glasgow residents. How will the Scottish Government work constructively with Glasgow City Council and Strathclyde Partnership for Transport to evaluate the effectiveness of the pilot so that we can properly understand the value of free public transport, not just during big events such as the games but on an on-going basis?

Neil Gray: That is an important area. I recognise Patrick Harvie's point about ensuring that we evaluate the benefit of the pilot, not just for the games but, more widely, in support of free public transport. Through collaboration between the Scottish National Party and the Greens, we have been able to achieve substantial additional free public transport across Scotland.

The situation with regard to the games is slightly different. There are issues about getting to and from locations such as airports and other transport terminals, but the footprint of the games is in a far smaller space within the city of Glasgow. That is not to say that we should not have support for public transport, but the scale will be different. As I said in my answer to Mr Sweeney, we will engage with Transport Scotland and the organising company on those issues to ensure that we provide the best possible experience for residents of Glasgow and visitors next year.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): During London 2012, I took Humza Yousaf out on a detached youth work shift in Govan. We entered Elder park to find 50 of the most excluded and marginalised young people in Glasgow playing an impromptu game of volleyball. My point is that high-profile sporting events can inspire young lives, but that only matters and can only be capitalised on if we have youth work interventions such as that one. With the erosion of youth work over the past couple of decades, what are the Government's plans to use some of the revenue that will be brought in by the games, and some of its own resources, to invest in youth work opportunities so that young people can really feel the benefit of the games?

Neil Gray: On the economic aspect, I agree with Alex Cole-Hamilton on the need to ensure that we support and facilitate people to be able to enjoy sport. I was the beneficiary of that, growing up in Orkney, with volunteers supporting local football clubs, athletics clubs, rugby clubs, swimming clubs, badminton and octopush. The array of sports that I was able to access as a result of volunteers where I grew up is the reason

why I attempted to emulate Mr Whittle's achievements in the way that I did.

As I said in response to Mr Bibby and Mr Whittle, we can look to the sport budget and ensure that we are providing the best support that we can. I know that Mr Cole-Hamilton will engage constructively in the budget process to ensure that we maximise the opportunity to give people in all parts of the country the same exposure and similar experience that you, Presiding Officer, have helped to support in the past in your work with athletics clubs.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): It is vital that the games are more than a one-off event and that they create a long-term legacy for communities across the country. We all know that sport and physical activity are great for health and wellbeing. Will the cabinet secretary speak to what the Scottish Government is doing to ensure that legacy for Scotland?

Neil Gray: I could not agree more with Emma Harper. I mentioned a few examples of that in my statement, and, as I have said, I am pleased that the first phase of work has been completed on Scotstoun stadium to build the new athletics track for the games. That track will be an asset for the city, giving people in Glasgow access to another first-rate international-grade sports facility for years to come.

Glasgow 2026 has held a series of workshops to develop its "story of change" legacy and impact plan, bringing together participants and organisations from across Glasgow and Scotland to discuss how communities can benefit from the games and how Glasgow can celebrate the games and the festival that I expect to be held in the city, surrounding the games. The aim is to create a lasting legacy and impact for Glasgow far beyond the games.

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): Every Glaswegian will, of course, be looking forward to welcoming athletes, supporters and visitors from across the world to Glasgow next year, but some Glaswegians will also feel ashamed of and disappointed by the sights that some of those visitors will see. There are rats, needles and overflowing bins on our streets, and I have heard from Glasgow health and social care partnership that rough sleeping is likely to increase during the games, due to a shortage of accommodation. I thank all those who are working hard on the games and on welcoming the volunteers, athletes and visitors to the city, but what can the Scottish Government do to ensure that Glasgow is in a fit state to welcome the world?

Neil Gray: I am confident that Glasgow City Council and Glasgow will be in shape to welcome the world. I say that not only from my perspective

standing here but because of the engagement that I had with delegates who came from around the world to visit Glasgow as part of the Commonwealth Sport general assembly and were blown away by the facilities, the integration and the work that is being done across Glasgow to prepare for the games. Donald Rukare and the other international delegates and partners from Commonwealth federations were more than pleased with the facilities on offer and were delighted to see Glasgow stepping in to save the games.

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): Glasgow has built a track record of hosting successful events and has become a world-class hosting destination with the necessary facilities and expertise for delivery, and we must celebrate this opportunity to host the games. The cabinet secretary touched on that in his statement, but will he expand on the importance to Scotland's international reputation of Glasgow's developing position as a global sports hub?

Neil Gray: Glasgow has a significant reputation for hosting major sporting events. We have had the world indoor athletics championships, the world cycling championships, the European championships and the previous Commonwealth games, all of which have put Scotland at the very top of the international major events landscape. We should be incredibly proud of that.

We have collaborated with international partners, including Australia, which has provided funding to support the delivery of the games. I am very grateful for that and was able to pass that on to the Australian representatives at the general assembly. Glasgow has been able to step in a way that other cities might not have been able to, precisely because of that reputation and the infrastructure that we have in place, and we should be incredibly proud of that fact.

We now have more than 3,000 volunteers, some as young as 16, coming forward to take part. The experience that they will gain from their involvement in a major event, which they can take into other major events and can even build a career around, is another part of the lasting legacy of hosting such a major event.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement. I will allow a few moments for those on the front benches to organise themselves before we move on to the next item of business.

Violence against Women and Girls

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-19970, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on uniting local and national efforts across sectors to end violence against women and girls. Members who wish to speak in the debate should press their request-to-speak buttons.

14:54

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): As I open our annual debate marking the 16 days of campaigning against gender-based violence, I reflect once again on the continued importance of this debate and of the part that it plays in the parliamentary calendar. As 2025 draws to a close, violence, abuse and misogyny remain a grim everyday reality for women and girls in Scotland and, although real strides have been made to ensure that women and girls can be equally safe, we have much more to do.

That is in part because violence against women and girls evolves. The tools that perpetrators have to draw on evolve, and the rapid evolution of technology has created new tools for abuse. Home security systems, wearable devices and artificial intelligence-generated deepfake images are increasingly enabling the mass creation and sharing of exploitative content. Research indicates a proliferation of harm towards girls online. A recent survey by Girlguiding reported that 77 per cent of girls and young women aged seven to 21 have experienced online harm in the past year. For those reasons, this Government acknowledges the importance of the UN Women theme “UNiTE to end digital violence against all women and girls”.

Online abuse has wide-reaching impacts. Beyond the direct harassment, it limits women’s and girls’ ability to take part in online spaces, to learn, to voice opinions, to socialise and even to do their jobs. As our equally safe strategy outlines, technology-facilitated violence against women and girls is both a cause and a consequence of gender inequality. It happens because of women’s unequal position in society and it exacerbates that inequality by limiting the freedom, choices and opportunities of women and girls.

Exposure to online content harms boys, too. At an age when boys are questioning their identity and searching for belonging, online spaces increasingly provide a warped framework for an understanding of gender roles and societal norms.

Misogyny is potentially now being written into our future. AI and emerging technologies are not neutral. Unless they are specifically designed with care and with women and girls in mind, they replicate existing biases, particularly sexism and racism. Social media platforms are fuelling hatred against women, with algorithms, data sets, systems and search engines delivering sexist, sexualised and abusive content even to those who are not actively seeking it. They often promote harmful messages that equate masculinity with dominance over women, emotional suppression and aggressive behaviour. If we do not find an effective way to regulate now, those systemic biases will become further entrenched. We are storing up problems for the future.

There are no easy answers for any legislature, any Government or society as a whole. The speed of change can feel alarming, but together we have to find a way. I note that the guidance that Ofcom published at the start of this year’s 16 days campaign includes a range of practical safety measures that the regulator is urging tech firms to adopt to tackle those harms, and in the Parliament today, I urge tech companies to take immediate action in line with the guidance. Indeed, I urge them to go above and beyond what is needed to comply with their legal duties under the Online Safety Act 2023. We need to be ambitious in the standards that we set for women’s and girls’ online safety, and I know that many campaigners are concerned that the guidance does not go far enough.

Internet services are reserved. This Government has worked with the United Kingdom Government to get the 2023 act amended and strengthened, but we are clear that we must continue to press for further protections. In January this year, the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise and the Minister for Victims and Community Safety wrote to UK ministers inviting further co-operation between the Governments on online safety, particularly in relation to protecting children and young people, and urged further legislative action. We will continue to work with the UK Government to do all that we can to protect our citizens from online harm. In October, ministers met Jess Phillips, the UK Minister for Safeguarding and Violence against Women and Girls, to discuss our shared aims of protecting children and young people from online harms and tackling violence against women and girls.

The First Minister, the Minister for Victims and Community Safety and the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise have all written to tech companies about the need to take meaningful and tangible action to tackle online harms, and we will continue to press that point.

Within devolved powers, the Scottish Government is proposing to consult on potential new criminal law and associated measures to tackle online harm. That is in response to growing concerns about the effectiveness of existing legislation and the ability to make progress through the justice system. The consultation will seek views on proposals to create a new offence to criminalise the non-consensual creation of deepfake images. That is due to the growth of apps that enable people to create deepfake pornographic images of another person.

Of course, we have already enacted criminal law to tackle people who share or threaten to share deepfake, intimate or pornographic images of another person without their consent. Through the UK Government, we are informing the developing Council of Europe instrument and recommendations in relation to combating technology-facilitated violence against women and girls.

In recognition of the significant and wide-ranging risk of harm, the First Minister established the online safety task force—with joint ministerial leadership from the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise and the Minister for Victims and Community Safety—to provide oversight and direction across the Scottish Government. It is reviewing current activity and considering priorities for action within the devolved powers that are available to the Scottish Government.

In order to end violence and discrimination against women and girls, men and boys must be seen as much more than part of the problem; they have to be integral to the solution. Research indicates that a rise in misogynistic content in digital echo chambers presents particular challenges for secondary school-aged young people. We are, therefore, in the process of co-creating a campaign with young people. Co-creation is critical to developing credible and effective messaging that reflects young people's lived digital experiences and understanding of misogyny. I thank the young people and the third sector experts who continue to work with us to shape the campaign, and I look forward to updating the Parliament ahead of the proposed launch date in February 2026.

To demonstrate how successful campaign work can be, it is worth reflecting on last year's sextortion campaign, which was developed with Police Scotland and the Crimestoppers youth service, fearless. It is believed to be a key factor in the 2023-24 32.2 per cent decrease in reports to Police Scotland of sextortion.

Our schools framework on preventing and responding to gender-based violence is clear about the need to create a positive, safe school

culture. We are also committed to supporting Time for Inclusive Education's new digital discourse initiative, which helps schools to equip children and young people with the skills to navigate the digital media and counters the impacts of disinformation and online hate. We are delighted to have been able to support the first stage of that work, to help teachers and learners with skills to tackle the issue.

The online world is not always negative. The digital space offers opportunities for services and survivors. Those who work with survivors of abuse have told us that digital delivery is an integral part of the support that they offer. That is particularly the case for organisations that support younger women, enabling increased access to choice and, in certain circumstances, expanding offers of support. That includes video calls and apps for one-to-one and group support and counselling, as well as online chat as a helpline option. QR codes can enable discreet access to information, whereas picking up a leaflet would immediately identify the woman as a possible victim.

That is why we have established a violence against women and girls digital inclusion network, which is made up of specialist violence against women and girls services, the Mhor Collective and others, to consider how we can improve access to information and advice for survivors of technology-facilitated violence against women and girls.

I will end my opening remarks by paying tribute to the extraordinary work of violence against women services across Scotland. Those support services are life saving, but it is not just in the vital area of direct support and advocacy that they are making a difference; extraordinary work is being done to raise awareness, to educate and to prevent violence before it begins. To each and every one of them, I give my thanks.

As I said at the beginning of my remarks, it is important for legislators and Governments to face up to the challenges of the technological changes that our society faces. Those are difficult. Often, perhaps, we are criticised as Parliaments and Governments for acting too slowly, for implementing too slowly or for reflecting on a debate that has already passed in a society that has moved on to other things. It is a challenge that we will all need to rise to, next session.

I move,

That the Parliament unites in its commitment to 2025's 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign; warns that digital violence is the fastest growing form of abuse against women and girls worldwide; highlights the UN Women campaign, "UNiTE to End Digital Violence against All Women and Girls", which reminds everyone that digital safety is central to gender equality; recognises that protecting women and girls online will take concerted societal action from all spheres of government, tech companies, organisations, institutions and individuals,

and commits to strengthening efforts to prevent violence against women and girls across all sectors and in all its forms.

15:04

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): Violence against women and girls can be physical, sexual or psychological. Violence against women and girls and misogynistic violence are on the increase. That is a fact.

The Scottish National Party's equally safe strategy is failing, and we are facing a national emergency—and not just in digital terms. The number of sexual assault cases has risen by 4 per cent since 2024; the number of annually recorded incidents of domestic abuse has increased by nearly 55 per cent over 20 years; Scottish authorities have identified multiple child grooming clusters in Fife, North Lanarkshire and Inverclyde; and the number of rape and attempted rape cases has risen by 11 per cent since 2024.

Presiding Officer, I do not know who is talking, but I am finding it off-putting.

In Glasgow alone, 1,200 women have received treatment for female genital mutilation in the past five years.

Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I am sorry, Ms White, but I just cannot hear what you are hearing. Please continue.

Tess White: The Scottish Government's definition of violence against women and girls views gender inequality as a root cause of such violence. Does the Scottish Government mean sex—biological sex—or gender? The two are completely different. The Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee discovered that the public sector equality duty—with sex, not gender, as one of the nine protected characteristics—was not being monitored correctly, and that risk assessments are hit and miss in Scotland. Language matters, data matters and outcomes matter.

Female genital mutilation affects only girls and women. FGM is a painful procedure that involves cutting or altering the external female genitalia. Like all other forms of violence against women, FGM is practised because of deep-rooted systemic inequalities that discriminate against women and girls, and, because it is frequently done to girls, it is child abuse.

The Female Genital Mutilation (Protection and Guidance) (Scotland) Act 2020 has not been implemented. The Women's Support Project said that the Alnisa service in NHS Lothian reported a 50 per cent increase in FGM cases in 2023. The Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation (Scotland)

Act 2005 made it an offence to have FGM carried out abroad, with a maximum penalty of 14 years' imprisonment. The 2020 act aimed to strengthen the legal protection for women and girls at risk of FGM, and yet, as we heard during today's topical questions, five years on, the act is still not in force, and no one has been convicted in Scottish courts for offences under the act. No one has been prosecuted in this country.

As Rebecca McCurdy said in *The Herald* only yesterday, the failure to enforce the legislation is a five-year betrayal of women. Women who contributed to the bill are right to be disappointed, and that is an understatement. Women experiencing abuse struggle to get justice, and the legal aid system is broken. We are at a crisis point. Scotland faces problems with misogyny, while the SNP has dropped plans for misogyny legislation. Earlier this year, a report found that there is evidence of sexism, misogyny and violence against women in Police Scotland, at both institutional and individual level. Misogyny has been identified in Scotland's schools, with a report finding that female teachers and pupils face frequent abuse and sexual taunts.

I want to pick up on a point that the cabinet secretary made about schools. She said that we must have a positive and safe culture in our schools, but the situation is getting worse, rather than better. This is a crisis in our school system, and child-accessible pornography has become a huge issue.

In April, the Supreme Court ruled that the Scottish Government's interpretation of "sex" was wrong. In the case of *For Women Scotland v the Scottish Ministers*, the Supreme Court ruled that the legal definition of a woman is based on biological sex. The SNP Government is still refusing to amend its policy, which allows biological men in women's prisons. SNP ministers are defending their policy to allow criminals who identify as women to serve sentences in female jails.

The Sullivan review noted that conflating sex and gender identity undermines trust in public services. Not recording biological sex accurately particularly affects women who rely on single-sex spaces for safety and dignity. Such spaces include domestic abuse refuges, prisons and hospital wards.

Safety matters. Women are being let down when they are at their most vulnerable. In the Women's Rights Network report on safety in our hospitals, of the 198 hospitals that were the subject of freedom of information requests to Police Scotland, 133 were unable to respond, stating that the data was not kept. That is shocking. It is also deeply troubling that, in the 57 hospitals that retained data, 276 sexual assaults

and 12 rapes were recorded. Sexual assaults were recorded in at least 13 of the 18 psychiatric hospitals. The incidence of assaults in psychiatric hospitals was highlighted as a major concern, and I have two spine-chilling cases in my constituency.

Non-fatal strangulation—NFS—is increasing as a severe form of domestic abuse. In June 2022, England and Wales made NFS a stand-alone crime, followed by Ireland in 2023. US legislation has made strangulation a serious stand-alone criminal offence, which has been linked to reduced intimate partner homicide rates, with 14 per cent fewer women killed. NFS can cause brain damage, organ failure, mental ill health and death. The evidence indicates that non-fatal strangulation laws reduce intimate partner homicides, yet the Scottish Government still will not have NFS as a stand-alone crime. Why not, when the evidence is so compelling?

We support making NFS a stand-alone crime. Dr Pam Gosal's Prevention of Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill must be supported. We must have an inquiry into grooming gangs in Scotland. In 2026, there must be a prosecution for female genital mutilation, and the Scottish Government needs to deliver single-sex spaces to keep women safe.

The vast majority of people in Scotland now see that the cult of gender ideology is harmful to women and girls, and no one—not even the Scottish Government—is above the law.

I will end with the words of the treasured Scottish poet Magi Gibson, as a thank you to all the courageous women who are fighting for the rights and safety of women and girls in Scotland today:

"Thankfully this crazy spinning globe is blessed with women holding up their half of the sky, and more Warrior women, battle wearied, bone tired, soul sore, while systems form to keep them down, oppressed, powered by politicians dumbed as Clydesdale ponies Ploughing ever deeper the same old furrows as they lumber onward, blinkered, never turning, to see exhausted women's bodies piling up behind".

Immediate action is required. Women will not wait.

I move amendment S6M-19970.2, to insert at end:

“; recognises, however, that violence against women and girls takes place both online and offline, and that clear action is needed from the Scottish Government to tackle it; emphasises that reported crimes against women and girls in Scotland are rising; welcomes Dr Pam Gosal MBE MSP's Prevention of Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill, which, if passed, will tackle violence against women; questions the lack of Scottish Government support and legislative deliverance to tackle violence against women and girls; urges all public bodies to ensure that they are following the Supreme Court's judgment on the definition of 'sex'; raises concern about the reports of grooming gangs

in Scotland, and calls, therefore, on the Scottish Government to urgently establish an inquiry to understand the extent of the abuse and the action necessary to tackle it.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I remind members who are seeking to speak in the debate to check that they have pressed their request-to-speak buttons.

15:13

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to open the debate for Scottish Labour and to reaffirm our support for the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence.

For more than 30 years, the 16 days campaign has raised international awareness of gender-based violence and the need for action to tackle it. We commend the work of the campaign and the thousands of organisations, including those in Scotland, that have supported it. This year's 16 days campaign is welcome, as it highlights the growing threat that online spaces, services and technologies pose in relation to gender-based violence.

Digital violence is now one of the fastest-growing forms of the abuse of women and girls, with digital tools being used by men to engage in harassment and abuse on a daily basis. Digital tools have empowered men and boys to engage in new kinds of abuse and violence, such as revenge porn, deepfakes, catfishing and trolling. I welcome the cabinet secretary's proposal on deepfakes and I look forward to considering it in detail. Digital violence also negatively impacts the mental health and wellbeing of women and girls. It often leads to offline forms of abuse and violence, including femicide.

The level of digital violence that is experienced and witnessed by women and girls in Scotland is particularly shocking. More than a third of women in Scotland have witnessed online violence and more than one in six have experienced it. Online violence is an even greater problem among younger women in Scotland, with nearly 30 per cent of 16 to 24-year-olds having experienced it. Six in 10 of the women who have experienced online violence also reported enduring negative impacts on their mental health and wellbeing.

Women and girls across Scotland lack confidence in the Scottish Government and Police Scotland to tackle online violence. More than three quarters of women who reported online violence were not satisfied with the outcome, and more than 60 per cent of women believe that the police lack the necessary resources to tackle online violence. Women and girls in Scotland are more likely to seek support from friends than from the police when they experience online violence, and

less than 15 per cent of women have confidence that the Scottish Government is doing all that it can to tackle online violence.

Earlier in this parliamentary session, I was pleased to lead, alongside Pauline McNeill MSP, Scottish Labour's consultation on ending violence against women and girls. Respondents to our consultation made it clear that there must be better controls available on online platforms and that social media companies should be legally accountable for online violence that occurs on their platforms. Although the Online Safety Act 2023 and Ofcom's new guidelines on improving online safety for women and girls are welcome, there is clearly much more that can be done, such as exploring the introduction of legal requirements for social media companies. Respondents also highlighted the need for Police Scotland to be better resourced and for specific offences to be created in relation to cyberflashing and the creation of intimate images.

Although the Scottish Government's motion focuses on digital violence, we must also recognise that the issue affects women and girls in all areas of life, including in public spaces such as schools and workplaces. I commend trade unions such as Unite, Unison, the Educational Institute of Scotland, the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, the Transport Salaried Staffs Association, the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers and many others that have published reports in recent years outlining the growing scale of the problem.

The NASUWT found that nearly half of female teachers in Scotland have experienced physical abuse or violence from pupils in the past year. The public sector trade union Unison has exposed the shocking rates of violence faced by workers across the public sector. Unite, the RMT and the TSSA have highlighted the increase in violence and sexual attacks on our trains and buses, particularly against female members of staff. The transport unions are calling for a specific offence of assaulting a public sector transport worker, similar to the one that we created for retail workers. Sexual harassment is endemic in Scotland's workplaces, with nearly 10 per cent of women workers having experienced work-related sexual assault.

However, despite the alarming scale of violence across Scotland, we must accept that Government efforts have been largely ineffective in tackling the issue. Just a third of Scotland's schools are signed up to the equally safe programme. Less than half of the rape and attempted rape cases that make it to court result in a conviction. Domestic abuse and sexual crimes are reportedly on the rise. Cuts have been made to funding for Rape Crisis and other support services for women and girls who

experience violence. In my region, there are campaigns for closed-circuit television to be installed in parks after rape and sexual assaults have taken place. Our train network has fewer staff and reduced ticket office opening hours. As Tess White said, the Scottish Government also abandoned its misogyny bill.

There are clear actions that the Scottish Government could take now that would help to tackle violence against women and girls. For example, we must introduce a cross-campus strategy in all our schools to address sexism, misogyny and the growing influence of far-right social media on the behaviour of young men and boys in schools and other educational institutions across Scotland.

I welcome today's debate, but I hope that, in the coming budget, ministers will provide sustainable funding for support services for women and girls, including funding for an expansion of the pilot of independent legal representation for rape victims and reliable funding for Rape Crisis and Scottish Women's Aid.

Scottish Labour will support the Scottish Government's motion due to our shared commitment to tackling violence against women and girls, but we are clear that more can and must be done, and we will work across the chamber to achieve that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Maggie Chapman to open the debate on behalf of the Scottish Greens. You have up to six minutes.

15:20

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests: I worked for a rape crisis centre before I was elected.

Deputy Presiding Officer,

"You deserve to be punched. And then some."

"That's surely a bloke."

"You need dealt with."

"Go to Palestine then, and see how they treat women there."

"You're an it."

"Why don't you f-off back to Rhodesia."

Those are all direct quotes from comments on my social media. It is a pretty sanitised selection; nonetheless, it is a wonderful mixture of sexist violence and imperial misogyny. Those are just the tiniest drops in the ocean of online violence that women and girls face all the time.

During these 16 days of activism, we gather again to confront a truth that should haunt us all: violence against women and girls is not only

pervasive but deeply political. It is produced and reproduced by the patriarchy, by inequality and by systems and structures that place men's comfort above women's safety every day. As the saying goes, to those who are accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression.

Engender's briefing for MSPs lays it bare: violence is endemic. In 2023-24, Police Scotland recorded nearly 64,000 domestic abuse incidents. Sexual violence is rising and online abuse is growing, with one in six women in Scotland having experienced digital violence. Young men are being radicalised into misogynistic extremism at alarming rates.

As Katy Clark outlined, the Open University's 2023 survey found that 17 per cent of women have experienced online violence. The figure is much higher for younger women, with more than a third having witnessed online violence. Further, 71 per cent believe that current legislation is ineffective, and 11 per cent of women who experienced online violence say that it progressed to offline violence.

The survey also found that online anonymity, the ease of getting away with it and misogyny are the most commonly perceived reasons why people—mostly men—commit online violence against women and girls.

The survey reported that nearly a third of those who experienced online violence were more likely to seek support from friends than the police. More than three quarters of those who reported online violence were not satisfied with the outcome, and 85 per cent said that it affected them, with six in 10 reporting that it had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

Those numbers are horrific, but behind them are real stories that are worse. One survivor recently recalled:

"He didn't need to hit me in the street. He could reach me on every device I owned. I felt like there was nowhere in the world that he couldn't get to."

Another said:

"I stopped reporting because nothing changed. Except the threats got worse."

Another survivor said:

"I reported every threat he made online. Screenshots, timestamps, everything. They told me it was 'just words'. Two weeks later he was at my door."

Those are not isolated stories; they are the reality for thousands of women across Scotland.

Digital violence is not separate from real-world violence. It is the same violence but delivered through new tools—tools that are designed, owned and regulated overwhelmingly by men, and

used by the far right to radicalise, recruit and spread hatred.

We must be absolutely clear that the far right does not protect women. It harms women, and it uses our safety as a weapon to justify racism, transphobia and attacks on migrants. Many who shout loudest about protecting our women are perpetrators of abuse. Last year's riot arrests plainly tell us that, as does what I have witnessed personally on the streets of Aberdeen and Dundee. Misogyny is the gateway drug of extremist politics.

However, misogyny is not only out there; it is here, too, in this political environment, in our work communities and in this building. Women MSPs, along with women of colour, disabled women and trans women, know that our everyday online spaces are filled with misogynistic threats.

We know that some of that hostility is fuelled—directly or recklessly, deliberately or not—by political actors. When fellow parliamentarians share or encourage posts that identify women MSPs who vote in certain ways on sensitive topics, they effectively create targeted lists. They are actively making us less safe. Calling that "accountability" is a grotesque distortion. It is intimidation, and the parliamentarians who have done that should be ashamed of themselves. Such behaviour must end.

Neither can we ignore those who are most at risk. Trans women and non-binary people experience even higher levels of violence. Sex workers who are pushed underground by criminalisation are made less safe by our laws. Migrant women with no recourse to public funds remain trapped with abusers because our system denies them the means to survive with dignity and independently. Disabled women face disproportionate levels of coercive control. Racism compounds misogyny. All that is part of the same structure of gendered oppression.

If we want to end violence, we have to dismantle the patriarchy. That requires primary prevention—the deep structural work that Engender and others rightly demand. It requires women's equality to be embedded in every policy area, including housing, transport, education, planning and social security. It requires toxic masculinity and harmful gender norms to be challenged, and it requires political courage. Survivors are tired of our caution. As one woman said:

"I kept waiting for someone to be brave enough to say the real problem is men's violence and to deal with it. I am still waiting."

If we are serious about eliminating gender-based violence, those kinds of comments cannot go unacted upon.

Let us be brave today. Let us name the problem: the patriarchy—structural sexist violence. Let us commit to real change.

15:26

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh Western) (LD): I am very glad to be opening for the Liberal Democrats in this important debate.

Before I go any further, I thank Maggie Chapman for her typically excellent contribution. I salute her indefatigability in sharing with us appalling examples of the online abuse that she has received. I am aware that many female colleagues in the chamber will have received similar abuse, and I stand with them in friendship and solidarity and give them my support. Such abuse only underlines the reach of the challenge that is before us.

I am also grateful for the tone that the Government has sought to foster on the issue and for the tone of Shirley-Anne Somerville's motion.

Violence against women and girls is a national emergency. It is one that is deeply rooted in misogyny and the patriarchy, enabled by silence and worsened by systems that still fall far below our expectations and fail survivors far too often. Today's debate gives us the chance to speak with one voice in this chamber in condemning it. Violence against women and girls has no place in our country, in our homes or society, or in our workplaces or classrooms. However, just saying that is not enough. We have to act, and we must do so with the seriousness that the emergency demands of us.

The United Nations' 16 days of activism campaign begins this week, and it shines a light on something that every woman in this country already knows—that the abuse and harassment that they have faced for far too long has now shifted into new venues and frontiers. The digital sphere has become a deeply damaging front line in this age-old problem. We have heard something of that today.

I was reflecting on the fact that the first time that I spoke in a debate on this issue, on the eve of the 16 days of activism, was nine years ago. At that time, AI was barely an academic concept. Now, the systems that are in the phones in our pockets, in our computers and in our laptops allow people to track someone's location without their knowledge. AI can be weaponised to create intimate images that were never even photographs. Women are being harassed, threatened and manipulated from behind anonymous accounts. This crisis is evolving faster than we can pass laws that are meant to protect women.

Violence is not just moving online—tragically, it is rising everywhere. The most recent crime figures show a 22 per cent increase in reported domestic abuse in the past year alone. Reported rape and attempted rape have risen by 11 per cent. That is outrageous, and it is an indictment of our ability to grapple with the issue. Behind every statistic is a woman who was victimised when she picked up the phone and asked for help. Far too many still feel that they cannot do so.

I pay tribute to my colleague Beatrice Wishart, who has been a tireless and compassionate champion for women and girls, especially through her work as deputy convener of the cross-party group on men's violence against women and children. Her leadership is invaluable, but Beatrice will be the first to say that leadership across the chamber must be collective—it must involve men, too. This is an issue on which we must all speak with one voice.

My party believes that the Government must take the following actions to address the emergency. It must finally commence part 1 of the Domestic Abuse (Protection) (Scotland) Act 2021. The emergency protections that it contains could be shielding women from danger right now; instead, they have sat on the shelf for years. Every delay has consequences, and survivors cannot wait any longer.

We must swiftly add sex as a protected characteristic under the Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act 2021. In the next session of Parliament, we should review whether a separate piece of legislation, such as the approach that was recommended by Baroness Helena Kennedy, is needed to properly tackle misogynistic harassment and hate.

We must protect girls in our schools. Reports of sexual harassment, coercion and assault among pupils have grown significantly in number, but guidance for schools and local authorities is inconsistent. Girls deserve to learn without fear, and teachers deserve clarity and support—we must ensure that they get both.

We must make it easier for survivors to report abuse and find help. Currently, too many women are forced to retell their traumatic experience to a revolving door of agencies and departments. That is why we propose establishing a single point of contact on abuse in every local authority, so that survivors have to tell their story only once and can be guided through the system with dignity and without retraumatisation.

We need to address abuse in our criminal justice system and train lawyers and judges to understand when legal abuse and coercion through the courts are taking place. We will all have casework examples from our constituencies

in which an abusive partner who has declared bankruptcy and qualifies for legal aid will use that reality to try to ruin their victim financially.

We must also ensure that every housing officer and front-line worker is trained to identify domestic abuse and respond properly to survivors. Front-line staff are often the first people to see what is happening behind closed doors, and they must be equipped to act.

Finally, we must adopt a presumption that, in cases of domestic violence, the perpetrator and not the victim is the one to leave the shared home. It is barbaric that so many women and children are still forced to flee the place where they should feel the safest. If someone chooses violence, they, not the person whom they harmed, should lose their home.

This is not a women's issue or a party-political issue; it is a national issue and a human issue, and it is one that demands every ounce of our collective political will. Scottish Liberal Democrats stand ready to work with every party in the chamber to stamp out gendered violence, wherever it occurs and whatever form it takes. Women and girls across Scotland deserve nothing less.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate.

15:33

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): In this debate to mark the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, I think that we are united in our commitment to end violence against women and girls in all its forms, online and offline. As has been said, this is not just a women's issue; it is a societal crisis that demands action from every sector, community and individual.

Let us begin by confronting a difficult but urgent reality: the pervasive nature of online pornography and its impact on young people, especially boys. Recent research by the Children's Commissioner for England has revealed a disturbing link between boys' exposure to violent pornography and subsequent harmful sexual behaviour. In half of the cases examined, acts of sexual violence that are depicted in pornography, such as strangulation or slapping, were mirrored in real-life abuse among children.

Boys are more likely to actively seek out pornography, and repeated exposure reduces shock and confusion, normalising harmful behaviours and making them seem acceptable. By the age of 15, most boys have seen pornography, and a significant proportion report that they want to act out what they have seen.

In Scotland, we are not immune to that. A major Scottish study by the University of the Highlands and Islands found that 86 per cent of boys aged 13 to 15 in the west of Scotland had viewed online pornography. NHS Scotland's own research highlighted that 41 per cent of popular online pornography videos that it analysed depicted violence against women. The content distorts young people's understanding of sex, relationships and consent, and it normalises aggression and exploitation. It is not only a matter of curiosity, as we sometimes hear said; it fundamentally shapes attitudes, which ultimately distorts relationships and fuels abuse. The trauma that is inflicted by that exposure can also be profound, and boys become victims, too. Experts warn that the eroticisation of violence in pornography can lead to traumatised sexuality, difficulties in ultimately forming healthy relationships and, in some cases, a cycle of aggression or, alternatively, dissociation.

I put it on the record, up front, that this is a public health problem that we cannot afford to ignore, and I welcome the efforts to work with the UK Government to address this important reserved area. However, if we are to end violence against women and girls, we must also address the role of men, not as bystanders but as active allies and agents of change. Engaging men and boys is crucial to shifting the societal norms that underpin gender-based violence. Men have a clear role in challenging toxic masculinity, rejecting harmful stereotypes and modelling healthy relationships. That means speaking out, as we have seen with the very successful Police Scotland "Don't be that guy" campaign. Men have to recognise that ending violence against women is not a burden for women to shoulder alone; it is a collective responsibility, and men have to be at the forefront of the movement.

I hope that the promotion of the white ribbon campaign by Ben Macpherson will continue. Now that he is in a ministerial position, we need somebody to pick that up—I see that he is pointing at Paul McLennan, behind me, which is excellent. To remind members, the white ribbon symbolises a pledge to never commit, condone or remain silent about violence against women and girls. To pick up Maggie Chapman's earlier point, all men here, particularly those who are in this profession, should not remain silent and should speak out regardless of whether they agree with a person's political party or view. We all need to do that.

Frankly, our efforts are undermined when the Government fails to prioritise women's safety, dignity and privacy. The Scottish Government has made public commitments, but its actions have often fallen short. Sometimes, that has been because of complexity, and I understand how difficult such matters are. However, I reiterate—all

members in the chamber know that this is my view—that the Supreme Court decision has made it clear that, for the purposes of the Equality Act 2010, “sex” means biological sex.

Picking up on an earlier point, the decision to shelve legislation on misogyny disappointed many people, and we have heard that reiterated today, but at least there is now action to add sex as a protected characteristic. It was ridiculous that women, who make up 51 per cent of the Scottish population, were the only group not to be covered. I do not underestimate the systemic nature of the challenge, however, and, in some respects, we are still at the early stages. We still do not routinely disaggregate data across policy making by sex—or other data collectors—in order to glean critical insights, particularly around economic measures. That is a point that I have consistently reiterated.

If we are truly committed to ending violence against women and girls, we must address the root causes, including the commodification of women’s bodies. The Prostitution (Offences and Support) (Scotland) Bill, which Ash Regan has introduced, is a critical step forward. By criminalising the purchase of sex, the bill targets demand, not those who are exploited by the sex trade. I know that the Government has some concerns relating to amendments that would be needed to the bill, but I hope that the Government can support it at least through stage 1, to make a statement that we, in the SNP, agree with the principle. That would send a clear message that women are not commodities to be bought and sold. Until we challenge and dismantle the systems that treat women as objects for consumption, violence will persist.

Let us unite not just in words but in action to build a society in which every woman and girl is safe, respected and free to live with dignity.

15:40

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): Every year since I entered the Parliament in 2021, I have spoken in debates on sex-based violence and on the 16 days of activism. However, sadly, things are not any better today—in fact, they are getting worse.

The theme of this year’s 16 days of activism is “UNITE to end digital violence against all women and girls”. With technology playing a more prominent role in our lives, digital hate is constantly on the rise. What can start as a seemingly harmless message, comment or post can spiral into something dangerous. From misogynistic comments to private photos being shared without consent and deepfakes that include the faces of women and girls on naked

bodies, the internet is becoming an increasingly dangerous place for women and girls. As if that was not shocking enough, we keep seeing younger and younger girls being victims of this terrible violence.

Sex-based violence is not just a global phenomenon; it affects women in Scotland, too. The domestic abuse figures that are released by the Scottish Government remain appalling. With almost 64,000 incidents reported to Police Scotland in one year—that amounts to one incident every 10 minutes—we clearly need to do better. At the same time, the numbers of cases of sexual assault, rape and attempted rape have also risen in the past year. That is just the tip of the iceberg, because the majority of cases go unreported.

On Thursday, along with the Women’s Rights Network Scotland, I sponsored a vigil to commemorate the 46 women who have been killed by men in Scotland in the past five years. They were somebody’s daughter, sister, mother and friend—most important, they were somebody whose life has been lost and whose family has been shattered.

Last week, in response to a question that I asked him on the subject, the First Minister indicated that he had attended similar events in his constituency. However, I was disappointed that not one single SNP MSP attended the vigil outside the Parliament.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Pam Gosal: The SNP Government has this debate at this time every year and claims to be a champion of women’s rights. However, shockingly, it cannot even define the word “woman”, and its policies put women at risk, including by putting dangerous men in women’s prisons.

Christine Grahame: On a point of order, Deputy Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please resume your seat, Ms Gosal. I call Christine Grahame.

Christine Grahame: I seek your guidance, Deputy Presiding Officer. Pam Gosal said that not one member of the SNP attended the vigil. I gave my apologies to her, and she accepted them and conveyed her thanks. I just thought that I should correct what was said.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Grahame. That is not a point of order. Please continue, Ms Gosal.

Pam Gosal: At the same time, the SNP refuses to call for a grooming gangs inquiry, all in the name of political correctness, and chooses to bury

its head in the sand as if grooming gangs are not a problem. The problem is not going away, but the SNP keeps kicking the can down the road. That is why I am proud that the Scottish Conservatives will keep bringing up the issue until justice is served.

Given that the debate is on uniting local and national efforts across sectors to end violence against women and girls, I would like to take some time to speak about an event that I attended in East Dunbartonshire. Last Monday, East Dunbartonshire Women's Aid hosted an event entitled "Empowering Deaf Women to Report Domestic Abuse". Deaf women and girls who have been domestically abused must overcome extra hurdles that are not necessarily experienced by women and girls who can hear. We heard first hand that Police Scotland and women's aid organisations, with the latter already being short on resources, do not always have British Sign Language interpreters or staff who have the knowledge of BSL. At the same time, many interpreters do not feel comfortable taking up domestic abuse cases. It was also shocking to hear that many deaf women were not aware of words such as "consent" and "coercion".

As the police do not gather data on disability in domestic abuse cases, it is difficult to identify the extent of the problem. Those women are already being let down by the current systems and they are let down further when they are at the most vulnerable stage.

The Scottish Government likes to brag about its equally safe strategy, which is more than welcome, but the picture on the ground is different, as more needs to be done. That is where my Prevention of Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill comes into play. The bill would introduce a domestic abuse register that will operate in a similar way to the sex offenders register by helping authorities to better monitor those who are convicted of crimes of domestic abuse. At the same time, the bill would put in place a mandatory assessment of whether someone is capable of rehabilitation, while also mandating domestic abuse education at schools. Finally, my bill would improve data collection so that the Scottish Government and authorities would have a clearer picture of which communities are affected more than others, such as the disabled or black, Asian and minority ethnic communities.

My bill has been backed by the third sector and survivors of domestic abuse. Tomorrow, the Criminal Justice Committee will take evidence on it, and I hope that it is supported by members from all parties at stage 1 and stage 3. I hope that members can come together for once and agree that the current model is simply not good enough. Things will not change overnight but, as

parliamentarians, it is our duty to ensure that no more lives are lost to sex-based violence.

15:46

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate during the 16 days of action to end gender-based violence. It is up to us all to work together to prevent and end violence against women and girls and we must also address the underlying attitudes and systems that perpetuate it. To do that, we must unite our efforts across local, national and third sector plans to fully tackle violence against women and girls.

West Dunbartonshire, which is part of my constituency, continues to have the second highest rate of domestic abuse in Scotland. For many decades, a key source of support throughout my constituency was Clydebank Women's Aid. I have mentioned its superb work in previous speeches but, unfortunately, it announced its closure earlier this year. I worked closely with that organisation for more than 20 years, so I know how tirelessly it has worked and how much of an impact it had on the lives of those most in need. Women, children and young people deserve to live a life free of fear and violence, and Clydebank Women's Aid has been a crucial source of support for those who have experienced domestic abuse.

The closure was a real blow to our town, and I am extremely disappointed that that decision was made and that the organisation was not better supported with secure funding from the Labour-run West Dunbartonshire Council. It has left Clydebank vulnerable without a vital service, which is why I am speaking today to push for more for my town to ensure that it is not left behind in cross-party and cross-Government efforts to end violence against women and girls.

Clydebank is a clear example of why it is vital that we unite local and national efforts in tackling this issue, and that is why I am glad this year to support the reclaim the night march in Clydebank, which is organised by Clydebank Women Supporting Women and the youth charity Y Sort-It. The march will allow us to stand together in solidarity, raise awareness and challenge violence against women and girls in Clydebank and beyond. My sincere thanks go to Clydebank Women Supporting Women and Y Sort-It for organising that important event.

I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government has taken a number of steps to legislate for action on domestic abuse, including the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018, which created a specific offence of domestic abuse that incorporates coercive and controlling behaviour. Through the

equally safe fund, the Government will provide £21.6 million to 115 projects that focus on preventing and eradicating violence against women and girls.

Gender-based violence is a harsh reality that is experienced by our mothers, sisters, daughters and friends. It knows no bounds and it significantly impacts the individual and even wider society.

The theme of the 16 days this year, led by UN Women, is “UNiTE to end digital violence against all women and girls”. It reminds us that violence is not just physical; it follows survivors into digital spaces. It highlights the growing threat of online harassment, image-based abuse and digital coercive control. Digital spaces should be safe for everyone but, unfortunately, they are not. I know that many of my female colleagues have faced online abuse in their role as MSPs. That is simply not acceptable.

Digital violence is the fastest-growing form of abuse against women and children worldwide. The development of digital technologies such as artificial intelligence poses new risks for women and girls, such as the development of deepfakes. Action is required across all policy areas, with Government and tech companies all working together to respond to the added risks that that may pose to women.

I therefore welcome the fact that the Scottish Government is giving the issue absolute priority and is working to deliver the equally safe strategy for preventing and eradicating violence against women and girls. I am pleased that it has established an internal policy group on technology-facilitated violence against women and girls, in recognition of the cross-cutting nature of the issue. That work seeks to accelerate the Scottish Government’s strategic approach to tackling the issue, including how it further strengthens its approach to addressing online misogyny. We know that we will see real change only when those who perpetrate domestic abuse, the majority of whom are men, change their behaviours and actions. We need to educate boys from an early age about respect for women, consent and empathy for others. That is an invaluable tool to tackling this abhorrent issue and changing societal behaviour.

Imagining a Scotland without gender-based violence should not be difficult. It is achievable, and I am pleased to see the work that is being done on it by the Scottish Government. It is vital that we continue the momentum and unite to ensure that women and girls can live a life free from fear and violence.

15:52

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

As we mark the 16 days of activism, we have a chance to reflect on the on-going impact of violence against women on our society. The sad truth is that 60 per cent of women who are murdered are murdered by someone who was supposed to love them. That statistic is shocking and seems to change little, regardless of the action that we have taken.

We live in a society where misogyny is prevalent. Those perpetrating it are being emboldened, as is the case with most hate crimes, while hiding behind anonymous social media accounts and being empowered by manosphere influencers.

Other members have highlighted what online pornography teaches our young people about sexual relationships: it not only influences boys in how they treat women; it influences girls as to what they should expect from relationships. It promotes violence against women at a very early age, and that needs to change.

We have an opportunity during these 16 days of activism to do something positive. This year, the Prostitution (Offences and Support) (Scotland) Bill has come to the Parliament. The bill seeks to decriminalise those in prostitution, criminalise sex buyers and provide routes out for those who are being exploited. The Scottish Government has accepted for more than two decades that prostitution is violence against women, yet we still criminalise women and do nothing about those who create the demand. Let us not shy away from the truth. Prostitution is a multibillion-pound industry worldwide, and those who are making their living from exploiting others will not easily give up their lucrative trade. We have seen the level of opposition to the bill, and it is often spurious. The whole trade is founded on misogyny—the idea that women can be sold as a commodity and the buyer feels free to use them in the way that they see fit, not as human beings to be treated with respect.

The truth is that one cannot buy consent—so, basically, we are turning our back on rape on an industrial scale. Women in prostitution live in danger; it is not a normal job. None of us would want our daughter, sister or mother to be exploited in prostitution. If it would be wrong for our own, it is surely wrong for everybody else.

The damage, both mental and physical, that prostitution causes is horrific. In this Parliament, there is no excuse to be unaware of that. Survivors have come and given us their testimony, yet, for the most part, MSPs have not heard them. It is upsetting and frightening to hear their experiences and, once you have heard it, you

cannot unhear it, but those are not excuses to do nothing.

It is desperately sad that the Scottish Government, which recognises that prostitution is violence against women, cannot give its whole-hearted support to the bill. Every bill that comes through the Parliament is amended in one way or another. Many of the issues that are dealt with in the bill should already be in place—it should not need legislation. We should already have well-funded exit routes for those in prostitution if we really believe that it is violence against women. We should not be convicting women of soliciting offences if we really believe that it is violence against women. We should be allocating the blame for this abuse where it sits, which is squarely with the sex buyer.

The cross-party group on commercial sexual exploitation carried out research on online pimping. Many platforms, from Vivastreet to OnlyFans, advertise this work. Women are sold in Scotland today on an industrial scale. Those sites try to suggest that they take steps to ensure that their sites are not used by traffickers and exploiters. However, a quick look tells us otherwise: identical photographs, the same email address and the same phone number are used for multiple women. Women are trafficked into Scotland and then around Scotland to feed the demand, and that is violence.

France, Sweden, Ireland and many other countries have taken steps. They have implemented the policies that are included in Ash Regan's bill. They have cut the rates of violence against women and they have furthered the cause of equality. It is clear that countries that tackle prostitution find that their society becomes more equal. Pay is more equal and caring responsibilities are shared. We should not be surprised by that, because, if one sex is commodified, it surely leads to the impression that they are less worthy than the other sex, which can use them as commodities. Because of that, prostitution impacts the whole of society and not just those who are exploited. Prostitution leads to women being treated as commodities.

If we really want to change, we have the opportunity to do so, so let us grasp it and let us back the unbuyable bill.

15:57

Stuart McMillan (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP): At the outset of my speech, I want to be clear that men need to do better. There is no excuse for violence against women and girls and, as the statistics show, the main perpetrators are men.

In the past, some considered it to be normal to be violent against women and girls, and some would consider those to be the so-called good old days, when aspects of life were allegedly better than they are today. In those so-called good old days, there was more deprivation, more children were failed at school because of an undiagnosed additional support need, and more women were denied opportunities because their place was at home. There will be many other examples that colleagues from across the chamber could name.

Sadly, too many men associate gender-based violence with masculinity and being macho, but there is absolutely nothing macho about being a bully.

The motion that we are debating mentions national and local efforts. Although we can all agree that violence against women and girls is a global issue, it is important to consider how actions at different levels can effect positive change. At Commonwealth Parliamentary Association conferences, there is always a workshop dedicated to this issue, and some of the testimonies heard by delegates have been horrendous and sobering. Different countries have different cultures and considerations around women and girls and how the issue is dealt with varies, including how it is policed. At the recent CPA conference in October, an MP from South Africa highlighted that, in the rural border areas between South Africa, Mozambique and Swaziland, domestic abuse is, sadly, commonplace. It is not always reported to the police and, on many occasions, the perpetrator will go back home before being caught and dealt with.

I therefore want to reflect on Tess White's amendment, which states:

"reported crimes against women and girls in Scotland are rising".

It is always a concern to see the number of crimes rising, but, in this instance, I believe that it shows that more women and girls feel empowered to come forward to report such attacks. On the one hand, that demonstrates why we must keep challenging gender-based violence. However, if more perpetrators are caught and dealt with, that is also a positive.

I turn to Ash Regan's amendment, which was not selected for voting on later. I do not disagree at all with the sentiment behind her bill, but it is still going through the parliamentary process, so I await the stage 1 report by the Criminal Justice Committee. I thought that the recent correspondence from the Swedish police was useful information on what she is trying to achieve.

Maggie Chapman lodged an amendment that is also not up for voting later. It highlighted the

problems with “toxic masculinity” and the need to take

“concerted action on misogynistic behaviour online”

and it called for plans to tackle online violence to be

“developed as part of the next refresh of Equally Safe”.

I whole-heartedly agree with her on those points. Social media is pervasive and is being used by bad actors to spread toxic masculine ideas en masse. Those platforms are used to influence young and impressionable boys and adult males who should, quite frankly, know better.

Members know that I keep my private life private and very rarely mention my family here in Parliament, but, for the sake of today’s debate, I will reflect on being a father of two daughters. My wife and I have raised them to stand up for themselves, to take no nonsense from anyone, to be careful when they go out and to just get away if they see any sign of trouble. I am sure that every parent in the chamber has probably done the same. I want my daughters to love life and savour every moment because it really is precious, and keeping themselves safe, particularly online, is an essential part of that.

However, I am also conscious that the messages that we give our kids should not be gendered. If we teach girls how to keep themselves safe but do not teach boys the same, choosing to brush off violent and misogynistic behaviour as boys being boys, we face a losing battle and are doing women and girls a huge disservice.

Fundamentally, there is no easy answer or quick fix—if there was, it would have been found by now. However, educating children about how to be kind to one another, to be respectful and to look out for each other, regardless of their differences, goes a long way towards improving society. Many people will respond by saying that that already happens, but this is not just about teaching that to our kids when they are young. We must also ensure that we, as adults, reflect that message in our behaviour and that we repeat it as our children grow older. Toxic masculinity harms boys and men as well as women and girls. Education to help boys and men away from that is absolutely essential; education is a crucial part of the wider debate.

In closing, I implore every man in the chamber and every male who is watching this or who reads the *Official Report* at some point in the future to challenge the attitudes that we have been discussing today. We must challenge those attitudes and behaviours whenever we hear or see them, not only during the 16 days of activism but

on every single day of the year. Failure to do so will only make us complicit.

16:03

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): I am glad that the Scottish Government has brought to the chamber this debate on the importance of tackling violence against women and girls. Like other females across Scotland, I hope the fact that it has done so signals a new SNP approach to protecting the rights of women and girls, because, up to this point, there has been precious little evidence that the issue is anywhere near the top of the agenda.

In fact, the Scottish Government’s attitude to the protection of women and girls is not at all fairly represented in the text of its motion today. A clearer picture can be seen in the Government’s refusal to launch an inquiry into grooming gangs in Scotland, in the on-going and disgraceful situation relating to males being housed in women’s prisons and even in the shocking lack of action on everything from domestic abuse to the shocking year-on-year increases in rape and sexual assault. If SNP ministers were genuinely serious about ending violence towards women and girls in Scotland, they would do more than just offering warm words in this chamber.

Victims of child grooming gangs in Scotland cannot enjoy even warm words from this Scottish Government. From the First Minister down, senior ministers have repeatedly refused this much-needed investigation. Victims in other parts of the UK are finally getting the chance of justice and answers, but in Scotland—yet again—things just have to be different.

On the Conservatives’ side of the chamber, we have tried for quite some time to persuade the Scottish Government to change its mind, but attempt after attempt has been thwarted. When the Scottish Conservatives recently tried to put in a freedom of information request to find out more about the mysterious national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group, we were met with a bizarre rejection. In obstructing the publication of information, the response used policy language about marine planning as justification for the secrecy—marine planning, on the matter of grooming gangs! That was clearly a mistake at Scottish Government headquarters, but that sloppiness and negligence summed up rather well the SNP’s attitude to the matter.

What is more, further research by my colleague Liam Kerr found a complete absence of interest in the strategic group. We should remember that the Scottish Government claims that the establishment of the group negates the need for an inquiry, so we would think that attending its

meetings would be rather important for senior Government ministers, yet the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs has never been, the Minister for Victims and Community Safety has not turned up either, and even the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise has yet to grace a meeting with her presence. Victims and members of the wider public will find it incredible that, on the one hand, the SNP cites the group as evidence of its tough response to child exploitation yet, on the other hand, no senior minister has seen fit to even show up to the meetings.

The continued refusal of this Government to hold a grooming gangs inquiry is a national disgrace. There is evidence of grooming in every part of Scotland, yet every part of the Government would rather close its eyes and pretend that it has not happened. It is a blinkered and shameful approach and it must change now.

We often hear ministers lament the number of women who are incarcerated in Scotland's prisons. They are rightly described as being among the most vulnerable females in society and we know that, far from being feared and notorious criminals, many of them are victims of crime and abuse themselves. Despite all of that, however, the SNP is refusing to change its policy of allowing dangerous male criminals who happen to just think or say that they are females to be housed in women's prisons. We know that those men do that because they are arrogant and abusive, because they want to pose a threat to women and because they think that they will have an easier life than they would have in a male prison. They are taking the system for a ride. The Supreme Court's ruling on sex was abundantly clear and it is a disgrace that the Scottish Government has not heeded it. There should be no men in women's prisons. It really is as simple as that.

Women and girls across Scotland are frightened for their safety. Domestic abuse is on a constant increasing trajectory and we know that it is females who bear the brunt of that. They are also usually the victims when it comes to rape—another crime that is on an alarmingly rising trend. In the current session of Parliament alone, 39 women in Scotland have lost their lives to male violence. There are so many things that our Government could be embarking upon to help to turn the tide on this. It could back my colleague and friend Pam Gosal's Prevention of Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill, which would create a domestic abuse register. It could get serious about misogyny laws. It could properly resource a justice system that gets tough on perpetrators, punishes and then rehabilitates properly, and serves up a robust deterrent to would-be and repeat criminals. Only then will the women and girls of Scotland really believe that this Government is on their side.

16:09

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important debate. The 16 days of activism campaign remains a stark reminder of the violence and abuse that far too many women and girls continue to face. As we mark this period in Parliament each year, we must do more than acknowledge that that is unacceptable. We must ask whether we are truly doing enough to change the realities of women's lives and ensure that they are better protected from violence and abuse in all their forms.

This year's focus on digital violence, which is now the fastest-growing form of abuse worldwide, is both timely and necessary. Digital spaces are increasingly central to young people's lives, to women's work and to our social interactions, yet they remain hostile environments for too many.

Although digital violence is our specific focus today, it sits within the wider continuum of gender-based violence that pervades homes, communities, workplaces and public spaces. Globally, the scale is devastating. Around one in three women will experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. More than a quarter of women aged 15 to 49 who have been in a relationship report that they have been subjected to physical or sexual violence by a partner. As many as 38 per cent of all murders of women are committed by intimate partners. Humanitarian crises, displacement and emergencies heighten those risks and, as we saw during the Covid lockdowns, existing inequalities can quickly escalate into new forms of harm.

Here in Scotland, sexual violence and domestic abuse have persistently increased. We are also witnessing a rise in misogynistic abuse in transport, healthcare and education settings—and, of course, online—yet, despite the commitments that have been made, the Scottish Government has not prioritised the roll-out of the equally safe strategy, nor backed it with the long-term resources that are required.

The decision to drop the planned misogyny bill was a profound disappointment. Given the First Minister's stated commitment to tackling misogynistic abuse, it was a moment when actions failed to match words. If we are to protect women and girls effectively, we need legislation, proper funding and decisive leadership.

There is growing evidence on what works to prevent violence against women. The RESPECT women framework, with its seven strategies and range of interventions, highlights successful interventions that prioritise women's safety, challenge unequal gender power relationships, are participatory and start early in life. If we are to

achieve lasting change, we need to enact and enforce legislation, allocate resources to prevention and response, and implement policies that promote gender equality. As elected members, it is our responsibility to push the Scottish Government to deliver on those principles.

It is equally important that we support education and awareness within our own communities. I am grateful to the many survivors who, despite trauma and loss, continue to empower others and help to create change. Tomorrow evening, I will join the Fife reclaim the night march in Dunfermline and the “Let’s talk” event afterwards, which is part of an on-going community effort to end violence against women and girls.

Across schools in Fife, many pupils participate in the mentors in violence prevention programme, which equips young people with the language and confidence to challenge the attitudes and cultural norms that underpin gender-based violence, bullying and abuse. It encourages active bystander behaviour and empowers young women to support their peers. Although I understand that all local authorities engage with the programme, delivery is not consistent across all schools. Time pressures and competing priorities create challenges, but we must ensure that schools are supported to deliver that vital preventative work.

In the digital sphere, we know that online platforms have become fertile ground for misogyny, harassment, grooming and coercive control. I recognise the steps that have been taken by the UK Government through the Online Safety Act 2023, which, though not without implementation challenges, is a necessary and important step in delivering stronger protections for young people. Online spaces have been difficult to police precisely because safety was not built into platform design from the outset. Holding platforms accountable for the content and behaviour that they host is overdue.

The motion highlights the UN Women “UNiTE to end digital violence against all women and girls” campaign, which rightly asserts that digital safety is now central to gender equality. It calls for co-ordinated action across Governments, tech companies, institutions and individuals. It mirrors the approach that we must take: requiring transparency about harms such as cyberbullying, online abuse and harmful content; promoting digital environments that are resilient to disinformation; and ensuring that Ofcom delivers on its role in safety by design, transparency, agile regulation and inclusivity.

We should not underestimate the difference between the online world today and the environment in which many adults grew up. Children and young people navigate risks that did

not exist even a decade ago. Research into the impacts of smartphones and social media on wellbeing, particularly for girls and young women, is still emerging, and policy makers must not lag behind the technological realities that are shaping young people’s lives.

The rise in misogynistic content across social media and mainstream online platforms has serious consequences. It normalises abusive language, harmful behaviours and even physical violence.

The normalisation of non-fatal strangulation, linked to depictions of choking in mainstream pornography, contributes to the culture of abuse that we must challenge. Banning the depiction of strangulation in pornography is a necessary step, but we cannot stop there. Broader action is required to confront the commercial structures and cultural norms that fuel online misogyny.

I wish to close by speaking about the case of Demi Hannaway, whose family I have been supporting. A fresh investigation is now under way, and I will not comment on its progress, but I want to acknowledge the recent reporting in the *Sunday Post* on misogyny and sexism in Police Scotland and the very real concerns that Demi’s family have about whether those attitudes influenced the initial investigation. Demi endured domestic abuse, and, despite police call-outs, charges were pursued only due to the persistence and courage of her family, under the most awful circumstances.

Demi’s family were among those who gathered outside the Parliament recently at the vigil for women whose lives have been taken by male violence. We owe it to them, and to every woman and girl experiencing abuse, to redouble our efforts to end this violence in all its forms, including online. The Parliament must unite in its commitment and act decisively. Only then can we hope to build the safer and more equal society that women and girls deserve.

16:15

Ash Regan (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind): Digital technology has created new mediums for abuse, but let us be clear that technology is a tool, not the abuser itself. Technology simply creates new frontiers for a very old problem: male violence against women and girls. It amplifies harm, facilitates exploitation and hides abuse in plain sight, but the perpetrator remains the same. However, we can, and I believe that we now must, join the dots between how the state protects women and girls, and societal attitudes to committing crimes against them.

The numbers are stark. In 2024-25, Scotland recorded just under 15,000 sexual crimes; that is

the second-highest annual total since 1971. Rape and attempted rape have risen by more than 60 per cent over the past decade. In our latest crime figures, crimes associated with prostitution are up by 33 per cent, reflecting rising exploitation and the persistent danger faced by women in the sex trade. These are not isolated spikes; they are predictable outcomes of a society that tolerates male sexual entitlement and the exploitation of women to meet it. To confront that, we must define the problem correctly: this is male violence against women and girls. It takes many forms, including rape, grooming gangs, sex trafficking and prostitution, all of which are fuelled by a single root cause: male demand.

New research from the USA confirms what we already know and what the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service acknowledged: men who buy sex are statistically more likely to endorse hostile masculinity, sexual aggression and dehumanising attitudes towards women. They see prostituted women not as people but as products for sale, purchase, review and to meet their wants, no matter how dehumanising, degrading or violent. They are more likely to commit other forms of sexual violence, and their actions directly drive the criminal marketplace for coercion, sex trafficking and other multilayered exploitation.

The Supreme Court ruling delivered legal clarity on “woman”, “man” and “sex”, and now this Parliament must act on that clarity to tackle sex-based risk. Women and girls continue to be commercially sexually exploited; it is legally tolerated as long as it does not occur in public. A Scotland that tolerates commercial exploitation by where it happens—rather than that it happens—is a form of state-endorsed systemic violence, and that makes Scotland a pimp state.

Rising sexual crimes, grooming, trafficking and prostitution are all interconnected and all are driven by male demand. We have the evidence, the data and the legal framework to compel us, united by the common purpose to act in devolved and reserved areas and across local authorities and international bodies.

In this Parliament, I believe that we can take three immediate steps: first, fully implement the For Women Scotland Supreme Court judgment and ensure that all laws and policies recognise sex-based risk; secondly, through my unbuyable bill, criminalise the purchase of sex and provide robust support for those who are exploited; and thirdly, take domestic violence and trafficking laws seriously, backed by robust data capture and enforcement, in order to detect networked exploitation and protect potential victims and support survivors.

The choice is clear. We know the problem and we know the perpetrators, and now we must act to

end male violence against women and girls anywhere that it takes place, whether it is online or offline. Our society cannot continue to tolerate the fact that vulnerable women’s and girls’ bodies are bought, sold or abused. This Parliament has the power and the responsibility to stop it, and my unbuyable bill is a critical first step in that. This Parliament cannot say that it is serious about combating violence against women and girls if it does not take this opportunity.

I have been here for nearly 10 years and, like some of the other speakers, I have watched this debate take place year after year. The statistics show that, rather than things getting better for women and girls, they actually getting worse. We must use what we have and do what we can to combat that.

The majority of those who are in prostitution are not there by choice. They are girls who have been in our care system; they have been sexually abused as children; they have been groomed; they have been coerced; or they have been trafficked into this country. Those girls deserve more, so I believe that this Parliament should act to protect them.

As Madame Pelicot bravely said, the “shame must change sides”.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Paul McLennan is the final speaker in the open debate.

16:21

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I am glad to speak in this debate. Normally, these debates are consensual, and I am a bit concerned about how this one has been politicised by Tory speakers—I really am.

There is absolutely no doubt that toxic masculinity is on the increase. We all see it and we all know that it is damaging our communities, schools, workplaces and everyday life.

More than four years ago, during the 16 days of activism, we all stood here in a new session of Parliament and pledged to do more. In the time that we have left in this session, we all need to do so. This time next year, Parliament will again debate this subject and it must also pledge to do more.

This year, the focus is on online safety, and I will touch on that later. A few speakers have talked about the number of incidents of domestic abuse in 2023-24, which was 63,867. That is a scary figure. A clear majority of victims are female, and the vast majority of perpetrators are male.

Since 2018-19, Police Scotland has recorded 60,000 incidents of domestic abuse every year.

That is 1,150 per week, 164 a day and seven every hour. In the time that we have been speaking in this debate, 20 women will have suffered domestic abuse. That is not acceptable.

We all know that domestic abuse is largely a hidden crime that goes unreported to the police. Scottish Women's Aid believes the figures to be much higher, as not all incidents are reported to the police, which the report acknowledges.

Tess White: Will the member take a point of order?

Paul McLennan: Yes, if it is brief.

Tess White: Thank you for taking my point of order.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Ms White, is this an intervention or a point of order?

Tess White: I am sorry—it is an intervention.

Is it not an Opposition's right and duty to hold the Government to account and point out failures? To say what the MSP has just said about politicising the debate is actually aggressive in itself.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back, Mr McLennan.

Paul McLennan: I do not agree with that. There is a political element in every debate that we have, but these debates, over the four years that I have been here, are normally consensual, and this one has been too politicised for me.

I will move back to the key points that I want to mention. In 2023-24, almost half of domestic abuse incidents that were recorded by Police Scotland were between current partners. Let us not forget that. Almost half of incidents were between ex-partners.

Some of the nuanced details are also really important. Females aged between 31 and 35 had the highest rate per 10,000 population for being victims, and males aged 31 to 35 had the highest rate for being suspected perpetrators, so there are lessons to be learned from that. Some 65 per cent of incidents involved people who had previously been recorded, so there is repeat abuse going on. We touched on issues of housing and key agencies in that regard. Nine out of 10 incidents occur in a home. In Scotland, 47 per cent of female homicide victims were killed by a partner or ex-partner—that was talked about earlier.

Like other members, I got a briefing from Engender. Among the key figures that it talked about included there being 2,897 crimes of rape and attempted rape, which is an increase of 15 per cent from 2023-24. The number of sexual crimes that have been recorded by the police is at the second-highest level since 1971. Between 2017

and 2021, Police Scotland recorded 701 honour-based abuse-related concerns, which is an average of 140 per annum.

As men, we come into the Parliament—I have heard men talking about this in debates before—and we just take living our lives for granted. Nearly three quarters of women in the UK have experienced some form of harassment in a public space. That is my daughter, my wife, my niece—that is scary. It is incredible. As men, we take it for granted, but we cannot allow it to happen—we just cannot.

More than one in six women in Scotland have experienced online violence, while more than a third have witnessed it. Research by Zero Tolerance shows that misogynistic extremism is spreading among young people online—we have heard various examples of that in the debate.

Let us get down to what this issue is all about, which is the gender inequality that we all take for granted. Women still have less access to power. In 2023, women held only a third of positions of power in Scotland—across the public sector, political institutions and the media—despite accounting for 51 per cent of the population. That is wrong. When it comes to money and resources, women still experience higher rates of poverty, rely more on social security and are less likely to own their home. That is wrong. A third of secondary school boys believe that girls wearing revealing clothing are “asking for trouble”, while one in six do not view girls as their equals. That is wrong. Gender inequality is the real cause of this issue.

In its briefing, Engender made a point about the collection of

“sex-disaggregated data on violence against women”,

which is important. It also spoke about commissioning

“a large-scale survey of women across Scotland on violence against women and girls”

and considering asking relevant questions in the Scottish health survey and the Scottish household survey. I would be glad if the minister would pick up on that particular point when summing up.

Violence against women continues to occur at endemic levels in Scotland. That is preventable. We must address the root cause, which is gender inequality, and integrate primary prevention into all areas of public policy.

I know how passionate the minister and cabinet secretary are about this issue and the Government's equally safe strategy. That strategy is backed by £20 million of funding and was developed in collaboration with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. The delivering equally

safe fund is providing money each year to support one-to-one projects. When I was a minister, I remember speaking to Kaukab Stewart about that, and I was aware of her passion about this issue.

As part of the housing emergency action plan, the Scottish Government is investing £1 million in the national fund to leave. The discussions that I had with Scottish Women's Aid at the time were incredibly important.

We all have a role to play in this issue, and men especially. We all need to do more.

16:28

Maggie Chapman: Like other members who have spoken this afternoon, I recognise the phenomenal endeavours of all the organisations and individuals who work every day to prevent violence against women and girls, support survivors, raise awareness, embed trauma-informed responses to those who seek assistance, and do so much more. I am sincerely grateful to all of them. I also remember Christina McKelvie, who fought fiercely for gender equality in the Parliament and beyond.

I will speak candidly: this Parliament must reckon with its own complicity in the climate that allows violence against women and girls to continue. That is not because we all intend to cause harm, but because silence, half measures, and political games have consequences.

We know that the root cause of violence is gender inequality, not bad decisions by individual men, misunderstandings or culture clashes. Gender inequality—shaped by patriarchy, reinforced by toxic masculinity and exploited by extremists—drives violence in every part of our society.

We do not need to look far for powerful testimonies, some of which I will share.

"Every time politicians argue about 'women's safety' while cutting the services that actually keep us alive, I feel like we're being used as props."

"When MSPs share posts about me voting for trans rights, the threats start again. It feels coordinated."

"As a trans woman, I'm told every day that people like me are the danger. But I'm the one who can't walk home safely. I'm the one who gets spat at. I'm the one who gets followed."

"What I needed was support. What I got was a waiting list."

"Men online know nothing will happen to them. They've learned the world will protect them, not me."

Those testimonies should terrify us, because they show that misogyny is not only growing but being legitimised.

The far right has weaponised women's safety with chilling effectiveness. They blame migrants for violence, while statistics show the opposite. They claim to defend children, while spreading conspiracy theories that isolate and endanger them. They platform men who promote coercive control as traditional masculinity.

Worst of all, the narratives of the far right seep into mainstream discourse. When this Parliament fails to challenge those lies—when we allow myths to spread about women's equality having gone too far, fearmongering about trans people or the demonisation of sex workers—we embolden those who would roll back decades of feminist progress. We must stop that slide.

Women do not need protection; we need liberation. What does liberation look like, and what can the men in this place do to support that? Liberation for women in Scotland would mean a society in which every woman and every gender-diverse person can move through the world without fear. It would mean a society in which our homes, our streets, our workplaces, our online spaces and our political institutions are not shaped by the threat of male violence. It would mean economic independence: secure incomes, accessible housing, universal services and social security that empowers rather than traps. It would mean that care work is valued; migrant women are protected; disabled women are centred; trans women are safe; and sex workers' rights and safety are respected.

Liberation looks like power shared, with Parliaments, councils, boardrooms and newsrooms reflecting the people they serve. Crucially, liberation requires men to do the work: to unlearn patriarchal entitlement; to challenge misogyny in their friendships and workplaces; to refuse the comfort of silence; and to participate in building communities that are rooted in equality, care, accountability and justice. Women's liberation is not an aspiration; it is a transformation—and men must take responsibility for their part in making it real.

When politicians post voting records or share such posts in ways that deliberately single out women MSPs, they are not informing the public, as some on the opposite benches might think. They are feeding a misogynistic ecosystem that already places women under constant threat. When colleagues indulge in dog-whistle rhetoric that casts trans women as dangers or migrants as threats to "our" women and children, they are participating in the very structures that produce violence. We must decide who we stand with: survivors, or those who profit from their suffering.

We also need a radical shift in policy making. We are falling short of our Istanbul convention obligations. We lack comprehensive, sex-

disaggregated data. Primary prevention work is siloed and underfunded. Local practitioners want to do more but are constrained by structural barriers. UK policies, including universal credit and the no recourse to public funds policy, force women into dependency, poverty and homelessness, all of which are fertile ground for abuse.

I ask the Scottish Government to commit today to launching a national campaign on the root causes of violence against women and girls, with a focus on challenging patriarchy and harmful gender norms; establishing a women's equality fund to support women with no recourse to public funds and those in other marginalised groups; and undertaking a radical refresh of the equally safe strategy, with specific actions to address online violence.

Survivors have told us what they need. One said:

"I don't want your sympathy. I want you to stop the next man from doing what he did to me."

Another said:

"I don't want to be brave anymore. I want the world to stop making me have to be."

If we mean any of the fine words that have been spoken today, we must honour survivors with action—fierce, unapologetically feminist action. We must take action that dismantles, rather than politely nudges, the systems that harm women and gender-diverse people, and action that liberates.

Ending violence is not about managing risk; it is about transforming society. It is liberation.

16:34

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to have the opportunity to close this debate for Labour. I thank the Government for bringing the motion to the chamber—it is very welcome at this time—and I thank members for speaking on such an important issue.

Although the theme of this year's 16 days of activism asks us to unite to end digital violence against all women and girls, recent statistics remind us that violence against women and girls remains far too common right across society—many members mentioned that this evening. Whether through domestic violence, sexual harassment or rampant misogyny, women continue to be the target of far too many men's terrible behaviour and aggression.

As we have heard in the debate, that is in many ways magnified in the digital world. The cabinet secretary pointed out that boys' viewing of warped behaviour online can have an effect on them for

life. Katy Clark as well as others mentioned that the digital world is being taken over by the far right, which is pushing messages to our young men. We have a responsibility to do all that we can to combat that.

I have to clearly say that digital abuse, including trolling, stalking and other forms of technologically facilitated violence against women and girls, really worries me. If I am honest, I do not think that we fully understand all the aspects of it.

The debate has raised challenges that we face. We have heard that digital violence changes so rapidly that it always seems to be one step ahead of legislators. However, if we cannot understand how serious that issue is today and address the complexities of regulation of our digital world and, at the same time, address the root cause of violence against women, we need to think about what we are doing in this place.

We have heard about how difficult it is to legislate in this area and about the importance of working across all spheres of government, and with companies, communities and individuals. The message of today's debate is that we must do so. We know that the work is challenging, but we must commit to join together—to unite, as the motion says—because this opportunity to change the trajectory is too important to miss.

I am pleased to hear that the Scottish Government is working with the UK Government on the Online Safety Act 2023, and I hope that it will continue to do that. If the Governments in Scotland, the UK and Europe work together, it will be a big step forward, because that is the only way that we will be able to tackle the issue.

A big step towards changing the trajectory will be exposing the parts of our society that are apologists for the normalisation of that violence, many of which are key elements of the establishment. Many people in the digital world seem to think that gender-based violence is normal, but we know that it is not inherent. The truth is that it is learned and nurtured through stereotypes, misogyny, bias and ingrained inequalities.

I thank Stuart McMillan for his contribution, in which he talked about his daughters and about the fact that we also need to talk to our sons, our brothers, our husbands and other men. Paul McLennan has spoken on that issue before, and I know that he is very passionate about it. Rhoda Grant and Ash Regan mentioned work that has been done on online pimping. Pimping websites, which are easy to find, exploit vulnerable women, and legislation has just not kept up with the sexual exploitation of women. The wording in those members' contributions told us that women are "trafficked" and are seen as "products". We need

to ask the Government to bring Parliament together to discuss what we can do about that.

I also want to raise the issue of porn and its normalisation in the lives of young men. Of course, porn is accessed both offline and online, but research and work with young men shows that extreme forms of porn tend to be accessed in the digital world. During my five years in Parliament, I have heard from women who research that area. The issue is often not tackled, perhaps because it is uncomfortable to do so and there is the feeling that we cannot change it, but we must endeavour to do just that. Porn is not acceptable and it is not normal, and we should be saying that to young men. They need to be educated, and online porn has to be tackled. I have heard from young women who say that it can be used to degrade them and make them feel violated. As Michelle Thomson clearly pinpointed, exposure to such things at an early age distorts some of our sexual relationships throughout our lives.

Members mentioned the manipulation of porn and online content. It is true to say that women bear the brunt of online manipulation in the digital world, and society has a responsibility to challenge the industry and those behaviours. As parliamentarians, we must provide adequate resources to tackle that injustice.

I want to mention the equally safe model, which is of course welcome, but it is fair to ask the cabinet secretary how we might be able to develop it further and make it work. Many members mentioned that it is not currently working and that not all schools have picked up on it. Some cross-parliamentary and cross-portfolio work on that would be really welcome.

There is much to be done, but I hope that, by coming together today in the Parliament, we can unite and change the trajectory of violence against women in Scotland and across the world.

16:41

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I want to use my summing-up speech to pick up on points by every speaker, because it has been an excellent debate. The first speaker who I will address is Paul McLennan, who was the final speaker in the open debate. I have to say that I think that the debate has been consensual. There has been slight disagreement and challenge, but we need that, because the issue still causes too many problems in Scotland, across the UK and around the world. If we just turn up for this debate year after year and say that the Government is doing everything correctly and that nothing has to change, the problem will not get better.

The reason why we need debate and challenge, both from Opposition members and from those on

the Government benches—I will come on to that when I mention other speakers—is that too many women and girls are still being assaulted, abused and killed in our country.

Paul McLennan: I do not disagree with that. The debate is about what we can do to try to move forward, and we have talked about that. I appreciate some of the points that have been raised, but there has to be a balance in the debate as we take it forward. As I mentioned, I think that the points were politicised far too much for this kind of debate—that was the point that I was trying to make. I agreed with some of the points that were raised and I did not agree with others, but I think that, in some cases, the balance was wrong for this debate. That is the point that I was making. Of course, I do not disagree on the point about the Government being held to account.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back for that, Mr Ross.

Douglas Ross: I just disagree with Paul McLennan. I did not hear anything from Tess White, Sharon Dowey or Pam Gosal that the Government has not heard before and that does not need to be said in a debate such as this one.

I will make a final point on the issue. This is now the fifth such debate of this session. When we came here in 2021, we all wanted the issue to be tackled and addressed and, while we have been here debating legislation, scrutinising the Government and asking questions, 39 women in Scotland have died due to violence by men. Thirty-nine lives—daughters, sisters, nieces and friends—have been lost. When 39 of our fellow Scots have died over that time, we cannot keep coming here year after year and saying that the Government is doing everything right. We must do more to prevent such deaths. Until we can come to this debate and say that not a single woman has died as a result of male violence, the challenge will not have been met. That is why it is important that we have this debate.

The cabinet secretary rightly focused on the digital sphere, given this year's theme of "No excuse for online abuse". I was also glad that she referenced the positive aspect of the digital community. As a representative of the Highlands and Islands, I know how important it is for some of our more remote and rural constituents that they have access to the same materials and support as people in more urban communities. The cabinet secretary pointed out how obvious it can sometimes be to pick up a leaflet rather than going online to get support, which could put people off. It is right that people have those opportunities.

Tess White mentioned the increase in the number of sexual assault cases. I did not want to interrupt Stuart McMillan, but he challenged that a

little by saying that it is a good thing, because it means that people are comfortable with reporting. I accept that, but, when the figures go back down again, the Government tends to say that that shows that things are working because sexual crimes are reducing. We cannot have Government members saying, on one hand, that it is good when more sexual crimes are reported, because that shows that people are more confident about reporting things, and, on the other, that things are clearly working when the opposite happens and the figures go back down again. Sexual assault is an area of concern.

Katy Clark was quite right—

Stuart McMillan: Will the member take an intervention?

Douglas Ross: I am sorry, but I have already taken one intervention.

Stuart McMillan: You mentioned me.

Douglas Ross: I know, but I want to try to get through everyone.

I think that Katy Clark was the only person in today's debate to mention mental health. We all look at the sometimes horrific physical abuse that women and girls suffer, but we must also consider the lingering mental illness and how it affects wellbeing. That stays with people for the rest of their lives, and it affects family members, too.

There were elements of both of Maggie Chapman's speeches that I disagreed with, but she was most compelling when she read out some of the abuse that she has suffered on social media. I was struck not only by the impact that that must have on her as an individual, but by what it says to women and girls who aspire to be in this Parliament. I am worried about the culture on social media and what it does to put off female candidates across the political spectrum. That was also mentioned by Marie McNair.

Alex Cole-Hamilton said that we must speak as one, and I think that we will at decision time tonight. Regardless of whether the Scottish Conservatives' amendment is agreed to, I think that we will speak as one voice when it comes to the motion. However, it is about more than words and coming to the chamber every year and speaking about these issues—we must see action as well.

Once again—I say this every time—Michelle Thomson gave an excellent speech. She said that men must be

“active allies and agents of change”,

and I think that every man in the chamber would agree with that. However, that is a message that we need to get across outside the chamber as

well, and Michelle Thomson made that point very well.

Pam Gosal rightly promoted her Prevention of Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill and raised the appalling domestic abuse statistics that we have seen. I am certainly a very strong supporter of her bill, and I hope that others will support it, too.

Rhoda Grant spoke about the survivors who have come to Parliament to give their testimony on prostitution and how not enough MSPs have heard from them. I agree, and I include myself in that. However, we have strong advocates, such as Rhoda Grant and Ash Regan, who provide a voice for those survivors by facilitating their coming to Parliament and by articulating their views in the chamber. That Rhoda Grant did so today, as well as providing information about what is happening internationally in France, Sweden and Ireland and how those countries have tackled prostitution—I hope that we can do the same here—was very helpful.

I will mention Stuart McMillan again, although I do not have time to take an intervention. It was helpful that he mentioned his CPA experience. The Government speaks in its motion about the local and national impact, but the CPA looks at the international impact—I think that he said that it does so every year. The South Africa example that he gave was very worthy of the debate.

Sharon Dowey spoke about the lack of a grooming gang inquiry. I will not reiterate all the points that the Scottish Conservatives have made about that, but it is now beyond doubt that the Scottish Government will have to launch a grooming gang inquiry. I am grateful that the Labour Party is facilitating a debate on the issue tomorrow. We are supposed to get an update by December, but we need to see action as a matter of urgency.

Likewise, Sharon Dowey was right to comment on the fact that the Government is still housing male prisoners in the female prison estate. That must stop, and I do not understand why the Government is going to court to allow that to continue when the Supreme Court ruling was so clear.

Claire Baker raised a local constituency issue very well, and she also spoke about the fact that 38 per cent of murders of women are by intimate partners. That is a statistic that we all know, but it terrifies me and every other MSP and legislator that the lives of people at their most vulnerable are ended by those whom they should trust most. That issue must be addressed, and we need to look at it.

Ash Regan urged people to support her bill. As someone who took my bill to a similar stage and did not quite get the Government's support, I know

that this will be a nervous stage for her, but she made very strong points in support of her bill. She also mentioned the fact that 15,000 sexual crimes were recorded in Scotland in 2024-25, which is the second-highest figure since 1971. Again, we cannot ignore the figures. There is an issue, and the fact that so many crimes are being recorded shows that we cannot assume that the Government is doing all the right things in that area.

Carol Mochan summed up the debate very well and presented us all with a challenge. If we as MSPs do not fully understand all the aspects of the root causes of violence against women and girls, how can we come up with the solutions? That summed up what we had all heard during the debate, and it challenged us—certainly, those who will return to the Parliament in the next session—to come up with the solutions that are needed.

Otherwise, the crime statistics that Ash Regan mentioned will continue to go up and the statistics that I mentioned to Paul McLennan on the number of women and girls whose lives are lost due to male violence will continue to be a cause for concern. We will not be able to address the issue and bring forward solutions until we understand the root causes.

This has been an excellent debate, which has been largely consensual—even if we cannot agree that it has been consensual, I think that we can all get behind the motion. However, we need more than words; we need actions to prevent such violence so that, when we have these debates in the future, we can celebrate the fact that we have eradicated male violence against women and girls. Until that day, our job will not be done.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Kaukab Stewart to wind up the debate. Minister, I would be grateful if you could take us up to just before 5 o'clock, please.

16:50

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart): Today's debate has been an important opportunity to discuss one of the most serious issues in society: violence against women in all its forms. I agree that the debate has been largely consensual. It has been significant in allowing us to reflect on the evolving nature of such abuse as a result of digital tools. From coercive control via devices to online stalking, cases of technology-facilitated sexual harassment and abuse are on the rise. It is important that we prevent and tackle the use of those new tools and approaches, so I echo the cabinet secretary's call for tech platforms to act to address violence against women and girls.

Only together can we make progress. The theme of the campaign that we have been talking about is unite. That means that everyone, including Governments, local authorities, stakeholders and individuals—women, girls, men and boys—needs to unite, because only by coming together can we deliver a safe online environment that women and girls can use and enjoy positively, without fear of and threat from others.

I will offer some reflections of my own, and then I will try to pick up as many of the points that have been raised as possible, although there have been far too many for me to name individuals.

When reflecting on online harms, I cannot reiterate enough that collective action is required. That brings to mind discussions that took place in the Parliament a year ago. Back then, we focused on how to empower young people's voices. I am also reminded that technology-facilitated violence against women and girls was one of the issues that was raised in the Scottish Youth Parliament debate a year ago. It is imperative that young people, to whom the use of technology is second nature, inform the actions that we need to take to make technology safer. It is vital that young people shape our approach, which is why we are co-creating with young people the public awareness campaign that the cabinet secretary mentioned.

I remain thoughtful of the representation of the Scottish Youth Parliament on the joint strategic board that helps with the delivery of our equally safe strategy, which is chaired jointly by the Scottish Government and COSLA. The voices of that Parliament remain essential to ensuring that our collective efforts reflect the needs and aspirations of young people.

It is equally vital that we understand that online abuse is connected to other forms of violence against women. The victim or survivor who experiences technology-facilitated coercive control, sexual harassment or stalking will also experience those things in the physical world. We move between digital and physical spaces seamlessly, and harm that is committed online is felt in the real world, so it is important that we do not invent some artificial divide between the two.

Tess White: One of the themes today—it was raised during topical question time and in speeches during this debate—is FGM. The issue was also highlighted by Rebecca McCurdy in *The Herald* yesterday. Will the minister find out how many women in Scotland have been treated for FGM?

Kaukab Stewart: If that data is available, I will be happy to do that.

Violence against women in the digital and physical worlds is a cause and a consequence of a gender inequality that is driven by societal and structural barriers across different sectors, many of which have been mentioned today. We must therefore renew our efforts to tackle that root cause. In the light of that, I was delighted that the cabinet secretary was able to highlight the public awareness campaign that we are developing to address the issue. It is significant that the Government is seeking to address online abuse and is using its online platforms to promote its positive messages.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Another thing that requires an urgent public awareness campaign, particularly at this time of year, is the danger of drink spiking. Would the minister speak to that?

Kaukab Stewart: I will come back to spiking after I reflect on the contributions that have been made by colleagues in the chamber.

I can confirm to Katy Clark our support for the proposals from Rape Crisis Scotland and the Faculty of Advocates that will deliver free access to independent legal advice to complainers in cases of rape and attempted rape. When it is desired, a three-year pilot will provide access to an experienced court practitioner who will assist complainers in giving their evidence and better understanding their existing rights. That pilot will be delivered by the expert Emma Ritch law clinic at the University of Glasgow.

Maggie Chapman called for us all to be mindful of, and to reflect on, our own behaviours when we use social media platforms, because we are providing leadership in how we treat each other. We must and should do better.

Alex Cole-Hamilton asked for an update on tackling domestic abuse. The Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Act 2025 will put victims and witnesses at the heart of a modern and fair society. We are engaging with justice bodies and stakeholders across the sector on the implementation of the act, and it will be phased in to deliver reform in a managed way that does not disrupt the operation of the system.

Siobhian Brown has written to all members today with an update on spiking, which I hope is helpful.

Michelle Thomson raised many points that were raised in the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland report, which is referenced in the equally safe strategy. Work is on-going to engage men and boys, and, as was mentioned earlier, the Scottish Government is undertaking a co-created campaign to ensure that men and boys are seen more as being integral to the solution than as being just part of the problem.

The Scottish Government will support the Scottish Women's Aid #ForThemAll vigil on 5 December, which is held annually in honour of women and children who have been killed by abusive men as well as women who have lost their lives to suicide that stemmed from their experiences of abuse. I know that my colleagues in the Cabinet and across the chamber will attend many events to highlight that important time and to hold those women and girls in our memory.

I share Marie McNair's concerns about the new risks of tech-based violence, and I echo her calls for us to unite in tackling it.

Rhoda Grant mentioned Ash Regan's Prostitution (Offences and Support) (Scotland) Bill. As we do for all members' bills, we will give that bill full and careful consideration. Members will be aware that the Criminal Justice Committee's scrutiny of the bill at stage 1 is under way, and the Minister for Victims and Community Safety gave evidence last month. The Scottish Government has confirmed that we strongly support the principle of legislating to criminalise those who purchase sex. That position aligns with our equally safe strategy, which states clearly that prostitution is a form of violence against women and girls. The Scottish Government currently retains a neutral stance on the bill ahead of the Parliament's continued scrutiny of the proposals in it.

Stuart McMillan rightly talked about tackling misogyny and referenced the good work of the equally safe strategy. A public awareness campaign is currently being developed, and it will be launched in February 2026.

I knew that I would end up running out of time, but I will just take a couple of seconds to finish.

I welcome and share the ambition to eliminate violence against women and girls that I have heard in members' speeches today. It is a tribute to the Parliament that we can all join together in solidarity as we continue to make progress. We must all work together, as the theme of Scotland's 16 days campaign highlights. I therefore call on all those in the chamber to renew their commitment, not just during the 16 days but every single day.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): That concludes the debate on uniting local and national efforts across sectors to end violence against women and girls.

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is decision time. There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S6M-19970.2, in the name of Tess White, which seeks to amend motion S6M-19970, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on uniting local and national efforts across sectors to end violence against women and girls, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:02

Meeting suspended.

17:05

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on amendment S6M-19970.2, in the name of Tess White, which seeks to amend motion S6M-19970, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on uniting local and national efforts across sectors to end violence against women and girls. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Ind)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Ind)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 White, Tess (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Gougeon, Mairi (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (LD)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Ross Greer]
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 Matheson, Michael (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Fulton MacGregor]
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)

Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Whitham, Elena (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Ind)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rowley, Alex (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Russell, Davy (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division is: For 31, Against 71, Abstentions 21.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-19970, in the name of Shirley-Anne Somerville, on uniting local and national efforts across sectors to end violence against women and girls, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament unites in its commitment to 2025's 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign; warns that digital violence is the fastest growing form of abuse against women and girls worldwide; highlights the UN Women campaign, "UNiTE to End Digital Violence against All Women and Girls", which reminds everyone that digital safety is central to gender equality; recognises that protecting women and girls online will take concerted societal action from all spheres of government, tech companies, organisations, institutions and individuals, and commits to strengthening efforts to prevent violence against women and girls across all sectors and in all its forms.

The Presiding Officer: That ends decision time.

International Day of Persons with Disabilities

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-19557, in the name of Pam Duncan-Glancy, on the international day of persons with disabilities. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises 3 December 2025 as the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, which is a day that has been established by the UN to promote the rights and wellbeing of disabled people in all aspects of life; acknowledges that this year's theme is 'Fostering disability inclusive societies for advancing social progress', which highlights that, when societies remove barriers and create equal opportunities, everyone benefits; commends the contributions that disabled people make to Scotland's communities, economy, culture and public life; recognises the continuing barriers that they face, including in employment, education, transport and access to public services; supports the work of disabled people's organisations, advocacy groups and charities across Scotland that campaign for equality and human rights, and notes the Parliament's commitment to building a fairer, more inclusive Scotland, in which everyone can participate fully and thrive, including through events such as the upcoming Disability Summit, which is set to take place at the Parliament, and online, on 21 February 2026.

17:08

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I am honoured to open this members' business debate, which provides an opportunity for members to come together to mark the international day of disabled people, which takes place tomorrow, 3 December. I welcome members' support for the motion and I look forward to hearing all the contributions.

The international day of disabled people is a global day of observance that was first proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1992 to promote the rights and wellbeing of disabled people across all aspects of life. Since then, significant progress has been made, with many countries bringing positive changes through laws, policies and actions in numerous areas, including accessibility in public spaces, public transport and buildings; enhanced digital accessibility; inclusive education and workplace practices; and greater representation of disabled people in public life—including among legislators—recognising that there should be nothing about disabled people without disabled people.

On that last point, I should say that, while I may be the first permanent wheelchair user elected to this place, it is incumbent on me and on us all to ensure that I am not the last. One way in which we in the chamber can ensure that is to empower the

next generation of disabled people and—as the theme for this year’s international day says—to foster disability-inclusive societies for advancing social progress.

In our own way, in the chamber and in Scotland, we have advanced social progress during the current session of Parliament. One way in which we have done that is that, for the first time ever, the Presiding Officer, on behalf of Parliament, hosted a summit for disabled people to mark international day. I thank her for that leadership.

Today, our Parliament has announced that we will do that again, this time with a future focus. Next year’s summit will provide an opportunity for disabled people to set out what action they want to be taken in the next session of Parliament. The summit will be held on 21 February and, in order to keep it future focused, while a group of cross-party MSPs will co-chair each session, those sessions will be jointly co-chaired with young disabled people from across Scotland—young leaders who do incredible work.

Those young people have joined us tonight in the public gallery. To them, I say this: I welcome you to your Parliament. When I was your age, the idea that this place could be for people like us felt like a pipe dream, yet here I am—here we are. This place is for you; this place is for people like us.

However, while there is much to celebrate—and celebrate we will—there is much still to do. Significant challenges remain. Tens of thousands of people continue to face barriers across every aspect of life—in employment, education, transport and access to public services.

In 2024, only 51 per cent of disabled people—that is just over half—were in employment, in comparison with 83 per cent of non-disabled people. Being locked out of work does not happen overnight; it is the consequence of being presented with systemic barriers over a lifetime. While some disabled people are unable to work, we know that, with the right support and structures in place, many can thrive in—and want to be in—the workplace and can contribute significantly to Scotland, our communities and our economy.

Glasgow Centre for Inclusive Living’s equality academy is an incredible example of helping to make that happen. The organisation, which is in my region of Glasgow, runs an internship programme that provides placements for disabled graduates, mainly in the national health service in Scotland. The programme supports disabled people to unlock their potential and has an 88 per cent success rate for getting people into employment. I challenge anyone in government to show us a programme that replicates that level of

success, and I would welcome to Glasgow any member who wants to see it in action.

The employment gap must close, but in order for that to happen, we need action not only in employability but in other areas such as education. While many people, including me, support the presumption of mainstreaming, the reality is that the policy is not being implemented as intended, and that is leaving young people in school without the support that they need. We cannot let that go on—we must restore support, and thus restore faith, in mainstream provision to deliver the ambition of inclusion in deeds, not just in words.

There are also barriers in getting to work or school, or indeed anywhere at all. For so many disabled people, that can be really difficult. Glasgow’s subway, for example, remains largely inaccessible. My husband and I cannot travel together by bus, because most services accommodate only one wheelchair, which I think could be a bit of a policy choice rather than a design choice, given the contrast with some other countries, where more than one person in a wheelchair can travel. When disabled people try to use accessible taxis to get around, we face long waits because there are very few taxis available, as a result of some policy decisions that can make it difficult for taxi drivers to remain in business. Many buildings remain inaccessible and—worryingly—some accessible toilets are still frequently kept locked to the public, leaving disabled people having to find someone and ask permission to use the toilet.

As we know, thousands of disabled people are stuck on social care and NHS waiting lists. That includes those with arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions, which affect around 1.7 million people in Scotland. Those conditions are among the biggest causes of persistent pain, disability and working days lost, and will remain so over the next 20 years, yet essential forms of healthcare such as hip and knee replacements account for nearly a third of all waits for planned operations, and there is no discernible plan that is dedicated to addressing this. The cross-party group on arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions is working hard to address that.

It is clear that there is still a long way to go to ensure that disabled people are able to realise our human rights, but—I say to you, Presiding Officer; to colleagues; and to friends and visitors in the gallery—that I have hope, for three reasons. First, I have hope because there are the disabled people’s organisations, advocacy groups and charities across Scotland that campaign for equality and human rights. I say to them: thank you—the impact of your work cannot be overestimated.

I will take a moment to mention a giant of that movement, Etienne d'Aboville, whom we lost in October. Etienne was a force of nature: a passionate and diligent campaigner who changed my life and that of thousands of others. I, and many others, miss him.

Secondly, I have hope because there are incredible disabled people in Scotland, who are innovative by design—for some, even just getting out of bed needs innovation. It will be that innovation that delivers our emancipation.

Lastly, I have hope because—as this year's theme highlights—when societies work together and remove barriers and create equal opportunities, everyone benefits. That is demonstrated by the tremendous contribution that disabled people make to Scotland—to our communities, our economy, our culture and our public life, every day—and it is embodied in the work that they do.

For that, and because I believe that we all feel the weight of responsibility to leave the world a better place, I believe that we can, and will, advance social progress for disabled people, together.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate.

17:16

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I congratulate Pam Duncan-Glancy on securing this members' business debate to mark the international day of persons with disabilities. This year's theme is fostering disability-inclusive societies for advancing social progress. That theme recognises something very simple: that, when we remove barriers and create equal opportunities, we do not just help disabled people—we strengthen our whole society.

For me, that is not abstract. I grew up as a child of a deaf adult—a CODA—and, from a very young age, I was painfully aware that the world was not set up for people like my dad, who is deaf. I watched bank staff, officials and people in professional positions speak over him and treat him as if he was a child without capacity, simply because he could not hear. Decisions were made around him instead of with him. That was not about his abilities; it was about other people's assumptions and ignorance, and it was degrading.

Now, as a mum of neurodivergent children with additional support needs, I see those patterns in different ways. My children, like so many others, have too often been treated as problems to be fixed—as disruptors in classrooms that were never designed with them in mind in the first place. Children know when they are seen as an

inconvenience, and they sense that they do not belong in the very place where they should feel the safest. That does real harm to their confidence, their wellbeing and their education.

The motion before us recognises those everyday exclusions. It acknowledges that disabled people still face

“barriers ... in employment, education, transport and access to public services”

and it rightly commends disabled people's contributions to our communities, our economy, our culture and our public life. That contribution is immense, but too often it is made in spite of, not because of, the system.

As a constituency MSP, and as convener of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, I hear time and again that our world is still not fit for purpose for many disabled people. We have a society in which some of the best players are left on the bench, not because they lack talent but because the game is set at hard mode for disabled people. As the Scottish Human Rights Commission has reminded us, human rights need to be built into the way in which we design services from the very start, not patched on at the end when the damage is already done.

I thank Pam Duncan-Glancy for using her voice and her lived experience to challenge exclusionary structures and for bringing the motion to the chamber. I also thank the disabled people's organisations, advocacy groups and charities across Scotland that fight, every single day, for equality and human rights, often while navigating the very barriers that they are campaigning to remove.

My hope, and my commitment, is for a Scotland where everyone can take part, whatever taking part means for them. For some, like Pam, that will be taking part in employment, politics or public life. For others, it will be living independently, travelling safely, learning in a classroom where they are understood and feel welcome or simply being part of their local community without facing a wall of barriers. All those things are equal and valid ambitions.

To my disabled constituents, and to disabled people across Scotland, I say this: you are not the problem. The problem is a world that has been built without you in mind. Let this international day of persons with disabilities be not just a date in our diary but a call to action that we answer with real, lasting, practical change.

17:20

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am pleased to speak in the debate, and I

thank Pam Duncan-Glancy for bringing this important issue to the chamber.

The international day of persons with disabilities reminds us of our collective responsibility to uphold the rights, dignity and wellbeing of disabled people across all areas of life and all aspects of society. It is important that Parliament acknowledges this day, and I congratulate Pam Duncan-Glancy and the societies, groups and organisations that all play a part.

I welcome the UN's chosen theme for this year, which is fostering disability-inclusive societies for advancing social progress. That theme reflects a simple truth, which is that the whole of society benefits when we support disabled people to thrive by removing barriers and widening access for them.

When I engage with organisations in my region, including employment services and third sector groups, it is clear just how much those organisations, and individuals with disabilities in the area, contribute to the communities that they work in every day and ensure that those communities thrive.

Pam Duncan-Glancy's motion rightly speaks about some of the challenges that disabled people continue to face. Those challenges include barriers to accessing education, securing stable employment and accessing public services, which remains difficult for disabled people.

Of all those challenges, employment remains one of the most significant. From 2013 to 2019, we saw positive change on that issue, and the proportion of disabled people in employment increased from 43 to 54 per cent. Despite some progress, however, we know that the disability employment gap remains stubbornly high. Recent figures have shown that the disability employment rate is 53.1 per cent, which is nearly 30 percentage points lower than the rate for those who are non-disabled. We also know that employment rates for disabled people fell during the pandemic, and that, overall, the proportion of disabled people in employment has not increased since 2019.

While we recognise the progress, there is a lot of work to do. We have to ensure that much more work is done. For example, we need to ensure that workplaces are genuinely inclusive, that disabled people have access to the correct support and that employers are able to make any necessary adjustments to enable them to work.

The previous United Kingdom Government doubled spending on the access to work programme between 2016 and 2024, and that provision helped to deliver employment support for more than 67,000 individuals in 2023-24. As we go forward, it is important that there is a continued

commitment to supporting disabled people to seek work where possible, so that further progress can be achieved.

Inclusion should be not just an aspiration but an essential part of a fairer Scotland, which we all want to see. It is therefore important that we ask the Scottish Government to continue to engage constructively with Parliament's forthcoming disability summit. I look forward to seeing what can be achieved from that.

The United Kingdom Government also has a key role to play in the process, as most aspects of equalities and employment law are still reserved matters. We must ensure that UK-wide disability rights legislation remains robust and effective and that Governments work together to make employment practices more inclusive. Disabled people deserve a system that works for them across all parts of the United Kingdom and at all levels of government.

In conclusion, I hope that members on all sides of the chamber can work together to make that vision a reality, because disabled people want nothing more than for the Parliament to work with them to achieve the goals that they rightfully deserve to reach.

17:24

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank my colleague, Pam Duncan-Glancy, for bringing this important debate to the chamber. I am delighted that I will be joining the Parliament's 2026 disability summit, which is mentioned in the motion; I am looking forward to working with the young people who will be co-chairing the sessions.

I will, if I may, start by talking a little bit about my colleague, Pam Duncan-Glancy, who is an inspiration not only to me, but, I know, to many others in the chamber. My colleague, who is sitting beside me, has worked tirelessly throughout her career on this cause, and I know that she will continue to fight for the rights and wellbeing of disabled people.

If there is one thing that I have learned about Pam Duncan-Glancy, it is that she has plenty of fight. She and others, such as Karen Adam's father, have faced challenges and barriers that I cannot even imagine. She has shared those experiences with us in the chamber, and across the community, to ensure that the voices of many disabled people can be heard. She is generous with her time on these issues and shows great determination to change the trajectory for every disabled person that she can.

Over my five years in Parliament, I have realised that Pam Duncan-Glancy is a great ally and wonderful friend. She is also very funny and—

I probably should not say this, Deputy Presiding Officer—we have had very many laughs and funny moments just sitting here in the chamber beside each other.

However, I want to make the point that Pam Duncan-Glancy is a very able parliamentarian. If we can bring more people with her experiences and background to Parliament, to professional jobs and to a whole variety of workplaces, we will have a far healthier and happier economy and society, and much better public service provision. I say that not just to talk up my friend, but to say to society that if we can make changes, we will all benefit. Disabled people should be our friends, neighbours and work colleagues. That would benefit us all.

Despite knowing how valuable disabled people are to our society, however, we know that the true picture—as we heard from Alexander Stewart—is that they face restrictions and their opportunities are often taken away. The employment rate for disabled people has been consistently lower than the rate for non-disabled people. People who are recorded as having additional support needs are less likely to achieve the qualifications that they should, and when they leave school, they are less likely to have a positive destination. We know that poverty rates remain much higher among households where someone has a disability. That is unacceptable, and we must continue to fight it.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated that if someone has a disability, the inequalities that they face are more likely to be exacerbated. People with disabilities have the right to work and to be part of our society, and it is incumbent on Government to ensure that the world of work is a welcoming and suitably adjusted environment. The Equality Act 2010 offers disabled people a lot of protection from workplace discrimination, but in order to ensure that that protection is realised, the Government must take the issue seriously. I am sure that we will hear the Minister for Equalities, in her closing remarks, speak about how we must continue to push to ensure that the 2010 act is complied with.

We must allocate resources and ensure that education and workplace projects are properly funded. We need to see much better representation of disabled people across society: in our media, our public services and our representative bodies. I hope that, as a result, other people will have the great privilege of meeting great work colleagues and friends, just like we in Parliament have in Pam Duncan-Glancy.

17:28

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I am grateful to Pam Duncan-Glancy for

securing the debate. It is only right that we recognise in our Parliament the international day of persons with disabilities.

I will focus on social security, as it has the power to foster an inclusive society, or to marginalise and exclude. The devolution of powers over disability benefits promised one of the most important developments in the rights of disabled people in the history of the Parliament. After years of cuts and austerity, years of successive UK Governments stigmatising disabled people who require support, and years of policies being forced through despite disabled people's concerns, the Parliament finally had the opportunity to do things differently and to show compassion, care and respect to disabled people.

Respect is especially important—it is part of Social Security's Scotland strapline, "dignity, fairness and respect". However, three years into the new system, I am not sure that we are fully delivering on that promise. After a promising start, we have seen huge falls in the success rates of those applying for adult disability payment. A total of 54 per cent—more than half—of those who have applied for ADP have been rejected, with the figure for the most recent financial year rising to 63 per cent. The rejection rate is now worse than it was for the personal independence payment. That is not just my analysis—the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the Scottish Fiscal Commission and the independent review of ADP all say the same.

What about the ambition to get decisions right first time? In ADP's short history, almost 60,000 people have asked for a second opinion on their decision. It is positive that, in about half of those cases, Social Security Scotland has admitted that it was wrong and has changed the decision—that is a higher rate of changes than elsewhere. However, some people have to go to court to get what they are owed. More than half of all claimants who go through the stress of appealing to the tribunal win their cases, having already gone through an internal review and been rejected for a second time. Too often, Social Security Scotland is not getting it right the first time or the second time. Instead, it is being forced by the courts to do the right thing and pay up. That is not dignified for disabled people, nor is it fair or respectful.

Looking across the statistics, almost every measure is going in the wrong direction. There are more rejections, more appeals and fewer people getting the highest rates. What is going on? If there has been a deliberate shift in assessment practice, we need to know, and the Scottish Government must be held accountable. I ask the minister to address those concerns in closing, if she can.

The independent review of ADP has now reported, making a range of helpful recommendations, such as scrapping the 20m rule that it inherited from PIP, which deliberately makes it harder for people with mobility needs to get support. The review also suggested a more automated system, in which people with particular conditions can access benefits without making a full application. Having a social care package, receiving money from the independent living fund or having a blue badge could all confer automatic eligibility. That approach is not just theoretical. After a trial by Transport Scotland, blue badges are now subject to a streamlined process for those with motor neurone disease, using a sign-off from an MND nurse, so it can be done.

Data also shows that ADP uptake among black and minority ethnic communities is lower than average. Why is that, and what do we need to do to change it to make the system genuinely fair for everyone?

When the Scottish Government responds to the review, I hope that it grasps the opportunity to right the wrongs that are faced by too many disabled people in this country. I hope that next year, when we again recognise this important day, we will have a better story to tell.

17:32

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Ind): Like others, I congratulate Pam Duncan-Glancy on securing the debate. I also thank her for highlighting the summit that will take place in February. It was a pleasure this afternoon to meet some of the young people who are in the gallery, and I am sure that the day will be a success.

I found Pam Duncan-Glancy's speech quite uplifting. Perhaps it will be the other side of the coin to what I want to say tonight, because, although this Parliament often talks about disability and accessibility, the reality is that, often, there are warm words but very little action coming out of those discussions.

Let us look at what the political parties are doing, or are not doing, on issues affecting disabled people. One party is not even here to speak in the debate, so I will turn to the Scottish National Party, which forms the Scottish Government. It has done almost nothing to deal with the disability employment gap. We hear lots of warm words about how we need to close the gap—we have heard that from speakers already tonight—but we know that the figure has not moved at all. We must ask the Scottish Government and the UK Government what they are doing to close the gap, rather than talking about it.

The Scottish Government has dragged its feet on the changing places toilets fund. It has taken almost the full session of Parliament for that fund to come forward. Last week, I held a meeting with about 15 disability charities and asked them what one thing they would like to happen. The answer was that they want to see the Government deliver a manifesto commitment, because it still has not abolished non-residential social care charges. I ask the minister: will that happen before this session of Parliament comes to an end in the spring of next year, or was the commitment simply words on a bit of paper?

To Scottish Labour members, I say gently—or maybe not so gently—that they need to speak to their colleagues down south. We all know that the health element of universal credit is still in the pipeline and that it will make life harder for disabled people. It is easy to come up with something that will make for a cheap headline, as Labour did last week in relation to the motability scheme in a move that saved not one penny of taxpayers' money but was simply designed to mimic Reform policies.

I say to my former colleagues on the left of me—their position in the chamber is the only thing about them that is to the left of me—that they should look at their website. The last time that it was updated with anything on social security was in September 2021. That is how seriously the Scottish Conservatives take social security. From my time in the party, I can say that they have no real understanding of how social security works, and they have no policies coming forward for disabled people.

My final point is that, earlier this year, this Parliament chose to deny disabled people the champion that they deserve. A disability commissioner would have helped to reverse decades of neglect, and it would have driven meaningful change—change that would have transformed the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our society. However, this Parliament decided that a disability commissioner was one commissioner too many—a decision that was made just weeks after passing legislation to create a commissioner for victims and witnesses.

That decision captures the attitude that I think exists across the chamber. Parties are very good at talking the talk, but when it comes to action, disabled people are too often sidelined in favour of other priorities. I do not think that that is good enough. Disabled people deserve better.

Although I welcome the Parliament's marking the international day of persons with disabilities, I am afraid that it rings hollow with many disabled people while parties continue to ignore us and ignore the chance to bring about real change in our society.

17:37

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I congratulate Pam Duncan-Glancy on securing this debate. To put it mildly, she knows far more than I do of the difficulties of those with physical disabilities, although she never lets her circumstances impinge on her contributions. She is clever, articulate and a fearsome parliamentary adversary—but enough of that praise.

Disabilities take many forms. We had a debate last week on Tourette syndrome, which is a much misunderstood disability. We have had members with hearing impairments and we had Dennis Robertson, who was blind. This place of work has tried to provide facilities to suit those individual needs, but, even here, the arrangements for accessing spaces in a wheelchair or, in my case, a mobility scooter needs improvement. People cannot travel from the public area to the garden lobby without accompaniment and the use of a lift. Doors have to be held open by someone else and the lift is small and hidden. I have to say, however, that I have followed Pam Duncan-Glancy, who has exposed hidden accessible routes, which I now use.

I say “now” because, until fairly recently, I would not admit to being in a minor way disabled. My disability is minor, but it has opened my eyes to what others have had to accept in how they access places and transport. Some people have been kind, some experiences have been annoying and some experiences have been, frankly, hilarious—at least, that was the best way to react. My mobility scooter is now regularly seen as I navigate the Parliament. However, in a world in which a mobile phone has to be scanned all the time, I find myself having to shout all the time to clear a pathway, because my horn is sadly pathetic.

Recently, when I was out with my walking stick, I found that I had to step aside to let others pass, not the other way round, even though, as is the case for others, pain is always my unwelcome companion. That lack of consideration makes me angry.

I will talk about annoyances, such as having to rely on others to, for example, simply pass through entrances. Doors here and elsewhere in public areas should open easily and comfortably for those with mobility aids. Lift doors should be timed to stay open long enough to allow people with mobility issues to enter safely. Able-bodied folk filling lifts when there is no need for them to do so, leaving disabled people to wait, is simply wrong.

The experience of being an assisted passenger at railways and airports is also annoying. Waverley station is a mixed bag. On one occasion, my

assistance, which had been booked, did not make an appearance, but I managed to capture a member of staff to help me to my distant carriage. Edinburgh airport has an assisted passenger desk, but that is well away from the entrance, so people have to struggle to it before they are allocated the most basic sort of wheelchair, which feels as if it and its user will part company quite easily. At the gates, the assisted passenger must wait conspicuously with others for their rickety transport to be placed on a lorry-like platform, which raises them up like a wheelie bin on to an even more rickety vehicle, which then deposits them on the plane.

At the end of the flight, they are, of course, the last to come off. At Halifax airport in Nova Scotia, I was offloaded and abandoned for some time, waiting for some poor soul to locate me and deposit me at customs. It is all a bit rough and ready and undignified, unless one is prepared to see the funny side of it. My walking stick was suspiciously and scrupulously examined at customs in Canada on account of its having a place for a light at the end. The whole shebang took so long that my poor family—complete with “Welcome, Granny Scotland” banners—had to wait 45 minutes before I appeared, now with walking stick, to an all-but-empty airport foyer.

However, there are kind people who offer help, even if someone is trying to do something for themselves, such as getting luggage on to the rack. On balance, in my case, such actions have, so far, outweighed the lack of consideration.

On accessibility, improvement is much needed, because, all too often, there are only stairs, which means that there is no access at all.

I thank the member for securing this debate. There are, of course, far more serious obstacles than those that I have met, but even having this recent but permanent taste of what is involved in simply getting from here to there while maintaining one's dignity and, importantly, one's individuality has been a lesson for this politician, and I am still learning.

17:42

The Minister for Equalities (Kaukab Stewart):

I thank all members for their thoughtful contributions. I pay tribute to Pam Duncan-Glancy for lodging this important motion, which shows our shared commitment to equality and inclusion. I will try to refer to as many points as possible, but, as usual, there has been a wide variety of comments. If there is anything that I do not mention, I am quite happy for people to follow that up with me.

I will also take a moment to acknowledge the loss of two remarkable individuals. Etienne D'Abolville has been mentioned and remembered

by Pam Duncan-Glancy, and I would also like to pay tribute to Alan Dick. Both were powerful and dedicated advocates for independent living and tireless champions of disabled people's rights. We honour their legacy and, of course, I extend our condolences to all who knew and loved them. They give us a reason to keep going. They fought, and I see that Pam Duncan-Glancy is carrying on that fight.

Pam Duncan-Glancy spoke of her accomplishment in being the first permanent wheelchair user to be elected to the Scottish Parliament, and I know that she will make sure that she is not the last. From a personal point of view, speaking as the first woman of colour to be elected to the Parliament, I can say the same. We are not the ones who will pull up the ladder behind us—in fact, I would say that we would both get rid of the need for that ladder in the first place.

In the meantime, I will highlight the access to elected office fund, which opened again on 6 May. Having originally started as a pilot in 2017, it provides practical and financial support and is now on a statutory footing, following the Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Act 2025. Of course, it goes without saying that the fund does not help with any political messaging; it just provides practical support. So far, the fund has helped more than 100 disabled candidates who have stood for election.

Comments were made on fair work, and our ambition is to at least halve the disability employment gap by 2038. The estimated disability employment rate gap has decreased, from 37.4 per cent between January and December 2016 to 31.5 per cent between January and December 2024, according to Office for National Statistics records. Clearly, that figure is still too high, and there are challenges there that we will address, but we are making progress in that area.

Accessible transport was also mentioned. The vision is that disabled people will be able to travel with the same freedom, choice, dignity and opportunity as other citizens. Launched in 2016, the 10-year accessible travel framework was co-produced with disabled people. The 2024 to 2026 delivery plan covers delivery for the final two years of that framework, and work on that is progressing. There are regular consultations with representatives from disabled people's organisations, to hear about what more can be done.

I was very pleased to launch the pilot to provide concessionary travel on public transport for companions of those who are blind and visually impaired. That was a further achievement.

Since, in 1992, the UN designated 3 December, which is tomorrow, as international day of persons

with disabilities, the aim has been clear—to champion the rights of disabled people and to ensure their full participation in every aspect of life. However, we know that barriers remain in education, employment, transport and public services, leaving too many at risk of poverty and exclusion.

I hear the points that were made by Jeremy Balfour. Although I understand and share his concerns about not moving fast enough, I do not completely agree with the narrative that he painted. I engage fully with disabled people's organisations, and I launched the improving access fund, with a significant contribution of £1.5 million. That was very warmly welcomed by disabled people's organisations, because it provides practical help that will assist people in their daily lives.

This year's theme—fostering disability-inclusive societies for advancing social progress—means that equality is not optional. We know that it is essential to tackling poverty and building a fairer Scotland. Participation is the foundation of progress. We want to make sure that the disability equality plan, which was co-designed, has a focus on three priorities: strengthening financial security, bolstering inclusive participation, and improving mental health and wellbeing.

I am mindful of the time, so I will finish by saying that we are also embedding disability competence across Government, so that policies are not only designed for disabled people but shaped with them, making inclusion a starting point.

A fairer Scotland is possible only when equal rights are secured for everyone. That requires more than this debate; it requires more than good intentions—I know that. It also demands action, determination and a shared responsibility. Together, we will continue to dismantle the barriers and build a Scotland where equality is lived and not just imagined.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, minister. That concludes the debate.

Meeting closed at 17:49.

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