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Scottish Parliament

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

Portfolio Question Time

Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands

Fly-tipping in Rural Areas

1. Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

To ask the Scottish Government, regarding any impact on agriculture, what discussions the rural affairs secretary has had with ministerial colleagues regarding how to protect rural areas against fly-tipping. (S6O-05291)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I am very glad that Liz Smith has brought up that issue, because it is really important. The Government recognises the impact of fly-tipping on rural areas and understands the pressure that it places on farmers. We are strengthening enforcement and support in rural communities through the national litter and fly-tipping strategy. That includes work by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency with local authorities to improve investigations and develop guidance for landowners on relevant powers. A private landowners grant fund supported the prevention and removal of fly-tipping in the first two years of the strategy, and a year 2 evaluation will be published shortly. The Scottish Partnership Against Rural Crime and other partners are contributing through the strategy group.

Liz Smith: The minister has been in the same meetings that I have sat through, in which farmers, in particular, have made their strong case that fly-tipping is creating considerable difficulties for their businesses and productivity. I suspect that Mr Fairlie knows exactly the areas in Perth and Kinross that I am talking about. Sadly, he will also know that Perth and Kinross Council and Fife Council are in the 10 worst areas when it comes to fly-tipping.

I hear what the minister has just said about the measures that are in place. However, are he and his ministerial colleagues convinced that, when people know who is undertaking the fly-tipping, enough is being done to ensure that those persons are apprehended and properly dealt with?

Jim Fairlie: Because of the rurality of the crime, it is incredibly difficult to get on top of it. We have the national fly-tipping strategy; we also have to get better data, as data is critical. Work is already under way to strengthen national fly-tipping data

and improve intelligence through digital waste tracking and the new reporting powers that are in the relevant act. Tackling fly-tipping supports wider priorities, including rural crime prevention, waste crime, environmental protection and community safety. The Government is definitely taking it very seriously.

“Repopulating Rural Scotland”

2. Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the Scottish Land & Estates report “Repopulating Rural Scotland”, including how the recommendations align with its current strategies to address rural depopulation. (S6O-05292)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): The Government recognises the challenge of depopulation and is committed to working closely with partners to address it, with evidence highlighting that local communities are best placed to respond to their own distinct challenges. We are, therefore, currently funding seven councils to deliver pathfinder projects that address population decline, many of which align with some of the key areas that were highlighted by Scottish Land & Estates in its report. Building on that, ministers will shortly consider options for a second phase and, where resource allows, expand delivery across a wider range of partners. We have also launched a non-statutory rural assessment toolkit to recognise the unique characteristics, challenges and opportunities of rural areas. In addition, population retention and attraction is the overarching objective of our new national islands plan.

Michelle Thomson: At the round-table discussion of the report, we agreed that a focus on rurality and the needs of rural people encompass many different directors and supporting committees; however, from the work in my various committees, I am aware that that does not always happen in practice. As the cabinet secretary has pointed out, and as the report said, clear accountability is needed and the monitoring of any initiatives needs to be carefully done. How will the Scottish Government measure the success of its rural repopulation policies across all portfolios?

Mairi Gougeon: Michelle Thomson has raised important points. The ministerial population task force meets quarterly. At that group, we agree cross-portfolio action around our population programme, which includes the work that we are doing to address depopulation.

In line with evidence, our response is ultimately led by local priorities and local communities. That is why interventions across multiple portfolios, such as when we consider housing, childcare and skills, are being delivered by affected councils.

We have established tailored monitoring and evaluation approaches with each of the delivery partners, to ensure that we can measure the initial outcomes that have been achieved. We are undertaking an interim evaluation that covers the first full year of delivery. We will then consider the outcomes of that review as we look forward to phase 2.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The cabinet secretary did not mention transport, but the report referenced “patchy” and “inadequate” transport having an effect on depopulation. That is certainly something that communities that are reliant on the Corran ferry will recognise, with both vessels currently out of service. This morning, I was contacted by an angry constituent who said that the area was struggling, with supplies and services affected. They also raised concerns that care support for the elderly is being affected by carers who rely on the ferry.

Will the cabinet secretary raise that issue with her Cabinet colleagues and her Scottish National Party colleagues on Highland Council and press them to reconsider the costly electric ferry option and ask them to look again at a replacement conventional ferry?

Mairi Gougeon: I recognise how important our basic infrastructure is when it comes to the retention of populations in rural areas and in island communities. I just listed some areas. Housing is another area of critical infrastructure—

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Transport?

Mairi Gougeon: —but I recognise that transport is, too, as I have highlighted previously to the member.

I am happy to raise the points that the member has mentioned today with my Cabinet colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Transport and to issue a further response to him.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Michelle Thomson mentioned cross-portfolio working. Repopulation is really important, including for Dumfries and Galloway. Will the Government maintain its commitment to that work after May 2026?

Mairi Gougeon: It is not for me to commit a future Government to the policies that could be introduced, but this Government absolutely recognises the importance of the work that we are progressing at a ministerial level through the population task force. We have undertaken a number of projects, as I outlined in my response to Michelle Thomson. We want to keep the momentum going. We will evaluate what has worked and what has not, so that we can continue to tackle those problems.

Public Access Rights

3. Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I apologise to the chamber for needing to leave before the end of this session of question time.

To ask the Scottish Government what progress has been made to update national guidance for local authorities on their responsibilities to uphold public access rights. (S6O-05293)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): I recognise the importance of the guidance to access authorities in part 1 of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003. That key document outlines their roles and responsibilities. I acknowledge that it has been some time since that guidance was last updated, which is why, during the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill stage 3 debate on 28 October this year, I undertook—in response to, I think, amendments from Mark Ruskell—to discuss the process for updating it with those interested members of the Scottish Parliament.

Officials will need to properly consider the process and resourcing that will be required for a review, but, once I have reviewed those options, my private office will contact those interested MSPs to discuss the next steps.

Mark Ruskell: It is clear that the updated guidance is long overdue. It was first drafted in 2003, and it is clear that some councils are failing to adequately enforce access rights in and around communities. One of those communities, which the cabinet secretary will know, is Burntisland. I know that she has recently met the Burntisland Harbour Access Trust and has indicated her intention to meet Forth Ports and Fife Council, to hold them to account over the long-standing issue of community access. What progress has been made under her leadership towards a resolution for that issue?

Mairi Gougeon: I thank Mark Ruskell and members across the chamber for highlighting the issues that have been experienced at Burntisland. The strength of feeling in the community was quite clear throughout the debate that we had on those amendments on land reform, which is why I have been determined since then to ensure that we keep up the momentum and try to find a solution, where possible, that works for everyone.

As Mark Ruskell outlined, I met the Burntisland Harbour Access Trust in Burntisland. That helpful meeting allowed me to get some of the background to the situation while seeing the area that we are talking about. I am still due to meet Fife Council and Forth Ports, and we are in the process of getting those meetings finalised.

I am happy to keep members updated on how those meetings progress, as well as on the Burntisland Harbour Access Trust, as we have those discussions, because I am keen that we find some form of resolution for the people of Burntisland.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Debates about access rights can often be quite polarised, but the reality is that huge numbers of people access our countryside every year, and it is done remarkably well. However, where conflict occurs, I often find that the landowner is questioned but the responsibility requirements of those accessing the land are not always pushed by local councils. If any update to the guidance is to be done, will the cabinet secretary ensure that the Government takes into account new thinking on what responsible access means?

Mairi Gougeon: I appreciate what Tim Eagle says about polarisation and what sometimes happens when we talk about the issue. However, Burntisland is a perfect example of a situation in which all parties from across the chamber came together to recognise that there are significant issues. Part of my response during the debate on that issue was that I want to engage with members—I asked those who are interested to contact me about it.

If the member wants to be involved in the conversation on the guidance, he should contact my office and let me know, because I want to make sure that we get the guidance right. I am open to having those discussions with anyone who has an interest in it.

Kilpatrick Hills

4. Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting Forestry and Land Scotland to protect the Kilpatrick hills. (S6O-05294)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): Forestry and Land Scotland manages approximately 3,500 hectares of land on behalf of Scottish ministers in the Kilpatrick hills, which is around 80 per cent of the land in the area that is loosely referred to as the Kilpatrick hills. Scottish Water manages the reservoirs on the upper ground.

The area is comprised of woodland and moorland, and it is managed for multipurpose objectives, including social and environmental objectives. The area is well used by visitors for recreation, including mountain biking. It also includes a section of the long-distance walking route the John Muir way. The John Muir way is the only formal trail, with other areas for walking being access roads and hill paths. The Scottish

Government supports Forestry and Land Scotland through direct funding.

Marie McNair: I recently met Forestry and Land Scotland and other stakeholders to discuss antisocial behaviour in the Kilpatrick hills, such as the illegal use of e-bikes and motorbikes on the trails. Litter, including remnants from campfires, also poses a risk. I am aware that campfire bans have been implemented in the Cairngorms national park during the summer months. Can the cabinet secretary advise whether Forestry and Land Scotland could consider that approach for the Kilpatrick hills? Will she join me in calling out the antisocial behaviour in the area that is causing damage to our precious environment?

Mairi Gougeon: Absolutely. I could not agree more with Marie McNair on that point. She mentioned the powers that the national park authorities have. Forestry and Land Scotland does not have those same byelaw-making powers, so it cannot replicate the actions that have been taken elsewhere to tackle some of those issues.

On the specific matters that Marie McNair has raised, we are currently developing a wildfire strategy for Scotland, through which we will explore and assess any potential legislative options for seasonal restrictions on fire lighting, as well as considering the use of disposable barbecues. In doing that, we will draw on the lessons that will be learned from the implementation of the new fire management byelaws in the Cairngorms national park.

I thank Marie McNair and her team for their involvement in the working group that has been established to co-ordinate resources to tackle the issue of antisocial behaviour in the Kilpatricks, which is affecting the local community that she represents.

Good Food Nation

5. Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the progress Scotland is making towards becoming a good food nation. (S6O-05295)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): Scotland is making excellent progress towards becoming a good food nation. I am delighted to note that “The First National Good Food Nation Plan” was laid in Parliament this morning and published online today at noon. The plan reflects the feedback from the wide-ranging consultation throughout its development and the input from parliamentary scrutiny. This is an important stage of our good food nation journey, and we will now turn our attention to the future development and

implementation of the local authority and health board plans.

Pam Gosal: The good food nation plan has become nothing short of a fiasco. Although the plan has been laid, stakeholders do not agree with it and have concerns and questions about governance and accountability. The Scottish National Party promised that we would be a good food nation by 2025, but instead we see a failure to deliver, along with the neglect of food producers and limited effort to make use of widely available sustainable produce such as venison. Does the cabinet secretary agree that this is a case of the SNP overpromising and underdelivering?

Mairi Gougeon: I respect Pam Gosal, but what she has just outlined is complete and utter nonsense in regard to our good food nation plan as well as—*[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Can members listen to both the questions and the responses in a respectful manner?

Mairi Gougeon: Thank you, Presiding Officer. Again, we have published our good food nation plan—the first of its kind—today. The work that we are doing in Scotland to become a good food nation is world leading. The plan underwent a great deal of scrutiny from a number of Scottish Parliament committees, all of which has been taken into consideration in the plan that we have published. We recognise that we need to implement the plan and know that that is important. It is the job of every minister in all the different portfolio areas across Government to work to deliver those outcomes.

Pam Gosal touched on a number of areas that are critically important, such as the role of our farmers and food producers. We want to ensure that more people in Scotland have access to their produce, which is a fundamental point that is made clear in our good food nation plan. The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity is progressing so much work to ensure that people have access to foods such as venison. Deer control has been talked about a lot during the passage of the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill. Work is on-going on all those fronts, and I look forward to continuing to deliver on our first national good food nation plan.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): The Rural Affairs and Islands Committee voted against the Good Food Nation (Specified Functions and Descriptions) (Scottish Ministers) Regulations 2025 on 3 December. Has the cabinet secretary now decided to change that legislation to meet the ambitions of stakeholders and have in place a good food nation plan that covers all aspects of food policy, including agriculture and fisheries, which were missing from the instrument,

or is the refusal to do so the reason why members of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee are now resigning?

Mairi Gougeon: I am disappointed that the committee did not support the affirmative statutory instrument at the recent meeting at which it was discussed, and it has since been withdrawn. We will continue to consider that and engage with stakeholders, as we have always done.

In the committee session at which we discussed that instrument, I hope that I was able to outline that, although some stakeholders wanted a broad-brush approach to the specified functions and descriptions, taking too broad an approach and covering only one generic policy area would not deliver the outcomes that we would all want to see, which are to have that difference and specific consideration by other portfolios across Government, to ensure that we are delivering on the plan's outcomes. I can commit that we will continue to have those conversations. If changes need to be made, we will consider them, but it is for a very good reason that we set out our approach, which would have enacted and delivered the plan's outcomes.

Land Reform (Land Justice)

6. **Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the recent "ScotLand Futures" report, which found that 96 per cent of respondents believe that changes are needed regarding how land is owned and used, what steps it will take to ensure that land reform goes further than the current Land Reform (Scotland) Bill does to deliver land justice. (S6O-05296)

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): We welcome the Scottish Land Commission's "ScotLand Futures" report and are considering its findings. The recently passed Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2025 represents a significant step forward in the land reform journey and delivers tangible improvements, such as lotting provisions and land management plans. Plans for implementation of the 2025 act are being developed, and we will continue to consult stakeholders to ensure that the provisions are as impactful as possible.

Alongside that, we are progressing work in other policy areas, including community right to buy and compulsory purchase, and we are considering compulsory sales orders. We are also addressing vacant and derelict land and exploring the role of taxation.

Sarah Boyack: I am glad that the cabinet secretary has reflected on what further changes can be made, but, after the Land Reform

(Scotland) Bill was passed, many stakeholders and community groups were disappointed with the Scottish Government's refusal to apply the bill's lotting and public interest powers nationwide. As land justice is a nationwide issue, does the cabinet secretary agree that those crucial powers need to apply to land on a nationwide scale so that constituents across the country do not miss out?

Mairi Gougeon: I appreciate the point that Sarah Boyack has raised, but we added the measures to the bill that has now passed on the basis of the evidence that we had, and we need to have the evidence base in place when we develop policies or make proposals, to ensure that they will work when they are implemented.

We should bear in mind just how significant some of the provisions in the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2025 are, and their implementation will be critical. Important amendments were agreed to at stage 3, particularly Martin Whitfield's amendment on the review of the act, because we must ensure that we monitor things and learn lessons as the act is implemented. That will mean that we can improve and build on the measures that have been introduced.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question 7 has been withdrawn.

Future Farming Investment Scheme (North East Scotland)

8. Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how many farmers in the North East Scotland region have applied for the future farming investment scheme this year, including how many of those were unsuccessful. (S6O-05298)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): Agricultural data are not collected for the North East Scotland region, because such data are not collected on the basis of Scottish parliamentary electoral regions. The Inverurie rural payments and inspections directorate agricultural area office region, which covers the north-east area, received 1,138 applications. Of those applications, 703 were eligible and 433 were assessed as not eligible, and a total of 326 applicants were offered a grant. A central mailbox for queries from unsuccessful applicants is being provided.

Liam Kerr: It seems that I am better informed than the minister, because I have the data and can tell him that, in the north-east, 85 per cent of applications were rejected. Nationwide, the scheme received more than 7,500 applications, but nearly half were ruled ineligible. The scheme gave applicants no reason for rejection and offered no right of appeal. Therefore, it looks as

though the Government is overpromising and underdelivering.

The Scottish National Party voted down Scottish Conservative proposals that would have resulted in the scheme being reviewed and reported on and that would have provided applicants with transparency. Will the minister consider reopening the scheme? If so, how will he ensure that more small farms are successful and that those that are not successful understand why?

Jim Fairlie: No, we will not be reopening the scheme, but we will shortly publish details of how the applications were assessed and provide information on why some applicants were not successful. As I said, members of the public can contact the rural payments and inspections directorate area office mailbox to seek general guidance and feedback on their application.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): Farmers in the north-east have expressed concern that the Scottish Government is dragging its feet in reforming and rebasing agricultural support, such as that provided through the future farming investment scheme and the less favoured area support scheme. That means that young farmers are being cheated out of a fair deal and that small-scale, environmentally friendly and regenerative farming is being prevented from taking place in less favoured areas. Recently, I asked the minister whether future support for less favoured areas will be based on contemporary data or historical data, but I did not get an answer, so I will ask the question again. Will he ensure that future support is based on up-to-date information and data?

Jim Fairlie: As I said to Mercedes Villalba previously, all those issues are being discussed and considered in the round as we take our systems forward. I take on board the point that we must give farmers the tools that they need and the certainty that they require.

Unfortunately, no certainty has been provided by the United Kingdom Government, which has caused problems through its inheritance tax changes, has not done anything to change the systems down south, has Barnettised the farming fund for Scotland and has taken away ring fencing. Therefore, I am afraid that under no circumstances can we take any lessons from the Labour Party on how to support farmers in Scotland.

The Scottish Government has maintained direct support, voluntary coupled support and LFASS payments, and it has provided a number of schemes to ensure that we protect farmers in Scotland, unlike that lot on the Labour benches or that lot on the Conservative benches.

Health and Social Care

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to questions on the health and social care portfolio. I advise members that there is a lot of interest in asking supplementary questions. If I am to get through them all, I will need brevity in questions and responses.

Loneliness (Health Impacts)

1. **Humza Yousaf (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to address the health impacts of loneliness. (S6O-05299)

The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur): We recognise that loneliness can affect anyone, with negative impacts on health and wellbeing. It can be particularly difficult at this time of year. Our social isolation and loneliness strategy and delivery plan are supported by a dedicated three-year fund that provides £3.8 million to 53 community projects across Scotland. That is complemented by our investment of £81 million since 2021 in the communities mental health and wellbeing fund for adults, which includes awards for more than 4,500 projects that focus on reducing isolation and loneliness. Our mind to mind website and campaign also encourage people to talk to others about how they are feeling.

Humza Yousaf: I thank the minister for that comprehensive response. He references the important health impacts that loneliness can have on an individual. It can quite literally be a killer.

We know that thousands of Scots, including many in our elderly community, in particular, will face the festive period alone. That is why the work of community groups such as the South West Arts and Music Project in my constituency is so vital. From its fun-time Fridays through to Christmas lunches and craft workshops, SWAMP ensures that our elderly know that they are always part of a community.

However, many organisations such as SWAMP face financial challenges. Will the minister acknowledge the important role that the third sector plays in tackling loneliness, the cost of which would otherwise be picked up by the national health service? Will he reflect that in the budget conversations that he is having with the finance secretary in the run-up to the Scottish budget?

Tom Arthur: I thank Humza Yousaf for raising that important issue. I join him in recognising how vital community projects are in helping to reduce isolation and loneliness for people across Scotland. On Tuesday, I saw the good work of the Willowacre Trust, in Cowlaers, in Glasgow, which

helps people of all ages to connect. That is just one of thousands of projects that are being supported through our communities mental health and wellbeing fund.

With regard to looking towards the budget, in recognising the pressures that are facing the third sector, we are seeking to extend multiyear funding arrangements. I am delighted that, as part of the fairer funding pilot, we have already committed a further £15 million to our communities fund for next year.

Sandesh Gulhane (Glasgow) (Con): I declare an interest as a practising NHS general practitioner.

For many people, Christmas is a time to enjoy precious moments with family and friends and reflect on the past year. However, for too many Scots, Christmas is a period of social isolation and loneliness, which are issues that I know all of us in the chamber care about deeply and want to address.

We have fantastic organisations across Glasgow and the rest of Scotland that provide vital support, such as Scottish Action for Mental Health's nook and the Samaritans, which I encourage anyone who is struggling with low mood to reach out to. However, those organisations require adequate financial support to deliver their essential services. Will the Government discuss with SAMH the possibility of expanding the work that it does through its nook by providing Government funding?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We will need greater brevity in questions.

Tom Arthur: I thank Dr Gulhane for his question and for raising those important matters. We actively engage with SAMH. I had the privilege of visiting the nook in Glasgow a few weeks ago and I was hugely impressed. We want to see more interventions of that type in Scotland, as they play a vital role. I commend SAMH and the many other organisations that provide vital support, not just at this time of year but all year round.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Humza Yousaf mentioned the excellent example of SWAMP in our city, and it was great to hear that the minister visited the Willowacre Trust. Such organisations are critical, because around 60 per cent of Scots over the age of 50 experience loneliness most or all of the time, particularly at this time of year. The concern is that the funding of local organisations is so precarious that they do not know from one year to the next whether they will be able to continue their services.

Another example is the Alive and Kicking project in Springburn, which is putting on a special Hogmanay party for elderly people in the area, but

it has just been through a hugely onerous process to secure three-year funding.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Please ask a question.

Paul Sweeney: Will the minister do more to work with health and social care partnerships to ensure that the benefits of such services from a public health perspective are reflected?

Tom Arthur: The member raises important points about security of funding and its importance in enabling organisations to plan strategically. That is exactly why we have the fairer funding pilot and the communities fund, which I referred to in my earlier answers, and why we have committed that funding for next year. I undertake to convey in my routine engagements with health and social care partnerships the good points that the member makes, because they are well made.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We will need greater brevity in questions.

Health and Social Care Provision (Adaptation)

2. **Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the population being expected to age rapidly over the coming decades, with more than one in five people soon to be of pension age, what measures it is taking to adapt health and social care provision to meet increased demand. (S6O-05300)

The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur): Through our service renewal framework and population health framework, we have set out a long-term approach for the reform and renewal of health and social care in Scotland. Those frameworks prioritise prevention and early intervention to reduce future demand. We will guide national planning to meet changing demographic needs while tackling health inequalities so that services remain sustainable and responsive for the whole population. Implementing those changes will deliver significant improvements in how people of all ages access and experience care and support across Scotland.

Keith Brown: What role does the minister see for emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence-assisted care planning, digital monitoring, robotics and telehealth in transforming health and social care for an ageing population? The minister will be well aware that Scotland has a uniquely long and substantial body of data on its healthcare, and of the integrity of that data.

What consideration is being given to the workforce skills that are required to support such technologies; to the role of colleges, such as Forth Valley College, in delivering the training; and to the opportunity that should exist for institutions to

work in partnership with their local health boards in order to deliver those changes?

Tom Arthur: I thank Keith Brown for raising those important issues. I assure him that the Scottish Government views emerging technologies as key to a digital first approach. As is outlined in the service renewal framework, telecare, remote monitoring and digital prescribing will improve access, efficiency and integration, which will support the provision of care closer to home for an ageing population. Those innovations will require a workforce with the necessary training and digital tools, and we will work with academia and industry to ensure that our workforce is appropriately resourced with the necessary skills as new technologies and innovations emerge.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I welcome the fact that people in Scotland are living longer, but they are not always living in good health for longer. In East Ayrshire in my South Scotland region, the total burden of disease is estimated to have increased by 2.6 per cent between 2016 and 2019. Will the Government provide an update on the targeted work that it is doing to promote healthy living across Scotland, particularly in our more deprived communities?

Tom Arthur: That is a really important point. Of course, we are concerned not just with life expectancy, but with healthy life expectancy, and that is a key component of our population health framework. I assure Carol Mochan and the whole Parliament that that is a priority for the Government.

Domestic Abuse (Healthcare Professionals)

3. **Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government, following NHS domestic abuse awareness day, which took place on 10 December with the aim to shine a light on the high prevalence of domestic abuse affecting healthcare professionals, how it is supporting national health service boards to ensure that they have robust domestic abuse policies in place. (S6O-05301)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Domestic abuse is a violation of human rights and is totally unacceptable. The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that NHS boards have robust domestic abuse guidance in place to address the issue. All boards are required to implement the national NHS Scotland gender-based violence workforce policy, which aims to provide sensitive and confidential support to employees who disclose that they are affected by domestic abuse.

Jackie Dunbar: Will the cabinet secretary outline how the Scottish Government's equally

safe strategy is supporting NHS boards such as NHS Grampian to tackle gender-based violence?

Neil Gray: Our equally safe strategy sets out a vision to prevent violence from occurring in the first place. It builds on the capability and capacity of support services, and it strengthens the justice response to victims and perpetrators. The role of the equally safe strategy is to define violence against women, to set out the scale of the problem and to take an agreed approach to addressing that problem across spheres of government and the statutory and community and voluntary sectors. Its vision for change recognises that NHS boards are at the heart of that, and a number of commitments within the equally safe delivery plan are aimed at supporting health boards.

We are working with a range of partners to improve the training for staff, including the health workforce, on all forms of violence against women. The delivery plan also outlines the work that we are doing with partners to continue to raise public awareness of NHS sexual assault response co-ordination services and to promote updated guidance for healthcare professionals on how to respond to a disclosure of rape or sexual assault.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I am sure that the cabinet secretary will welcome the announcement by the United Kingdom Government of specialist NHS support for domestic abuse and sexual violence survivors. It is essential to have trauma-informed specialist healthcare pathways, as their needs often fall between criminal justice, health and safeguarding systems. Is the cabinet secretary considering adopting a similar approach, given the recent concern about grooming gangs?

Neil Gray: Sexual assault, like any form of sexual violence, is completely unacceptable and must not be tolerated. It is incumbent on boards, in the first instance, to ensure that their staff and patients are supported so that they can report it when it takes place. Of course, I welcome any steps that are taken in any jurisdiction to improve the situation for people who are victims of sexual violence or domestic violence, so that they are able to report it and so that the police can respond accordingly. I will respond in writing to Jackie Baillie on the steps that we are taking in Scotland.

Third Sector Support for the National Health Service

4. Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what consideration it has given to the role of the third sector in ensuring the sustainability of the national health service. (S6O-05302)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): We recognise the essential role

that is played by the community and voluntary sector in supporting communities across Scotland and in supporting the delivery of the Scottish Government's priorities. Community and voluntary partners are embedded across all aspects of Government policy, and the importance of the sector is reflected in our vision for public service reform and population health. As Mr Arthur set out earlier, we acknowledge that the sector needs stability and an opportunity for longer-term planning and development to support its sustainability and ability to continue to meet the needs of communities in the longer term.

Brian Whittle: I welcome the cabinet secretary's support for the third sector, because many manifestos, including that of Voluntary Health Scotland, call for third sector parity in service commissioning. That is crucial for NHS sustainability. For example, Morven day services, in my region, receives no health and social care partnership funding despite having delivered nearly 11,000 hours of peer support, therapy and activities since January—worth £170,000 if billed. Like many third sector organisations, Morven faces closure next year without long-term sustainable funding. Does the cabinet secretary agree that losing such services would further strain an already unsustainable NHS? How will the Scottish Government ensure the sustainability of crucial community services such as Morven day services?

Neil Gray: I thank Mr Whittle for raising the concerns of what appears to be a very strong community organisation in his region that provides support to people in the community and, undeniably, support for the health service.

I routinely ensure that partnership working, which I have spoken about and which Mr Arthur was speaking about in terms of longer-term sustainability, is absolutely embedded not just in health boards but, I expect, in integration joint boards—although I do not have the same locus in IJBs as I do in health boards.

Some of our community and voluntary organisations can reach people and provide services that our statutory organisations often cannot. We should be looking to provide that mix while supporting such well-run organisations to support our people and, through more preventative activity, move to better population health that will come through from the population health framework.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I am sure that Mr Whittle recognises that asking for sustainability in our NHS means voting for it. He and his colleagues did not vote for the record funding that the Scottish National Party Scottish Government delivered for our health and social care system in 2025-26. Will the cabinet

secretary join me in calling on the Tories to recognise the profound positive impact that the more than £21 billion of funding for health and social care has delivered for the people of Scotland this year alone while the Tories sat on their hands?

Neil Gray: I agree. We are making good progress in transforming Scotland's health services. Last year we delivered a record number of hip and knee operations. The number of long waits over 52 weeks has reduced for five consecutive months, and we performed more operations, the number of which has been at its highest level since January 2020. That is thanks to the tireless work of our outstanding NHS staff. We are also delivering thousands more appointments and procedures this year, and there are downward trends across nearly all waiting list indicators.

Health is at the heart of our budget, which provided record funding of £21.7 billion to health and social care in 2025-26. To protect the NHS's long-term future sustainability, we plan to invest in a range of reforms, including shifting care from acute to community settings, investing an additional £531 million in general practice over three years and expanding hospital at home capacity to 2,000 beds—to give just three examples.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Last week, I met staff and volunteers at Accord Hospice, which runs the Renfrewshire bereavement network. The network provides vital support to people who are experiencing loss or dealing with grief. The service is free at the point of use and works with minimal wait for people.

Despite the high demand for its service, Accord is concerned about there being no secure commitment to funding from the health and social care partnership, which could potentially put the service at risk. That is exacerbated by a 7 per cent reduction in overall hospice funding from Renfrewshire HSCP this year.

Does the minister agree that organisations such as Accord Hospice are best placed to deliver such specialist services and that we should do everything that we can to protect them and their funding?

Neil Gray: As Mr Bibby will know, those decisions are made locally, which they need to be. I am very familiar with the work of Accord Hospice, as I am with the hospice network. I am in the fortunate position of having a remarkable hospice in my constituency, as well, so I recognise and understand the invaluable contribution that they make and I encourage all our health boards and IJB partners to support the hospice network. That is why we have invested additional money and resources into hospice funding—to give support

for pay parity, for example—and why we will continue to work with the sector.

Although I do not comment directly on the individual case that Mr Bibby raises—for obvious reasons in relation to local decision making—I hope that that gives him some assurance of the Government's support for the sector.

Neurodevelopmental Conditions (Provision)

5. Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland on its proposal, "The future of provision for neurodevelopmental conditions". (S6O-05303)

The Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing (Tom Arthur): The Scottish Government welcomes the report by the Royal College of Psychiatrists on future provision for neurodevelopmental support in Scotland. I agree that demand for neurodevelopmental assessment and support now far exceeds what Scotland's mental health infrastructure can deliver and that a different response is needed.

The Scottish Government is committed to driving forward improvements to address that complex issue. To support us in that work, the royal college is a member of our children and young people's neurodevelopmental task force, and it participated in the cross-party summit on neurodevelopmental support that I hosted on 15 December.

Paul McLennan: The summit brought together people from clinical services, education, the Government, academia and policy. What key points were raised at the summit? How will the voice of people with lived experience be heard in relation to that issue, and where will it implement policy?

Tom Arthur: At Scotland's first summit on neurodevelopmental support—held, as I said, on 15 December—the focus was on improving our shared understanding of the complexity of neurodevelopmental needs and the actions that are required to improve access to timely, consistent and neuro-affirming support. I was pleased that there was political consensus on a number of issues, and I am considering how we take that forward. Lived experience was shared generously by neurodivergent attendees, and I will ensure that neurodivergent people, their families and front-line staff continue to inform and shape our policy approach.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): In Scotland, 30 per cent of adults live in areas where they are unable to get a neurodevelopmental assessment. It is not that demand is outstripping supply; in many parts of the country, there is no supply. Why will the minister not treat this much

more urgently than he currently is doing? It is an urgent situation.

Tom Arthur: I assure Mr Rennie that I treat the matter with the utmost urgency. I was grateful to his colleague Alex Cole-Hamilton for participating in the summit on Monday, and I recognise that the summit arose from a commitment from the Government that was made during a debate that the Liberal Democrats secured.

It is an area in which I really want to build political consensus. That was evident at the summit on Monday. I would be more than happy to engage directly with Mr Rennie on the national or local picture, and I want to leave him in no doubt of the priority that I attach to the matter.

Community First Responders

6. Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting the work of community first responders. (S6O-05304)

The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health (Jenni Minto): Scottish Ambulance Service community first responders play a critical role in saving the lives of people across Scotland and I—and the Scottish Government—support them whole-heartedly.

The Scottish Ambulance Service has full operational responsibility for community first responder schemes. In 2025-26, the Scottish Government increased the Scottish Ambulance Service's budget to £437.2 million—an increase of £88 million on the previous year—which will see continued investment in almost 150 of those life-saving schemes.

Emma Roddick: Community first responders in the Highlands and Islands are crucial and often bridge the gap when it comes to difficulties with distance or resourcing in rural and island communities. However, many have reported to me that barriers to carrying out that role are increasing with time—from difficulties securing the correct insurance to being unable to access training courses or administer emergency medication such as EpiPens. Can the Scottish Government do more to support those vital volunteers?

Jenni Minto: I absolutely recognise the importance of community first responders in our rural and island areas. I had the pleasure of meeting some community first responders who are based on Islay at this summer's Islay, Jura and Colonsay show, and I absolutely recognise the importance of the roles that they play. In January, I will host a round-table meeting on out-of-hospital cardiac arrests, which will include the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, Police Scotland and the Scottish Ambulance Service.

It is important to recognise that, when community first responders respond to calls, they are covered by Scottish Ambulance Service insurance. Some schemes, with the support of their communities, have developed beyond the core model and secured their own vehicles, equipment and funding. It is understood that it is their responsibility to source business cover and suitable training. If Emma Roddick would like, I am happy to meet her to discuss the issue.

Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Ind): Bleed kits ease pressure on first responders by allowing bystanders to prevent a potentially fatal loss of blood from occurring while they wait for a responder to arrive. However, there are nowhere near enough bleed kits in Scotland. Will the minister explain what the Scottish Government is doing to increase the number of bleed kits in Scotland?

Jenni Minto: I recognise the importance of the provision of bleed kits across Scotland, which I have been speaking to a number of people about, and I would be happy to follow up on the issue with Mr Choudhury in writing.

Influenza Admissions (Support for National Health Service)

7. Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I remind members that I am employed as a bank nurse by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

To ask the Scottish Government how it is supporting NHS boards, in light of the increase in hospital admissions of people affected by influenza. (S6O-05305)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): One of the most important things that we can do to support NHS boards is to make sure that people stay healthy and attend hospital only when it is absolutely necessary.

In addition, our vaccination programme is vital in tackling flu this season, and we work closely with boards to make vaccination as accessible as possible. We do that by supporting national resources and funded initiatives, such as mobile vaccination units. Our nationally funded programmes, such as virtual hospitals and flow navigation models, also support boards to enable people to get the right care in the right place and reduce unnecessary visits to accident and emergency.

Clare Haughey: As the cabinet secretary said in his answer, we know that one of the best ways of preventing influenza infection is to get vaccinated. How is the Government supporting health and social care staff to increase their uptake of the vaccine this year?

Neil Gray: Presiding Officer, I thank Clare Haughey for her question, because it offers me the opportunity, in one of my final contributions before Christmas, to wish you and other colleagues a merry Christmas and, most importantly, to thank our health and social care staff for their service and sacrifice over the festive period, which is greatly appreciated by us all. I hope that I speak on behalf of the whole Parliament when I say that.

This winter, additional measures have been introduced to boost uptake among health and social care workers, including digital prompts and tailored communication materials to encourage vaccination. Along with the chief medical officer, I have written to system leaders to request continued support in making access to vaccination easy for staff, and most health boards now provide peer-to-peer vaccination in workplaces and drop-in clinics for convenience. The vaccination programme is also working with professional bodies to reinforce that message through blogs and social media. The fact that uptake in those vital groups continues to rise as the programme progresses reflects those strong collaborative efforts.

The message is clear: protect yourself, your loved ones and our services this winter by taking up the vaccine if you are eligible to do so.

Walk-in General Practitioner Clinics

8. Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what criteria will be used to evaluate its pilot programme for walk-in GP clinics, including whether stakeholders representing GPs and other health professionals will have been involved in defining these criteria. (S6O-05306)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): The Scottish Government will evaluate the walk-in service pilots by drawing on the clear set of characteristics that were used to select proposals in the first instance, which include areas such as impact on access, patient experience, wider system performance and overall cost-effectiveness and scalability. Those characteristics will underpin the national governance and evaluation framework for the pilots. GPs and other stakeholders have been involved in shaping that work to date, and they will continue to be closely engaged as the pilot programme is established and evaluated.

Patrick Harvie: More or less as soon as the policy was announced, it received significant pushback from GPs and other health professionals who said not only that it would be a poor investment but that it would actually risk worsening health inequalities. As far as I am aware, the British Medical Association had the opportunity to discuss the issue only the day before it was

announced, and the Royal College of General Practitioners was unable to discuss it until two days after it was announced, which means that those organisations have not had the opportunity to shape the Government's thinking. Further, as far as I am aware, they will not have the opportunity to shape the evaluation criteria, either.

Can the cabinet secretary assure us that the expertise of the people who are delivering these services will be taken seriously, and that GP services will be treated as something more important than a conference gimmick?

Neil Gray: The widespread welcome of the policy announcement on the part of the public is testament to the policy's popularity. I have engaged directly with the BMA and the Royal College of GPs. I understand their concerns regarding continuity of care and the potential for health inequalities to be exacerbated. I want to ensure that the reverse is true, and that we can address health inequalities through the establishment of GP walk-in clinics and that we can make our services more accessible and flexible for people to use while maintaining their continuity of care. That is why I continue to insist on the involvement of not only boards but GPs in the design and evaluation of the system.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: With apologies to members I was unable to call, that concludes portfolio questions on health and social care.

Protecting Children From Harm

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a statement by Jenny Gilruth on protecting children from harm. The cabinet secretary will take questions at the end of her statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:51

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Protecting children from harm is of the utmost importance to this Government. Those who have suffered as victims of child sexual abuse have been let down by a system that should have protected them. Discussion of these topics—whether in the national press or in this chamber—should be sensitive to that trauma. All parties should, rightly, treat this matter with the appropriate care and seriousness that it demands. I welcome that Opposition leaders and spokespeople will have the opportunity to meet Professor Alexis Jay and Police Scotland on 14 January for a full briefing on their work.

As I previously set out to Parliament, the Scottish Government has not ruled out the establishment of an inquiry into group-based child abuse and exploitation. The experts on the national strategic group have been clear, however, that there is limited evidence at the current time on the nature and extent of the issue in Scotland. It is, therefore, imperative that that evidence base is established at pace, to clarify next steps and lessen prolonged suffering for the victims of these crimes. That evidence base matters to survivors. Last week, one of them told me:

“the current narrative is moving faster than the evidence base, and that policy, commentary, and public positioning must remain anchored in verified evidence rather than momentum or rhetoric. When language runs ahead of evidence, the consequences are borne not by commentators, but by survivors—through misrepresentation, loss of trust, and further harm.”

The national review has been established in part to scrutinise the effectiveness of local responses. It will be led by four statutory inspectorates that are, importantly, independent of Government and the organisations that they scrutinise. Crucially, those agencies have powers to compel public authorities to provide information that they request. Those powers will be critical to the success of the review. Public agencies will not be able to refuse to co-operate, and the inspectorates will help obtain the evidence that is needed to inform future decisions and investigations.

That approach will be underpinned by Professor Alexis Jay’s expert advice on its design and, at key stages of the process, will draw on her

unrivalled experience in this area. Of course, that work will also operate within Scotland’s established constitutional arrangements, including the independent role of the Lord Advocate in directing the system of criminal investigation and prosecution. The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs and I are clear that that work must be undertaken at pace, with ministers, the national strategic group and the Parliament receiving regular and appropriate updates.

The review will be conducted in three parts, with reports provided iteratively to ministers. In the first part, the inspectorates will scrutinise data and evidence from all local authorities about the risk and threat of group-based abuse and exploitation. That rigorous work will be detailed, ensuring that all responses from local authorities are scrutinised. I assure members that, if any harm or risk is identified during the review, it will immediately be escalated through the appropriate channels, including to Police Scotland as required. Action will be taken, and it will not need to wait for the review to conclude or for an inquiry.

I know that, like me, members will have welcomed the news last week that the Scottish child abuse inquiry confirmed that, as part of its phase 10 hearings, it will be able to hear and act on evidence that relates to grooming and group-based child sexual abuse, where that falls within the inquiry’s terms of reference.

I want to be clear with Parliament today that any person who considers that they might have been groomed, and sexually exploited as a result, while in residential care before 17 December 2014 has a right to contact the inquiry.

The national review, Police Scotland’s on-going work and the advice of the national strategic group, which is chaired by Professor Jay, will gather evidence, help us to take action now where it is needed and inform advice to ministers on whether a national inquiry on group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation is required. Ministers expect to be able to update the Parliament more fully on that work by the end of February.

We must also ensure that survivors’ experience is at the heart of our considerations; their voices must be heard and listened to. It is critical that we take the right approach and involve survivors in a trauma-informed way and with appropriate safeguards in place.

I do not underestimate how distressing it is for survivors to share their experiences of abuse. I commend the courage of those who have already spoken out, whether publicly or privately with the Government. I say to them: be in no doubt—your voices matter.

Today, along with the justice secretary, I wrote to the cross-party group on adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse to request that we attend a meeting in the new year to hear directly from the wide range of survivors that the CPG represents. This approach of engagement with the CPG mirrors the approach that has been taken by the national strategic group, which, at its next meeting, in January, will further consider more strategic approaches to engagement with victims. It is vital that the views and experiences of survivors inform the work that we are taking forward.

I want to reassure survivors about an issue of significant concern to them, which is the retention of records and information that relate to their experience and are pertinent to this work. I know that this matter has caused—and continues to cause—significant distress. Therefore, the director general for education and justice has today written to key agencies and organisations, asking them to review their document retention policies in order to ensure the retention of all documents that may be relevant to the national review. That is in addition to the instruction that the Scottish child abuse inquiry issued, when it began its work, on keeping records and information that it would wish to review and consider.

It is shocking and sickening that children and young people in our society continue to be sexually abused, often by members of their own family, as well as, increasingly, through online exploitation. Therefore, we must also invest in initiatives that address such harm and help children and young people to recover.

To date, the Government has provided £20 million for the bairns' hoose programme to enhance holistic, child-centred support for children who have been harmed. That is in addition to funding for third sector organisations that are working to prevent—and protect children from—sexual abuse and exploitation.

Today, I announce a further £220,000 of funding to be deployed immediately during this financial year. That will enable the United Kingdom Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse to undertake pilots in two Scottish local authorities in 2026-27. These pilots will provide access to experts and resources to help build the skills and confidence of front-line practitioners in identifying and responding to child sexual abuse cases.

The funding will help support the Lucy Faithfull Foundation to strengthen its work in Scotland with young people and families who are impacted by online sexual offending. It will also support free access to online harm training from the Children and Young People's Centre for Justice and the Lucy Faithfull Foundation.

Additional funding will be provided to enhance Police Scotland's digital forensics capability and ability to act on online harm. That funding to Police Scotland will, importantly, build upon the existing capabilities of the national child abuse investigation unit, which provides a specialist approach to tackling child abuse and exploitation. It is focused on complex cases that involve multiple victims or perpetrators, and on organised networks. It conducts around 700 investigations per year.

Just as we must investigate and address what has happened in the recent past, so must we ensure that we are doing all that we can in the here and now. We must work to protect children and young people from harm and, importantly, to identify required improvements to current approaches. In 2021, we published revised national child protection guidance to support the development of evidence-based responses. That guidance makes clear what everyone working with children must do to protect children from harm, including reporting to social work and the police when a child is experiencing or is at risk of abuse or exploitation.

We are also rolling out national training for local services and professionals on interagency referral discussions. These discussions are fundamental to our system of child protection in Scotland. They bring together the police, social work, health services and wider partners to share information, assess risk and agree a safety plan.

In recognition of the increasing complexity of child sexual abuse, we established the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group last year. From January 2026, the group will be chaired independently by Professor Alexis Jay. I pay tribute to the determination and drive of its recent co-chair, Iona Colvin, Scotland's chief social work adviser, who is retiring this week, following a career that was dedicated to protecting Scotland's children and young people from harm, abuse and neglect.

To build on the work of the strategic group, I want us to go further. The mandatory reporting of child abuse has been the subject of recent discussions in the chamber. Many professionals in Scotland already have a duty to report child abuse; I know that from my time in schools. However, the national strategic group has been actively considering the case for a broader statutory requirement for mandatory reporting. I want to be clear with Parliament that the mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse is supported in principle by Scottish ministers, and a task and finish group is being established, under the guidance of the national strategic group, to consider potential models for that.

This Government is determined to take action to establish the potential extent and scale of child sexual exploitation. That includes conducting an independent national review to assess the prevalence of this type of abuse and the effectiveness of local systems, and identify any risks or evidence that require early action.

I have provided further detail on our approach to the national review; I have set out how we will involve survivors to ensure that their voices are heard; I have announced additional funding to help professionals better protect children and prevent harm; and I have indicated our support for the development of mandatory reporting options for Scotland.

However, this work must be a shared endeavour. All MSPs, from all political parties, have a role to play in protecting Scotland's children and young people from harm. I therefore invite MSPs from across the chamber to support the work that is under way and, crucially, to offer their input and ideas by engaging meaningfully. Our children and young people deserve nothing less.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: The cabinet secretary will now take questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. I intend to allow around 20 minutes for those. I encourage members who wish to ask questions to press their request-to-speak buttons.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement. The Scottish National Party Government did not want to talk about grooming gangs; it said that they were not a problem in Scotland. Well, those gangs—or paedophile rings—are a problem in Scotland. Every survivor I have spoken to has no trust in the Government in relation to group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation.

The justice secretary has been sidelined because she misrepresented an expert, then denied doing so and has still not corrected the record. Her responses today raise even more questions about her conduct and her integrity.

This morning, I met Kimberley Hutchison, who is a survivor of child sexual exploitation that started when she was 10 years old. She told me that the Government is

“behaving in the same way as those who exploited and trafficked us”.

She and others use words such as “chaotic”, “shambles”, “dishonest” and “disgraceful”.

The Conservatives remain clear, as do survivors, that there must be an independent inquiry. If the Government has any hope whatsoever of rebuilding trust, it must start

listening to survivors and must not create another talking shop. Will ministers heed their calls to include survivors on the existing national strategic group and the new task and finish group?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Mr Findlay for his question and his interest in the issue. He raises the case of an individual by the name of Kimberley, and I want to put on the record my own intention to meet survivors. Like Mr Findlay, I have met Taylor's mum, with whom Mr Findlay has engaged directly, and I would be very keen to offer a meeting to Kimberley. I have set out some of the steps that I will take as cabinet secretary, alongside the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, to engage directly with the cross-party group and survivors, but it is important that that work is undertaken in a trauma-informed way, which I set out in my statement.

In her evidence to the Education, Children and Young People Committee this morning, Professor Alexis Jay talked at length about the importance of listening to survivor voice. She also talked about not thinking of survivors as a monolithic group—a point that Mr Greer made in the chamber yesterday.

In my statement to the Parliament today, I read a quote from a survivor who has been in touch with my office, and I want to come back to that. The survivor who contacted me said:

“When language runs ahead of evidence, the consequences are borne not by commentators, but by survivors—through misrepresentation, loss of trust, and further harm.”

The evidence base is something that we have not yet established, and Alexis Jay has been very clear on that. The requirements behind the review set out the ways in which the evidence base will be established. I will come back in February to provide a fuller update in that regard, as I set out to Parliament in my statement.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Every day, the Government's approach to the grooming gangs inquiry is more chaotic—we have a cobbled-together response and a structure that is still confusing.

Last week, the four inspectorates that the press asked about the matter were still awaiting guidance, and the Care Inspectorate said that it still had not been contacted by the Government. I ask the cabinet secretary whether it is not time to agree with Scottish Labour that the review requires clear leadership and the obvious person to lead it is Professor Alexis Jay herself. She is the right expert to direct such a review. Further to that, is the cabinet secretary satisfied that victims have full confidence in what she has announced today?

I asked the Government why it did not seem to have any prior understanding of the seriousness of

organised child exploitation. Has it really treated the issue with the seriousness that it deserves? I still await an answer about the 46 children on the Police Scotland list, because we still do not know what has happened to that list. I was promised an answer last week. Can the Government convince me today that I will get an answer to my question?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Ms McNeill for her question and her on-going interest in these matters.

I come to the point about the Care Inspectorate in particular, which is one of the four independent inspectorates that will lead the national review. I want to put on the record—I have checked this with my officials—that, on 20 November, the first version of the signed national review proposal was received from the Care Inspectorate, Healthcare Improvement Scotland, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland and Education Scotland, and it was shared with Professor Alexis Jay for expert advice. On 28 November, feedback from Professor Jay on the national proposal was shared with all four inspectorate partners. I am not necessarily sure that I follow Ms McNeill's argument on the Care Inspectorate, but, just for assurance, my officials are engaged directly with it, and they have been appraised of that.

In relation to Pauline McNeill's point about the national review, I go back to the points that I made in the chamber two weeks ago. These independent inspectorates have responsibilities and statutory powers that do not rest with ministers. They are able to interrogate information from local authorities, for example, and they will be able to come back with evidence, advice and guidance. Throughout that process, Professor Alexis Jay will inform the methodology that they use, and she will provide expertise on that. She spoke to some of those matters in front of the education committee this morning.

The final point that Ms McNeill raises relates to victim engagement. Again, that is a matter that the strategic group is taking forward, as I understand it, at its next meeting in January. I, along with Ms Constance, have also committed to engaging with the CPG and survivors. I have been very open to that and have already started to undertake some of that work.

However, it is important that we have an effective strategy. Alexis Jay talked about the need for that to be undertaken in a sensitive manner, so we will take advice from the strategic group when it meets in January in relation to how we engage, but we will also continue our work with the CPG, noting its expertise in that area.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: As members might expect, there is considerable interest in

asking questions. I will try to get everybody in, but the questions will need to be fairly brief.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I am pleased to hear more detail about the national review and that phases will be concurrent. I do not underestimate the important work that the inspectorates will carry out. Does the cabinet secretary agree that it is now time to allow the professionals involved the space to undertake their vital contribution and for MSPs to focus on how that will support the work to protect children?

Jenny Gilruth: It is important to emphasise that Police Scotland is already undertaking work to review child sexual abuse and exploitation cases, and the national review, which is being led by the inspectorates, will be starting rapidly. That national review is not just about gathering information and providing the scrutiny to which I have spoken; it is also about experienced professionals identifying and recommending improvements that will protect our children. Findings from the review will be responded to as they come to light, and updates will be provided to the Parliament on how the review supports the protection of Scotland's children. As I intimated in my statement, I intend to return to the Parliament in February to provide further updates to that end.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): The absence of reliable data was exactly the issue that I raised in my amendment to the Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill in September, so I recognise the imperative of gathering that. However, given the time that has already been lost, can the cabinet secretary tell me clearly when the review will conclude, what the key milestones and dates are, and—crucially—what findings or thresholds would trigger a full independent inquiry?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Liam Kerr for his interest in the matter. I reassure him that that point was discussed at the Education, Children and Young People Committee this morning, with my ministerial colleagues and officials. In relation to his amendment, one of the officials from the education team was keen to point to the existence of other commissioners in the education space—for example, the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland. I am mindful that Mr Kerr will be au fait with that from his time on that committee. However, his substantive point about data is important, and I go back to the quote that I read out from a survivor who contacted me last week.

We require to establish the evidence base that we do not yet have. That may lead to the establishment of an inquiry. I do not want to prejudge the outcome of that review, but I will come back to the Parliament in February to set out more detail to that end.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I was pleased that the cabinet secretaries have offered to meet the cross-party group on adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. As chair of that group, I have received the letter on that, and I look forward to the meeting happening in the new year.

One area that the group has focused on in recent months is that of mandatory reporting. I welcome what the cabinet secretary said on that in her statement. Will she say a bit more about the considerations of the national strategic group that she referred to, and when she thinks that it might draw conclusions on the potential models that she talked about?

Jenny Gilruth: As I said, we are considering the case for a broader statutory requirement on the mandatory reporting of child abuse, and we are engaging very closely on that with stakeholders, including the cross-party group on adult survivors of childhood abuse, Police Scotland, Social Work Scotland, Child Protection Committees Scotland and others. The national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group has discussed the issue at its past two meetings and has agreed that more work is required to consider mandatory reporting in relation to the depth that is provided. It agreed to establish a task and finish group to develop options for a Scottish mandatory reporting model. That group is currently being set up. I again put on the record ministers' support in principle for mandatory reporting.

The task and finish group—to which, I think, Professor Jay alluded to in responding to the Education, Children and Young People Committee this morning—will take forward work to consider and develop options for Scotland and report into the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group, which will be under Alexis Jay's leadership.

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): My sense from the committee evidence sessions this morning is that the Government does not have a grip on many of the issues. Given the reporting earlier in the week, it is clear that there has been confusion within review bodies, multiple ministers have taken parts of responsibility, and there were no terms of reference. However, I note what the cabinet secretary has now said about trying to get more clarity on that.

This morning, I pushed the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs on the importance of victims and their concerns about the landscape being too cluttered, not being clear on who is responsible and, ultimately, not having confidence in the process.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Question.

Paul O'Kane: If a victim would not be covered by the pre-2014 point that Ms Gilruth made, where should they go if they have a story to share?

Jenny Gilruth: I was taken by some of Alexis Jay's commentary at this morning's evidence session. She talked about lack of evidence and low levels of reporting. We need to be mindful that much of this type of crime is, by its nature, hidden. Often, the abuse involves a power differential. It is hidden in plain sight, so we need to be mindful that that underreporting—the low level of reporting—requires interrogation. That is why I set out in Parliament two weeks ago the approach that we are taking with the independent inspectorates.

On victims, the work of the national strategic group is relevant in this space. As I think Alexis Jay said when she provided an update to the committee, that will be taken forward through broader work by the strategic group in January. I have also set out my intention, along with the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, to engage with the cross-party group on adult survivors. Further to that, we will take advice from the strategic group on ministerial engagement with survivors. I will come back to Parliament in February to say more about that, but it is important that that is undertaken in a trauma-informed manner.

Although I know that Paul O'Kane's question was not about the Scottish child abuse inquiry, it is again worth putting on record that, as was intimated on Monday last week, the Scottish child abuse inquiry can look at instances that may constitute grooming or group-based child sexual abuse, should it be within the terms of reference of the inquiry. I encourage those who think that they may have been affected to contact the inquiry directly, because it is there for good reason.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests: I am a trustee of Break the Silence, which is a charity that offers therapy to people who are affected by childhood sexual trauma.

I agree that victim/survivors should be listened to and heard. Will the cabinet secretary assure me that victim/survivors and their families will have access to trauma-informed resources and support before, during and after they have contributed their views and stories?

Jenny Gilruth: Ruth Maguire raises a hugely important point. Many years ago, when I was on the Justice Committee, I visited Oslo to look at the bairns' hoose model and how that trauma-informed approach works to support child victims of sexual abuse.

We must ensure that survivors' experience is at the heart of our considerations. The justice

secretary's and my engagement with the CPG is part of that work, as is the focus of the national strategic group. However, I listened with interest to what Professor Jay said on that to the committee this morning. It is hugely important that we acknowledge that there is not a single community of survivors, so we need to take on board her advice and look at how we can engage widely. For example, she spoke about children, in particular, and the ways in which we can engage with different groups of survivors and the appropriate means of doing so, for example, via trauma-informed approaches such as the bairns' hoose model.

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 being elected.

The Government has indicated its support in principle for mandatory reporting of child sexual abuse. Given concerns that survivors' organisations have raised about unintended consequences, such as children being deterred from seeking help or trust being undermined in support services, will the cabinet secretary consider a full human rights and child rights impact assessment before introducing proposals? Will she also ensure that any model that is adopted strengthens, rather than weakens, early intervention and survivor trust?

Jenny Gilruth: I think that it is fair to say that there are a range of views on the issue. Ministers' views have been informed by the points that Liam Kerr made about data and underreporting.

We are mindful of the factors that Maggie Chapman has noted. I am broadly supportive of what she has set out regarding human rights considerations, but we must also be mindful that we do not have a reliable data set at the current time, and that is required in order to make a decision on whether we will have further inquiries.

Mandatory reporting is a key part of our response as a Government in that regard, but I take on board the issues that Maggie Chapman has raised in that respect.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The problem with that answer is that it may result in a lower level of reporting, because young people might just shut down. They might fear the consequences of reporting; the enormity of reporting might result in our getting lower levels of data than we otherwise would. I urge the cabinet secretary to be cautious and to move forward carefully, working with the professionals, to ensure that we get this right, because we must get it right.

Jenny Gilruth: I absolutely concur with Mr Rennie's position. There will be a reticence to report—I think that he spoke to the views of young

people and their fear of reporting. However, the reality is that, as I think I said to Maggie Chapman, the recorded levels of such crimes is very low currently and it is important that we build that evidence base. Mandatory reporting can be part of building a better evidence base, but the way in which we engage in that work is really important.

I take on board Mr Rennie's points on expertise, and ministers will very much be guided by the advice and guidance that we receive from the national strategic group, which, of course, is chaired by Alexis Jay.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): In my work prior to becoming a member of the Parliament, I supported far too many young women who were trafficked into prostitution following grooming while in care. Accountability is key to preventing such harm and will shine a bright light where it is needed.

Will the cabinet secretary set out the steps that will be taken to ensure that care-experienced young people, many of whom are living with complex and multiple trauma, are not failed by fragmented systems but are listened to and believed? How will we ensure that education, social work and all the partner agencies are effectively co-ordinated and held accountable for keeping care-experienced young people safe in the first place?

Jenny Gilruth: As Elena Whitham mentioned care-experienced young people, I should put on the record my entry in the register of members' interests, which shows that my wife is a member of the Promise oversight board.

It is important that we have a strategic approach to these issues. The member referred to a number of agencies that have responsibilities. Those agencies and partners have representation on the national strategic group, which is the key group that will give advice and guidance to ministers on the next step to inform whether we establish further inquiries. We require the evidence base, via the four independent inspectorates, on whether the threshold has been met. That is the necessary work that I set out to Parliament two weeks ago.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): The cabinet secretary has acknowledged the importance of preserving records and information that are relevant to the review, yet instructions to review and retain documents are being issued only today. Given the concerns about the loss of evidence in historical abuse cases that have been raised repeatedly by victims, experts and the Parliament, why were those safeguards not put in place at the outset of the process? What assurance can the cabinet secretary give that relevant records have not already been lost during the delay?

Jenny Gilruth: As I understand it, the Scottish child abuse inquiry put in place a number of requirements in that regard many years ago. Today, we have supplemented and strengthened the approach via communication in that regard from the director general for education and justice. That has come as a direct result of engagement with victims and from listening to their experiences on records retention. I know the distress and trauma that records being destroyed has caused to victims. It is imperative that that behaviour does not happen in any of our organisations that are involved in protecting children and young people. What has been set out today further strengthens that approach, but it has already been taken via the Scottish child abuse inquiry.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen) (SNP): I welcome the clarification from the Scottish child abuse inquiry that its phase 10 will include grooming gangs where that issue falls within the inquiry's terms of reference. How does the inquiry's independent work inform the Scottish Government's approach to improving child protection measures?

Jenny Gilruth: The work of the inquiry is already providing a very detailed picture of failings across a wide range of care settings. The Government has welcomed each of the inquiry's interim findings, and we have emphasised that they vindicate the harrowing testimony of survivors. We will continue to listen carefully to the evidence that is being given from survivors, and we are fully participating in the inquiry process.

The inquiry's final report will make recommendations to improve on regulation, policy and practice. The Scottish Government is absolutely committed to learning lessons from the inquiry's work and to responding to it to improve the protection of children in care.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Survivors have lost confidence, so can the cabinet secretary outline what kind of further inquiry might take place? For example, is it a full public inquiry that is being considered? What would be its remit and timescale? Who is doing the work on that? Can she clarify whether the terms of reference of the Scottish child abuse inquiry include abuse of children who were in care when the abuse took place where the abuse took place outside the care setting and by perpetrators who were not employed in the care sector or connected to it?

Jenny Gilruth: Two weeks ago, I set out to Parliament the approach that we are taking through the four inspectorates and established their responsibilities. They will come back to provide the evidence base to the national strategic group, which will then provide advice to ministers. It would be remiss of me to prejudge the outcome of those investigations. Alexis Jay has been clear

over the past few weeks, including today at the Education, Children and Young People Committee, that the evidence base does not yet exist to substantiate the need for further inquiries. We require the evidence base to be built, which is what the four inspectorates have been tasked with doing. They are undertaking that work at pace.

On Katy Clark's question on the Scottish child abuse inquiry, I think that that is the approach that Lady Smith set out and that is our understanding of the terms of reference of the inquiry. However, I will write to the member specifically on that detail, to give her clarity on that point.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We have a little additional time this afternoon, so I will call the final two speakers who want to ask a question.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): We have had public inquiries that have gone on for years and years, and I question whether that serves the victims very well. Could the cabinet secretary make a commitment that, if there was to be a public inquiry further down the line, it would be time limited? That is happening with the United Kingdom inquiry, which I believe is for three years.

Jenny Gilruth: I think that John Mason pursued that same line of questioning at the Education, Children and Young People Committee this morning, and the costs associated with public inquiries have also been debated by the Finance and Public Administration Committee. As I stated in my response to Katy Clark, the evidence base on the need for further public inquiries has not yet been gathered, so it would not be appropriate for me to rule them out today. I will also not make a general comment in relation to time limits, because we do not yet have that evidence base. However, when we do have the evidence base, the strategic group will provide advice and guidance to ministers on those matters.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary agree to report back to the Parliament on any destruction and loss of evidence and records when she is made aware that such an incident has happened?

Russell Findlay asked whether survivors would be included in the Government's existing strategic group or in the new task and finish group, which I do not think that she answered.

Jenny Gilruth: On both points, I support reporting back to the Scottish Parliament. On records retention, I am happy to report back if we are provided with information from inspectorates on that. As I said in my statement, I will provide a fuller update to that end in February.

I apologise to Mr Findlay, because I meant to catch the point on the inclusion of victims earlier. The strategic group is actively looking at that

issue. At its next meeting in January, the group will discuss ways to engage with victims, and I am more than happy to write to the member or provide an update in February to give reassurance that victims' voices will be at the heart of how the review is conducted.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes this item of business. There will be a brief pause before we move to the next item of business, to allow front-bench members to change.

Cybercrime

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a debate on cybercrime on behalf of the Criminal Justice Committee. I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.

15:27

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): I am very pleased to open this afternoon's debate on behalf of the Criminal Justice Committee. I will start with the usual thank you to committee clerks and Scottish Parliament information centre colleagues for their support on this important piece of work.

This year, the committee has had a very busy programme—it has considered four separate bills at either stage 1 or stage 2—so the time that we had available for this inquiry was limited. However, we were aware that cybercrime is an important topic that we wished to consider, especially as it affects business, vulnerable individuals and wider society.

The short factual report that we have produced does not attempt to identify solutions. Rather, we wanted to identify the scope of the problem and to stimulate public debate. It is clear from the evidence that we have received that an increased focus on cybercrime and cybersecurity needs to be put front and centre every bit as much as our focus on the risks that are posed to us by issues such as climate change.

Turning to the impact on business, we undertook a one-off oral evidence session on 14 May with stakeholders representing the police, business and vulnerable individuals. That was followed up by written evidence from business, third sector groups and the Scottish Government. One issue that became immediately clear was the impact that cybercrime can have on all levels of businesses that play a vital role in our society. We heard from NatWest bank that it currently has to defend itself against an average of 100 million attempted cyberattacks every month. That requires a huge on-going investment in staff and technology, but such defensive actions are an essential part of modern-day business.

We also heard about the impact of a ransomware cyberattack on Scotland-based business Arnold Clark. Despite having an information technology department with more than 200 staff, 12 of whom were dedicated to cybersecurity, and having an IT budget of several million pounds per annum, cyber criminals were still able to breach Arnold Clark's systems and steal large amounts of data. The attack, which was deliberately undertaken over the Christmas period

to make it far more difficult for the company to respond, had a substantial impact on Arnold Clark's business, with about 4,000 customers affected. Although the company recovered quickly, we were told that it is still feeling the after-effects of the attack today.

I am aware that the Economy and Fair Work Committee has recently been taking evidence on the use of artificial intelligence among Scottish businesses. The latest statistics show that 17.6 per cent of Scottish businesses use AI daily and that fraud accounted for about £1.7 billion last year, with most of it occurring through social and digital media. Last month, Forrit, an Edinburgh-based content management system company, told the committee that the AI tools that it has developed

"have blocked 3.9 million cyberattacks in the past three months"—[*Official Report, Economy and Fair Work Committee*, 5 November 2025; c 7.]

for one of its corporate clients. That shows that we can develop effective AI tools to protect businesses and our wider economy from cybercrime.

Our committee heard from Age Scotland about the continually evolving nature of the threat to vulnerable individuals. Although phishing emails and scam phone calls still represent a major problem, new AI tools that allow criminals to manipulate their image and voice present new risks to vulnerable groups. AI-enhanced fraud scams are making it increasingly difficult for people to identify that the person with whom they are engaging is not real. That allows criminals to build up trust with a victim, thereby increasing their ability to defraud people out of cash or valuable data. Research by Age Scotland shows that about 20 per cent of elderly people who experience online fraud do not report it to the police. Some do not report it because of embarrassment, whereas others do not do so because they believe that the police could do little to help them.

We learned that the type of fraud that is being perpetrated is changing. In the past, criminals would simply have sought money, but there is now a focus on stealing personal data, which cyber criminals can package and sell to other criminals on the black market. Helping members of the public to stay informed about the evolving threat and encouraging them to report such fraud to the police remains one of the greatest challenges that we face.

In relation to the policing response, prosecution and the law, using traditional policing methods to address cybercrime is extremely difficult. The borderless nature of the digital world means that it is virtually impossible to identify where a criminal might be located. Police Scotland told us that the action that it takes is often focused on gathering

threat intelligence and finding out where the weaknesses are in the system, because its ability to trace and prosecute a criminal who could be based anywhere is far more limited.

The Cyber and Fraud Centre Scotland pointed out a loophole in the criminal law. At present, it is a criminal offence to handle stolen physical goods, but no such crime exists for handling or making use of data that has been stolen in a cybercrime. The law should seek to address that loophole.

I note that the UK Government's Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill has just been introduced in the House of Commons. Its focus is on the security and resilience of IT systems that we rely on to carry out essential activities, and it proposes stiffer penalties for cybercrimes. I would welcome hearing about the discussions that the Scottish Government is having with the UK Government on the bill.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of Microsoft's launch of the Windows 95 home computer. Many people consider that to be the start of the general public's move into the online realm. Since then, our everyday experience of the digital world has moved from it being an optional extra to it being a central part of our lives.

Anyone born after 1990 has grown up in the computer age, so a large percentage of our modern-day workforce is more cyber literate than our policies might recognise. However, we must continue to invest in cyber training for all employees to ensure that their resilience and awareness keep pace.

Unfortunately, many of our public sector IT systems have not kept pace, largely due to costs and the need to procure such systems on a large scale. Our evidence taking on both cybercrime and the budget highlighted the pressing need to ensure increased capital investment in vital public IT systems.

We saw earlier this year that cyberattacks on retailers left many Scottish communities with empty supermarket shelves. We also saw attacks targeting our local authorities, which impacted on schools and many other services. Our report points out a recent Audit Scotland analysis of a cyberattack on Western Isles Council, which highlighted various issues that local and national Government must address.

We also heard about the need to ensure that key criminal justice sector partners such as the police service, courts, the prosecution service and prisons are ready to meet new challenges as they move more of their operations on to digital platforms. Maintaining public confidence in how our criminal justice system responds to calls for help or gathers evidence of crimes must be central

to the capital resources that we commit to modernising our IT systems.

As a digitally dependent society, we face many challenges from bad-faith actors—both individuals and nations. They wish to steal from us, sow discontent and undermine public confidence in democracy. Ensuring robust public and private sector IT systems and embedding cyber awareness as part of everyone's daily life must be central to Scotland's cyber resilience strategy.

I thank all those who gave evidence to the committee, and I look forward to hearing the rest of the debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call the cabinet secretary, Angela Constance, to open on behalf of the Scottish Government.

15:37

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): Today's committee-led debate is an ideal opportunity to set out the current picture of cybercrime in Scotland and the actions that we are taking and need to take across policing, Government, business and civil society to prevent harm, protect victims and strengthen our national resilience.

Cybercrime has changed the character of offending in Scotland. Five years ago, Police Scotland recorded 7,710 cybercrimes; today, the figure is 14,120—almost double pre-pandemic levels. Those are broad estimates from police records, but the direction is unmistakable. More crime—whether fraud, extortion or exploitation—is now committed online or enabled by digital means.

The public's experience mirrors that. The Scottish crime and justice survey estimates 524,000 incidents of fraud and computer misuse in 2023-24, which means that roughly one in 10 adults is affected. When organisations suffer a cyberincident, the knock-on effects on people can be severe. The Co-op cyberattack in April, for example, disrupted operations and supply chains, leaving some of our rural and island communities with empty shelves in local shops.

When West Lothian Council's schools IT systems were hit, many schools experienced operational challenges, although exams were not affected due to well-rehearsed contingency plans.

Those incidents are stark reminders of the growing cyber threat and the importance of resilience across all parts of society. What does that mean for our justice system? Our courts, law enforcement agencies and prisons handle enormous amounts of sensitive information, including criminal records, evidence and personal details of victims and witnesses. One breach could

expose that data, endanger lives and derail investigations.

Cybersecurity is not just about protecting data; it is about protecting trust. If systems are hacked or evidence is tampered with, confidence in fair trials collapses and, with it, the rule of law. Today, most evidence—emails, closed-circuit television footage and forensic data—is stored digitally. That makes it vulnerable to alteration or deletion, which could lead to wrongful convictions or acquittals.

Let us not forget operational continuity. Courts and law enforcement rely on digital platforms for case management, e-filing and virtual hearings. A ransomware attack could halt proceedings, delay justice and create massive backlogs. Justice systems are prime targets for organised crime and even state-sponsored actors seeking to disrupt governance or influence outcomes. Cybersecurity is not just an IT issue; it is the cornerstone of justice that safeguards the fairness, reliability and resilience of our digital legal systems. That means that prevention, early warning and rapid, well-coordinated incident response arrangements are just as important as detection and prosecution.

Police Scotland has strengthened its specialist capability in cybercrime investigations and digital forensics. The newly established cyber and fraud unit is consolidating the prevention of cyberfraud and digital harm under one command. Innovation is also happening at the front line of policing through the deployment of digital forensic vans and digital evidence detection dogs and the exploration of AI-enabled efficiencies as part of the policing in a digital world programme.

Those changes matter, but we must be realistic about the constraints and challenges. Over 90 per cent of crimes now involve some form of digital evidence, and that places sustained pressure on our investigative capacity. The digital evidence-sharing capability programme, which is funded by the Scottish Government, is tackling that challenge and is now live across all police divisions. Across the justice system, we must—guided by the Christie principles—deliver integrated and secure services, providing better outcomes and best value for the public.

Legislation must evolve, too. The Computer Misuse Act 1990 remains the backbone of legislation on cyber-dependent crime, but it predates contemporary security research. The proposal by the UK Government of a statutory defence for legitimate security research is welcome, and we will continue to engage with the UK Government on that matter.

Alongside that, the UK Government has introduced the Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill, as mentioned by Ms Nicoll. The bill will widen the

scope of existing regulations to include managed service providers and data centres, it will harden essential services, and it will strengthen reporting. The bill will matter for Scotland. Some of our critical services and suppliers sit within its scope, for example health and drinking water. We will work with UK partners, regulators and industry to ensure smooth implementation.

The Scottish Government's refreshed "Strategic Framework for a Cyber Resilient Scotland 2025–2030" sets the vision for a digitally secure and resilient nation. It is a renewed commitment to protecting our people, organisations and future in an increasingly digital world. None of that can be achieved by Government alone. Prevention at scale is essential, and Scotland has established a national ecosystem to strengthen its ability to be more responsive and future focused.

The CyberScotland partnership helps to drive practical resilience and awareness across public, private and third sectors. The Scottish cyber co-ordination centre—SC3—provides intelligence and early warning and manages incident response co-ordination for the public sector. In partnership with the National Cyber Security Centre and Police Scotland, SC3 is helping us to stay ahead of the threat and respond effectively to minimise the impact of incidents when they occur. I recently launched the SC3 cyber observatory, which will gather and analyse cyberthreat data and maturity insights from the public sector, allowing us to better target support and intervention.

We are also investing £300,000 this year to equip the public sector workforce with the skills needed to safeguard our essential services. In line with the National Cyber Security Centre, we are positioning the cyber essentials standard as the baseline security standard for all organisations in Scotland. Alongside that, we are driving the adoption of multi-factor authentication and encouraging regular back-ups, incident response planning and the use of incident response exercises.

There are five priorities in our fight against cybercrime, as part of our need for a secure and efficient justice system. The first involves sustaining and targeting investment in policing capacity, completing the build-out of Police Scotland's cyber and fraud unit and refreshing front-line digital tooling. The second priority is to build on exemplar collaboration programmes, such as the digital evidence-sharing capability programme, to modernise our justice systems. The third is to enable legislation evolution, so that our laws are fit for today and resilient for the future. The fourth is to scale up prevention and skills. We must continue to build and enhance the capabilities of SC3 and the CyberScotland partnership and accelerate targeted prevention

campaigns for specific sectors and communities. Fifthly and finally, to embed accountability for public bodies and critical suppliers, we need to move to a place of mandating minimum-security baselines and transparent risk reporting.

Cybercrime is now a mainstream risk to our economy, our justice system and our people. Scotland has strong foundations in place: specialist policing capability, evidence of a maturing public sector, SC3, our national incident response and co-ordination centre, and an active partnership that reaches from Government into business and civil society. Our task is to lock in all those gains.

Our focus, as always, is to keep people safe, protect essential services, bring offenders to justice and ensure that Scotland remains digitally secure and resilient. I am very grateful to the Criminal Justice Committee for its work.

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

15:46

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): I welcome this opportunity to discuss cybercrime and the devastating impact that it can have on people and businesses. I thank the Criminal Justice Committee clerks for all their work to arrange the evidence sessions and compile the committee's report.

As was made clear throughout the evidence sessions, this problem is not going away—in fact, it is getting worse all the time, and more people are doing it. The technology that they are using is becoming more advanced. The criminals have more resources behind them—either from serious organised crime gangs, which always get themselves involved when they think that there is easy money to be made, or because of the increasing role that bad states such as Russia, Iran and North Korea are playing in this area.

This is a global problem, of course, but even the statistics for Scotland paint a grim story. According to official recorded crime data, there were an estimated 7,710 cybercrimes in Scotland in 2019–20. By 2024–25, the figure had almost doubled to 14,120. That equates to 38 incidents a day, which cover everything from fraud and extortion to sexual abuse and exploitation. We know that many such crimes are never reported, so the true picture is likely to be far worse.

The question that MSPs face is what to do about that. In the first instance, we must look to Police Scotland and the Scottish Government. I do not believe that this hugely complicated and

difficult subject should be the source of an intense political blame game. Even if not a single person in Scotland was guilty of a cybercrime, the problem facing ordinary Scots from international threats would still be considerable. My contribution to the debate is therefore intended to be entirely constructive.

The police do great work in this area, but they need more support. The difficulties that the force faces when it comes to officer numbers and resources—not to mention the impossible environment in which the police work—have been well documented in the chamber. They have a specific ask on this topic, which I urge the Scottish Government to deliver in full.

Chief Constable Jo Farrell has said that Police Scotland needs £105 million just to stand still, in effect, when it comes to officer numbers, and that a further £33 million would enable her to strengthen the workforce. That includes £6 million specifically for tackling cybercrime. She has cited cybercrime as a major problem, while the Scottish Police Federation has said that the response to cybercrime is being weakened by a lack of cash.

When she delivers her budget in the new year, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government must give the police every penny that they need. That money is important, because it has been proven that, when the justice authorities are supported, they can make an impact.

The banking protocol, whereby police work with bank staff to spot potential fraud in customer transactions, helped to save Scots £750,000 in the first three months of this year. Hundreds of incidents were prevented—often ones that would have involved elderly and vulnerable customers transferring money or handing over sensitive data to people who wanted only to exploit them and cause them harm.

The Edinburgh-based Cyber and Fraud Centre Scotland, which is headed by Jude McCorry, has done some great work to raise awareness and encourage businesses to work together to avoid themselves and each other being scammed. Its cyber and fraud hub has helped more than 500 victims over the past year, has prevented hundreds of thousands of pounds from being lost and, in some cases, has helped people to recover what was lost.

The organisation has also done great work on encouraging women to get involved in cybersecurity. Recent events brought together about 200 women and girls in the hope of guiding them towards a career in that area. We, in the chamber, are all well aware that, if we want the very best people to be involved, we cannot afford 50 per cent of the population thinking that it is not a subject area for them.

Cybercrime targets the most vulnerable people in our society. The despicable criminals who indulge in it do that on purpose. Their merciless exploitation of elderly people—taking advantage of the possibility that they are not up to date with technology or that they may be susceptible to being tricked—is inexcusable. Similarly, those who target young girls online in the hope of exploiting them sexually deserve the most severe punishments. We, in this country, can only do our bit while hoping that international agencies and foreign Governments step up, too.

Police in Scotland require more specialist skills, digital forensics and sustained investment. The Scottish Government must match its words with actions, to ensure that we have enough officers and capability in the wider justice system to hold to account those who are responsible.

Nobody is safe from cybercrime: from huge companies such as Jaguar and Marks and Spencer to small Scottish businesses; from major Government agencies, such as the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, to our smallest local authorities; and from wealthy individuals who are robbed of thousands to vulnerable people who lose everything that they own. That is why the problem deserves our utmost commitment and attention.

15:52

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): I am pleased to open on behalf of Scottish Labour. As a member of the Criminal Justice Committee, I thank my fellow committee members, the committee clerks and all stakeholders who were involved in the committee's work on the issue.

The committee's report is important and timely. Cybercrime rates across Scotland are at a significant level. As Sharon Dowey said, more than 14,000 cybercrimes were recorded in Scotland last year—a number that remains well above pre-pandemic levels. Cybercrime amounted to 5 per cent of all crimes recorded in Scotland last year, but digital technology and online spaces are being used to carry out more traditional crimes, too. We can see that from the fact that cybercrime accounted for 27 per cent of all sexual crimes reported last year.

In recent years, several high-profile cyberattacks have been launched against private companies and public bodies across Scotland—major companies such as Marks and Spencer, the Co-op, Adidas and H&M have been hit by cyberattacks this year alone. NatWest provided alarming evidence to the committee that its customers have to be protected from more than 100 million cyberattacks every month.

Earlier this year, Glasgow City Council, the City of Edinburgh Council and West Lothian Council all suffered cyberattacks that were aimed at disrupting online education services. Hackers managed to access a significant amount of information from NHS Dumfries and Galloway last year, including the confidential details of staff and patients. In 2020, SEPA endured one of Scotland's worst-ever cyberattacks, when thousands of its digital files were stolen. Whether we look at cybercrime statistics or examples of cyberattacks, it is clear that cybercrime is an issue that affects all of Scotland, including individuals and organisations.

Two common themes emerged in the evidence that the committee heard on how we can better protect ourselves from cybercrime. The first theme was that the current state of Scotland's cyber resilience is inadequate and must be improved. Digital participation in Scotland has continued to increase, particularly among older people, and more than 90 per cent of adults now use the internet for work or personal activities. That is to be welcomed, but it brings greater risks of cybercrime.

Previous results from the Scottish crime and justice survey found that nearly 5 per cent of internet users in Scotland had experienced computer viruses, received scam emails or had banking details stolen online. In addition, the Scottish household survey found that nearly 10 per cent of all adults in Scotland did not take any online security measures, such as not opening emails from unknown senders or not sharing personal information online. That is why some of the proposals in the Scottish Government's cyber resilient Scotland framework that focus on improving cyber learning are welcome.

Embedding cyber learning in the school curriculum, expanding the availability of cyber learning resources and improving access to cyber learning opportunities for adults are all practical steps. The £300,000 that has been allocated for an upskilling fund to strengthen cybersecurity skills across the public sector is also very welcome.

However, I believe that the Scottish Government must do more to educate everybody—in particular, young men and boys—on the harmful effect that far-right and misogynistic online content can have on their behaviour, and to tackle the resulting sexism, misogyny and violence in schools. That is why I again call on the Scottish Government to bring forward a cross-campus strategy to tackle the issue. I think that that is relevant to today's debate.

Although education is vital in improving cyber resilience, we must also look at other avenues to achieve that aim, such as legislation. The Online Safety Act 2023 has now come into force, and I

urge the Scottish Government to work with the UK Government and Ofcom to ensure that it is effective, especially in the light of the fact that reports of online child abuse in Scotland have doubled in a year.

The Scottish Government should also make representations to the UK Government and Ofcom on ensuring that the provisions in the Online Safety Act 2023 that are designed to tackle fraudulent online advertising are implemented as soon as possible, and I encourage ministers to engage with the UK Government and Ofcom on how the Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill will be implemented in Scotland, should it be passed at Westminster.

There are many other aspects of improving Scotland's cyber resilience that I hope will be considered in today's debate, such as the need for regulation to reduce the harms associated with AI technology, including deepfakes, and the need to ensure that digital technology that is used in the public sector is better protected from cyberattacks. I welcome the action that the Scottish Government is taking, such as its recent announcement on deepfakes.

The second theme that emerged in evidence to the committee in relation to tackling cybercrime was the need for the Scottish Government to invest more in cybersecurity. Organisations ranging from the Cyber and Fraud Centre Scotland to the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service have identified the need for further investment. The committee heard from Police Scotland on the significant financial challenges that it faces, which Sharon Dowey mentioned, and how that affects its ability to tackle cybercrime.

I hope that the need for greater investment in cybersecurity will be explored further in today's debate. It is important to note that the true scale of cybercrime across Scotland is likely to be greater than we expect, given that it often goes unreported by individuals and organisations. It is also likely to become a bigger issue in the future.

I hope that the Scottish Government will reflect on all the points that I have raised and that other members will raise on the need for cyber resilience and investment in cybersecurity.

15:59

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I am grateful to the Criminal Justice Committee and all who contributed to the inquiry that resulted in the timely and important report that we are discussing today.

Cybercrime and cybersecurity are often discussed as abstract, technical or even distant issues. However, the report makes it unmistakably

clear that they are none of those things. Cybercrime is not virtual harm—it is real harm. It is harm that lands on kitchen tables, in bank accounts, in workplaces and in the lives of people who are all too often already carrying the heaviest burdens.

The evidence that the committee gathered is sobering. Although there has been a recent decrease in estimated cybercrime compared with the previous year, levels remain far above those that were seen before the pandemic. Cybercrime now accounts for at least 5 per cent of all recorded crime in Scotland and for more than a quarter of sexual crimes. Nearly all crimes involving threat and extortion are now cyber enabled. Fraud, in particular, has been transformed by the digital environment, with estimates suggesting that almost half of all fraud now involves cyber methods.

Behind those statistics are people: older people who are targeted by increasingly sophisticated scams, often powered by AI and deepfake technology; workers whose personal data is stolen and traded repeatedly long after the original breach; staff in businesses and public services who are dealing with the stress, fear and disruption that is caused by ransomware attacks; island communities left without access to food because a supply chain was digitally attacked; and people in local authorities who are unable to deliver essential services because their systems have been compromised. The report rightly centres those human impacts.

I thank all those who gave evidence to the committee, and particularly those from organisations such as Age Scotland, who reminded the committee that many victims do not report cybercrime because they do not know where to turn, they fear that they will not be believed or they assume that nothing can be done. That is not a failure of those individuals; it is a failure of our systems. If people do not feel supported, trusted and protected, our response to cybercrime is already falling short.

The report also highlights a stark imbalance of power and resources. Large institutions such as banks are able to invest millions in cyber defence, employing hundreds of staff to monitor and block attacks, although even then, as the committee heard and as we have heard this afternoon, they are subjected to tens of millions of attacks every month. Small businesses, charities and third sector organisations simply do not have that capacity, nor do many public bodies that are forced to maintain ageing legacy systems while trying to meet growing digital demands. That imbalance matters. Cyber criminals need to succeed only once, and that one-time success can

be devastating for people. Everybody else's protections need to work all the time.

The approach of the Scottish Greens to the issue comes from a clear set of principles. We believe in safety and justice for all, but we also believe that how we pursue safety matters. We reject the false choice between security and rights. We do not believe that expanding mass surveillance, eroding privacy or normalising intrusive state powers will necessarily keep people safer in the long run. In fact, history tells us the opposite. That means that, although we support properly resourced, skilled and specialist policing to tackle cybercrime, we will always scrutinise proposals that risk widening surveillance without clear necessity, proportionality and democratic oversight.

Cybercrime is borderless and complex, but that cannot become an excuse for undermining civil liberties or treating everyone as a suspect by default. Instead, the report points us towards a more effective and more just approach. Prevention, resilience and accountability must sit at the heart of our response.

Prevention means investing in digital literacy and public awareness, particularly for older people and other groups that are most at risk. It means ensuring that reporting mechanisms are accessible, trusted and trauma informed. It means recognising that shame and fear are powerful silencers and that we must design systems that actively counter that.

Resilience means having sustained investment in public sector digital infrastructure, not piecemeal fixes. It means supporting small and medium-sized enterprises and the voluntary sector with practical help, and not just advice that they cannot afford to implement. It means recognising cybersecurity as essential public infrastructure and not as an optional add-on.

Accountability means asking difficult questions of those who profit from insecure systems. As the committee heard, stolen data can be traded again and again with devastating consequences, while responsibility is too often pushed back on to victims. We must seriously consider whether our legal frameworks adequately reflect the harm that is caused by the theft and trafficking of data, and whether corporations and platforms are doing enough to design systems that are secure by default.

Audrey Nicoll: One issue that emerged during the committee's scrutiny that has not yet been touched on, and which relates to resilience, is insurance. Businesses are perhaps more able to absorb the cost of insurance, which is an important part of a business's overall resilience to an attack.

Maggie Chapman: Absolutely. Not everybody will be able to afford insurance, nor will everybody even think that it is something that they need to have. The fact that its affordability will put insurance out of reach of individuals or organisations needs to be part of our thinking about resilience and accountability.

The report does not offer easy answers, but it does offer clarity. Cybercrime is not just a policing issue; it is an issue of social justice, equality, workers' rights and public services, and our response must be as interconnected as the systems on which our society now depends.

I look forward to hearing the rest of the speeches in the debate and then to working together to ensure that Scotland's response to cybercrime is one that protects people, upholds rights and puts justice, not fear, at its core.

16:06

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I join other speakers in thanking the members of the Criminal Justice Committee for allowing this debate to take place and, more important, for undertaking detailed scrutiny of this important issue. Audrey Nicoll comprehensively set out the breadth of issues that are covered in the report, which leaves little doubt about the amount of work that will need to be done to address the many and various challenges going forward.

Cybercrime often leaves victims, whether they are individuals or organisations, harmed in profound and lasting ways. Were we in any doubt about that, the subject of the item of business that preceded this debate should have dispelled that. Abuse by grooming gangs is a horrific exemplification of that, reflecting the way in which online harms are, as Maggie Chapman said, very real.

Those who have been the target of cyber-enabled fraud can lose their life savings and have their personal data harvested. The convener of the Criminal Justice Committee rightly pointed to the fact that, these days, data harvesting is often more of a motive for perpetrators than cash. Individuals who are subjected to the non-consensual distribution of private sexual images face enduring trauma, and companies whose online systems are compromised by hackers can be held to ransom and lose decades of work and the trust of customers.

Katy Clark and Audrey Nicoll spoke about the extent of cybercrime and the fact that large organisations can find themselves being subjected to millions of attacks over the course of a month. The investment that businesses put into IT departments to try to brace against those attacks has a cost. However, Maggie Chapman is right

that, although businesses may be most at risk and most in need of resilience being put in place, all organisations in the public, private and third sectors need to have resilience.

Much of the crime is not new, but technology is allowing it to be carried out in a different and more effective way and to target a wider cohort of potential victims. The growing use of AI and other emerging technologies means that that trend is set to continue and get worse, as Sharon Dowey rightly said.

How do we rise to meet those growing challenges? More focus by the Parliament—including the type of inquiry that the Criminal Justice Committee carried out—is a start. If we, as legislators, are to put in place appropriate and robust safeguards and protections, we need to develop a detailed understanding of what is happening and how that is likely to change.

The nature of these issues means that we will require a collaborative working approach between Parliaments and Governments, not just here, in the UK, but internationally. As I said, building greater cyber resilience into systems and networks across the public, private and third sectors is crucial, and we need to continually raise awareness among the public of the risks and how to minimise them.

The scale of the challenge is shown by the fact that cyber-enabled fraud is estimated to account for nearly half of all frauds in 2024-25. The committee heard that, perhaps unsurprisingly, that type of crime increasingly targets more vulnerable groups, including the elderly. The demographic trend of an ageing population and the pace at which technological change is happening are creating a perfect storm. Perpetrators evolve and adapt their techniques and tactics, making the work that is done by Police Scotland, community organisations and others through public awareness campaigns exceptionally difficult. We are dealing with the ultimate moving target. That is why the Scottish Liberal Democrats have been clear in calling for Police Scotland to have enhanced support in the area and to be given the tools that it needs.

I am grateful to the Scottish Police Authority for its briefing, which sets out many of the ways in which Police Scotland has sought to invest and adapt to the changing challenge. I suspect that, during the past decade, when there has been a bit of an obsession with officer numbers—for reasons that I understand—we have perhaps lost sight of the debate that we need to have about the types of skills and resourcing that policing requires now and into the future. Staying one step ahead of organised crime gangs and other types of criminals is not straightforward, but our police and, indeed, our entire criminal justice system need to

be given a fighting chance. Others have pointed to the need for resourcing to enable that.

As an islander, I was interested in, although not surprised by, the evidence that Jude McCorry of the Cyber and Fraud Centre gave on how island communities are at a particular risk of being left without food supplies due to cyberattacks on supermarkets and supply chains.

As we try address the digital divide, we recognise that the digital space is levelling the playing field and opening up access to services in a way that is hugely beneficial, but at the same time it expands the risk of individuals and organisations being susceptible to becoming victims of fraud. As somebody who represents an island community, I see that very clearly. If we are to continue to move towards the modernisation of critical services, which is clearly necessary, we must be prepared to address the myriad of cybersecurity risks that will accompany that process.

It would be remiss of me not to return to the growing issue of online sexual violence and abuse, which has been amplified by the availability of deepfake technology and other generative AI tools, and which disproportionately impacts young women and girls. That issue has been driven largely by the rise in toxic masculinity in our society—Katy Clark made that point—and it will therefore require reform on a systemic level. Education will be key to changing attitudes, but there will also be a role for industry to play. Technology companies should not be given free rein to introduce new tools, systems or platforms into the market unless they have been built with safeguarding and responsibility in mind. Regulators must be proactive while also making clear the responsibilities and obligations on technology companies that operate in that space.

As a former member of the Criminal Justice Committee, I do not want to tell its current members what they should be doing, but it could recommend in its legacy report that future committees should return to the issue regularly. Putting my convener's group hat on for a second, I note that it is also an issue that would benefit from cross-committee working.

For now, I thank Audrey Nicoll and the members of the committee for allowing this debate to take place. We will need to do more work on the subject, but this has been a decent start.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We now move to the open debate. I advise members that there is some time in hand.

16:14

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate on the very short report that the Criminal Justice Committee has published on cybercrime and cybersecurity in Scotland.

Unlike Liam McArthur, who is a former member of the committee, I am current member of the committee, but I was not a member at the time that it undertook the activity or its report. I commend the convener and my colleagues for the work that they undertook.

The report makes it clear that cybercrime is no longer a marginal or technical issue. It is now a central challenge for justice, for economic security and for democratic resilience. Although the most recent figures show a reduction in recorded cybercrime compared with the previous year, as Katy Clark set out, levels remain significantly higher now than they were before the pandemic. As Police Scotland told the committee, it estimates that cybercrime constitutes around 5 per cent of all recorded crime. Cyber-enabled offending now makes up a substantial proportion of fraud, sexual crime and threats and extortion, so its impact is very real and significant.

Even then, those figures tell only part of the story, because, as Sharon Dowey mentioned, many cybercrimes go unreported, particularly when victims feel embarrassed, uncertain or powerless—something that we know is often a feature of someone's experience when they have been caught out by a scam.

The evidence from Age Scotland was particularly striking in highlighting the impact of cybercrime on older people. AI-enabled scams, impersonation and increasingly convincing fraudulent communications are eroding confidence and causing real distress. The fact that a significant proportion of victims do not report those crimes should concern us deeply. Prevention, education and accessible reporting mechanisms are therefore essential.

We should recognise that cybercrime does not affect all people or organisations equally. Larger institutions, such as banks, have the means and ability to invest heavily in sophisticated cyberdefences. The evidence from the financial sector illustrated the scale of the attacks that it faces and the scale of the resource that is required to defend against them. I do not denigrate the seriousness of the impact on our financial institutions, but, by comparison, small businesses, charities and individuals simply do not have their capacity, yet are also exposed to the threat of cybercrime. That imbalance is one of the challenges that we need to consider as we move forward.

The committee heard evidence from businesses such as Arnold Clark that demonstrated that even well-resourced organisations can be brought to a standstill by a single successful attack. The consequences were not limited to data loss or financial costs; individuals were affected as well—customers were stranded, staff were unable to work and essential services were disrupted. We should bear in mind that when a business is impacted, individuals are also impacted.

Cybercrime should therefore not be understood only as theft but as a form of disruption with tangible human and economic consequences. That same point applies in the public sector and has been made about the substantial attack on SEPA. Cyberattacks on local authorities, public bodies and supply chains can interrupt education, social care, food distribution and transport. In an increasingly interconnected digital environment, disruption in one system can quickly cascade into many others. I believe that that reality should concern us all, because it speaks directly to societal results.

It is important to recognise—this has been touched on in the debate—that not all cyberthreats originate from criminal networks that are motivated solely by financial gain. We now operate in a global context in which hostile state actors routinely use cyber capabilities as tools of influence, espionage and destabilisation. Attacks on public institutions, democratic processes and critical infrastructure demonstrate that cyberactivity has, sadly, become a normalised instrument of hostile state power, and Scotland is not insulated from those dynamics. Our public services, universities, research institutions and digital infrastructure are part of a wider international system. Hostile cyberactivity may not always target Scotland directly, but it can still have direct effects here through attacks on UK-wide systems and supply chains, or through disinformation, which I believe is one of the greatest challenges of our age. Such activity is designed to undermine trust in democratic institutions.

The overlap between state-sponsored cyberactivity and organised criminal methods, including ransomware and data theft, further complicates detection and response. That is why co-ordination and partnership are critical. Effective responses to cyberthreats, whether criminal or state sponsored, depend on close co-operation between Police Scotland, UK agencies, international partners and the private sector. I therefore welcome the continued engagement with the National Cyber Security Centre and the work of the CyberScotland partnership and the Scottish cyber co-ordination centre.

Liam McArthur is probably right that there has been too much emphasis on the headline figures for police officer numbers. We should be turning our attention to whether the police force and other parts of the system are properly equipped to respond to the threats that we face.

Audrey Nicoll rose—

Jamie Hepburn: I see that the convener wants to intervene. She may be about to make this point, but I will make my point and then hear hers.

We will have to consider the issue through the committee's budget scrutiny of the evidence that has been provided to us thus far.

Audrey Nicoll: On the point that Jamie Hepburn has eloquently set out about how organisations or individuals respond, one point that came out in committee was the narration by Arnold Clark of how it responded to a unique, unusual, significant and serious event, and what should be done, particularly when a ransom is demanded. That is an important part of the overall resilience strategy.

Jamie Hepburn: I agree. That speaks to the need for us to ensure that Scotland continues to build its own cyber resilience. The elements that Audrey Nicoll laid out must be part of that.

The refreshed cyber resilient Scotland framework for 2025 to 2030 is an important step. Of course, that has to be matched by investment and practical support, particularly for smaller businesses, charities and community organisations, which might lack in-house expertise.

There is also a broader question about whether our legal frameworks are keeping pace with the realities of cybercrime, particularly in relation to stolen data. The harm that is caused by data breaches can be repeated and prolonged, affecting victims long after the initial attack.

Cybercrime sits at the intersection of criminal justice, economic security, national resilience and democratic trust. It is driven by organised crime, enabled by rapid technological change and, increasingly, exploited by hostile states that seek to undermine open societies. Addressing it requires more than reactive enforcement; it requires prevention, partnership, investment and public confidence. I agree with Liam McArthur that the area warrants further attention, which the Parliament should continue to give it.

16:22

Davy Russell (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (Lab): I thank the Criminal Justice Committee for bringing the debate to the chamber. I am sure that I am not alone in worrying about the

rise of cybercrime in Scotland. We can see from the Criminal Justice Committee's report that cyber criminals were able to nearly double their output overnight in response to the pandemic, as their supply of in-person victims dried up.

In addition, certain crimes lend themselves much more readily to becoming cybercrimes; there is a statistical propensity for that with sexual crimes and with threats and extortion. New technologies such as deepfakes and generative AI have enabled a whole new kind of fraud and deception. Many of our constituents are worried that they or a loved one will fall victim to an AI-generated request for money, although that pales in comparison with the violation of deepfake pornographic imagery.

The Scottish Government must ensure that Police Scotland is adequately resourced and prepared, not for the crimes of the last century, but for the crimes of this century and beyond. That includes ensuring that the police have the powers to investigate and act if a new type of crime has been committed. The Parliament must be swift and flexible, and it must bring in appropriate legislation accordingly.

However, the ability to identify crime will not be enough. As often as not, the culprits are far outside the UK, and a stronger cyberdefence is paramount. Schools should be our first port of call in giving children the experience of identifying unfriendly links and invitations. That needs to be an active Government initiative, not simply a hope that teachers who are already hard stretched will be able to rise to the challenge.

Schools and community centres should also be hubs where parents and grandparents can learn what to do should their child—or even they—fall victim to cybercrime, because it will be a learning curve for us all. Maybe we should resurrect the old 1950s public information films, just to make people aware.

I, too, have been approached by many older residents who are out of their comfort zone with digital platforms. The Bank of Scotland's decision to close the last branch in Larkhall highlighted that issue, with many feeling that in-person services were the last backstop between them and cyber criminals.

The Government should do all that it can to protect in-person banking services, in particular to prevent older constituents from falling victim to financial cybercrime. Some criminal ploys have existed for a long time—fleecing emails, for example, and malign links on social media, often in the guise of bots. However, AI has introduced a new level of capability to mislead vulnerable groups and businesses on an industrial scale.

I would hope that all my colleagues would be against those things, but I read a few weeks ago that the First Minister was in favour of the Iranian bots because they are pro-independence for some reason. That aside, at some point or another, everyone in this chamber will have been on the receiving end of abuse and insults because of some point of view that they might have held in the past. Basically, doing that on social media is a cybercrime and should never be considered acceptable.

Cybercriminality, in any shape or form, regardless of how it is manifested, is committed by calculated cold villains and no one is immune from it. The Scottish Government needs to be industrious and dynamic in its legislation to protect the public and businesses, and criminals need to be prosecuted with vigour. No doubt the worst is yet to come. As technology rapidly improves, those who are currently considered immune from AI deception may be the most vulnerable. It may be that entirely new types of cybercrime emerge that are far beyond what we can comprehend today.

We are at the start of a fantastic journey, on which we will see lots of great things. However, we should take heed, as we do not know where we will end up or what perils await in these uncharted waters.

16:27

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): We are all potential victims of cybercrime—and the sad fact is that thousands of people in Scotland have been. Since 2019, the annual number of recorded cybercrimes has doubled from 7,710 to just over 14,000. That is probably the tip of the iceberg, because those are only the numbers that are recorded.

We all rely on websites, apps, systems and data in our daily lives. Although they bring great benefits, the convenience comes at a cost. Cyberoffending, coupled with online harm, is increasing, whether that is people who are seeking to exploit the vulnerable or using online activities as a vehicle for offending behaviour.

It is, indeed, the growing crime of our times, which is why cyber resilience and digital safety are more important than ever. I am pleased to hear about the many Scottish Government initiatives that the cabinet secretary outlined.

Cyberthreats are evolving rapidly, technology is ever-changing and becoming more sophisticated, and it is our shared responsibility to meet the challenges that Scotland faces. That is why I was pleased that the Criminal Justice Committee took such valuable evidence to allow us to produce a

report on cybercrime, which is about where we are now and where we must go in the future.

We listened to fascinating but sometimes chilling evidence from banks, charities, retailers, Police Scotland and organised crime experts about the toll that combating this ever-growing scourge is taking on them. We learned that some cyberthreats cannot realistically be fully mitigated, regardless of how much preventative spending takes place. Major systemic vulnerabilities often have roots in legacy technologies and outdated practices, so wider digital and cultural transformation is often required to tackle the underlying cause.

For other risks, making the best use of the systems and services that are already in place is often more effective and better value for money than buying in advanced security solutions.

On the plus side, there is no doubt that the digital economy is driving Scotland's economic growth and shaping our future, and that it brings great opportunities. The Scottish Government's approach is built on strong partnerships across sectors, reinforcing the point that collective effort is critical if we are to safeguard people and unlock the economic potential of our secure digital future. That includes continued engagement with the UK Government and the National Cyber Security Centre on reserved security matters, alongside our European partners.

That is why the Scottish cyber co-ordination centre promotes effective detection and response processes with a strategic framework. The framework details actions and supports to help people, businesses and organisations across Scotland to recognise and prepare for the inevitable cyberthreats. In addition, the centre's cyber observatory, in particular, will be vital in alerting organisations to potential threats. The centre aims to improve incident response, recovery and intelligence sharing, and to get a much better understanding of cybersecurity.

Collaboration is at the heart of the SNP Government's strategy, because no Government can tackle cyber challenges alone—Scotland is no exception. Speaking about the challenges of investigating cybercrime, Assistant Chief Constable Stuart Houston of Police Scotland told the committee:

"these crimes are often borderless and are, on occasion, perpetrated outwith the UK."

He went on:

"Quite often, a network of people are involved in the larger ransomware attacks. In the past, organised crime groups would operate in networks of people who knew one another, but we need to be alive to the fact that people now often operate in networks where they have only seen someone through a screen."

David Keenan, chief information officer with Arnold Clark, who was mentioned earlier, spoke to the committee about the impact of a major cyberattack that happened to the business in December 2022. It was a ransomware attack in which a large amount of sensitive customer and corporate employee data was stolen. The criminals deliberately planned the timing of the attack over the Christmas period, when staffing levels in the organisation would be reduced and it would take longer for staff to detect and respond to the attack.

Mr Keenan said:

"In the days immediately after the attack on Arnold Clark, when we were unable to operate our systems for a period, more than 4,000 customers were expecting to come and make use of our services. More than 700 people who had bought a car were expecting to take delivery of that vehicle. Some 2,000 people who either had their car in for a service or had booked in to have their car serviced were unable to have that work done. We were unable to provide our rental service to more than 1,500 people who had planned to make use of it, many of whom were holidaymakers who were travelling from abroad ... That was the direct impact on customers."

He went on to say that the cyberattack also had a major impact on the wellbeing of staff of Arnold Clark and their ability to do their job. He said:

"At the time of the incident, we had well over 200 members of staff in IT, with a multimillion-pound budget and 12 members of staff who were dedicated to cybersecurity, but that still was not enough to protect us."

He went on:

"Ultimately, a cybercriminal has to be lucky only once, but we have to be lucky against every single attack."—*[Official Report, Criminal Justice Committee, 14 May 2025; c 5, 7.]*

That was a very well-made point.

In her oral evidence to the committee, the chief constable of Police Scotland, Jo Farrell, said:

"Poverty, geopolitics, cybercrime and civil unrest are driving a high level of demand, and the challenge for policing is evolving rapidly. That is illustrated by the increase in online harm and threat and in violence associated with organised crime, as well as a high level of protests. The threat is now."—*[Official Report, Criminal Justice Committee, 5 November 2025; c 26.]*

That is a fitting remark to end with. The threat is now, and we must continue to innovate to find ways to combat it.

16:33

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Like other members, I am delighted to speak in the debate as a member of the Criminal Justice Committee. Scotland thrives when it is confident, connected and secure in today's world, and that means being a digitally secure and resilient nation. Digital technology can

no longer be considered a separate sector of our economy. It underpins almost everything that we do, from how businesses trade and grow, how public services are delivered and how families stay in touch to how communities organise themselves. Digital systems shape our daily lives and Scotland's future prosperity. They are driving economic growth, opening up new opportunities and helping Scotland to compete in a global stage.

As other members have said, however, that opportunity brings responsibility. As our reliance on digital technology grows, so, too, does the importance of cyber resilience and digital safety. We all depend on websites, apps, systems and data, often without even giving it a second thought. They make life more convenient, efficient and connected, yet, in a digitally connected world, convenience comes at a cost.

Cyberthreats are increasing in scale and sophistication. Incidents of cyberoffending and online harm are increasing in number, whether that is criminals seeking to exploit vulnerable people, disrupt essential services or use online activity as a gateway to wider offending. The point was made to us as a committee that such risks are no longer abstract or confined to large organisations but affect individuals, families, small businesses, charities, schools and public bodies alike. In many cases, crimes that we once thought of as traditional, such as fraud, domestic abuse, stalking and exploitation, now have a clear cyber or digital dimension.

The new reality has profound implications for policing and public safety. This morning, ahead of the debate, the Scottish Police Authority wrote to the committee about that. Police Scotland's 2030 vision, which was launched last year, recognises the changing landscape and has a clear focus on safer communities, less crime, supported victims and a thriving workforce. Crucially, it includes a commitment to strengthen Scotland's response to cybercrime and fraud, which includes establishing a dedicated cyber and fraud unit and developing specialist skills and training across the workforce. The SPA provides robust oversight of that work through its policing performance committee, which ensures transparency, scrutiny and public accountability.

We are already seeing tangible progress. Police Scotland has established its cyber and fraud unit, which will continue to evolve as demand grows. Work is already under way to join the UK-wide fraud and cybercrime reporting and analysis service, which will help to improve intelligence, consistency and victim support. Alongside that, the policing in a digital world programme is equipping officers and staff to respond to cybercrime using the four Ps approach: pursue, protect, prepare and prevent.

Innovation plays a vital role. The introduction of tools such as the child abuse image database, which uses face-matching technology, has transformed how officers work by using artificial intelligence to reduce the time that is spent reviewing images and to allow greater focus on identifying victims and safeguarding children. Digital forensic vans are speeding up investigations and reducing the time that people are separated from their devices. Police Scotland's cyber alarm is supporting businesses and organisations across Scotland to identify vulnerabilities and protect themselves from attack.

We must be clear about the scale of the challenge. The number of recorded crimes with a cyber element continues to grow, and new performance measures that have been introduced by Police Scotland show a rising volume of cyber-tagged crimes. However, those figures still underestimate the true picture. Many offences, from fraud to domestic abuse, are enabled by everyday technology and leave a digital footprint, even if they are not yet consistently recorded as cyber-related. Improving our understanding of that complexity is essential if policing resources are to be effectively directed and victims are to be properly supported.

Digital forensics is therefore central to modern justice. The ability to identify, extract and present digital evidence is now integral to investigations, yet demand is increasing faster than capacity. The Scottish Police Authority continues to scrutinise Police Scotland's approach to building a sustainable digital forensic capability, because it recognises that evidential integrity, public trust and victim confidence all depend on it. Meeting those challenges is a shared responsibility, and the Government has a vital role to play, but it cannot act alone, which is a point that has just been made by Rona Mackay. The Scottish National Party Government is determined to do everything that it can within its powers to strengthen cyber resilience. It will work closely with Police Scotland, the Scottish Police Authority, the UK Government and the National Cyber Security Centre on reserved matters, and it will work, where appropriate, with our European partners.

Our wider approach is rooted in partnership. We work with industry, academia, the third sector and local government, because collective effort is essential if we are to safeguard people and unlock the economic potential of a secure digital future. Collaboration is not an optional extra; it is the only effective response to threats that constantly evolve. That is why Scotland places such emphasis on preparedness, detection and response. The Scottish cyber co-ordination centre plays a crucial role in promoting effective incident response and recovery, which helps organisations to act quickly and confidently when incidents

occur. That work is guided by the strategic framework for a cyber resilient Scotland, which was developed with partners through the CyberScotland partnership. A key development in that framework is the cyber observatory, which will strengthen intelligence sharing, improve early warning of emerging threats and help to target support to where it is needed most. Together, those efforts will help to ensure that cyber resilience is embedded across sectors rather than treated as an afterthought.

A secure digital environment builds trust. Trust enables investment. Investment supports growth and inclusion. Growth, in turn, strengthens Scotland's ability to thrive in an increasingly digital world. Cyber resilience, at its best, fosters confidence to innovate, connect and ensure that Scotland is ready to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow. By continuing to work together, we can ensure that Scotland remains not only digitally connected but digitally secure, resilient and fit for the future.

Like other members, including Liam McArthur, I thank the Criminal Justice Committee, particularly its clerks, for allowing us to provide good scrutiny of the matter. We must continue to scrutinise it well into the future, particularly as the threat of cybercrime grows.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches.

16:40

Maggie Chapman: I am very grateful for the contributions that have been made during the debate. It is clear that there is a shared recognition across the chamber that cybercrime poses a profound and evolving challenge for Scotland. Where we might differ is not on the seriousness or urgency of the threat but on how we respond to it.

The committee report that we are debating is careful, evidence based and grounded in lived experience. It shows us that cybercrime is not confined to laptops and servers. Such crime reaches into every corner of our society. It disrupts businesses, undermines public services, damages mental health and erodes trust, and it does so in ways that disproportionately affect those with the least power and the fewest resources.

That is why the Scottish Greens will continue to argue that any response to cybercrime must start with people, not technology alone. Victims must be believed, supported and protected. Reporting systems must be clear, accessible and properly resourced. Prevention must be given at least as much weight as enforcement. As Liam McArthur and other members noted, that all means that the education, awareness raising and support that we provide for people must be appropriately tailored

to the right audience, whether it is older people at risk of scams, young people who spend more and more of their lives in digital spaces or organisations that hold valuable data and information.

Liam McArthur: Maggie Chapman has made the point that the pathways for reporting cybercrime and cyberfraud must be as empathetic and supportive as they can be. As a number of members have observed, people often feel a sense of shame about what has happened. Particularly with elderly people, there can often be a sense that admitting to what happened might call into question their capacity, which might have wider consequences, so we must be as empathetic and supportive as we can be. However, I think that it is inevitable that it will be very difficult to get everybody to feel confident in reporting such crimes.

Maggie Chapman: I absolutely agree. That is why we need to take a holistic view and ensure that everybody who supports older people has conversations to reassure those people that they will not be treated as daft or stupid and that their admissions about what happened to them will not be used as an excuse to change their care situation or anything like that. That is imperative.

Sharon Dowey, Davy Russell and other members spoke clearly about the need to ensure that Police Scotland has the resources that it needs. I want to be clear: we support investment in specialist skills, modernised systems and co-operation across borders when crime is transnational. Police Scotland, the courts and the wider justice system must be equipped for the world that we now live in, not the one that we wish still existed. That might mean having challenging conversations with some people. Policing is changing, so we cannot just do more of what we did decades ago, even if that is what some people expect or want.

As we have heard, some of our legislation will need radical updating in order to be fit for purpose. However, I will continue to sound a note of caution: cybersecurity must not become an excuse or a gateway for expanding intrusive surveillance or weakening fundamental rights. Safety that is built on fear, secrecy or overreach is not sustainable. Trust is created not by treating everyone as a potential threat, but by ensuring transparency, accountability and respect for human rights.

Several members, including Rona Mackay and Fulton MacGregor, have spoken about artificial intelligence and emerging technologies. Those developments raise urgent questions not only about how crime is committed but about how power is exercised. We must ensure that new tools do not deepen existing inequalities, embed

bias or create systems that are impossible to challenge or understand.

We have also heard this afternoon, from Jamie Hepburn and others, that our public services—and, indeed, many of the other services that we all rely on at different points in our lives—are targeted by different ill-intentioned actors. We must ensure that the services—and the infrastructure that they rely on—are secure and resilient; we cannot just patch systems that are already creaking under the strain of technological advancement.

The report also reminds us that responsibility cannot rest solely with individuals. Too often, people are told to be more vigilant, to be more careful and to be more cyber aware, while operating in digital environments that are designed without their safety in mind. We need stronger expectations and regulations for organisations, platforms and suppliers to build security into systems from the outset and to take responsibility when failures occur.

Cybercrime exposes the cracks in our social and economic structures. It exploits isolation, poverty, underinvestment and digital exclusion. Therefore, addressing it effectively means addressing those underlying conditions as well.

I welcome the committee's decision to draw Parliament's attention to these issues, and I urge the Scottish Government to respond with ambition as well as urgency. Cyber resilience must be treated as core public infrastructure. Support for small businesses, charities and local authorities must be practical and sustained, and any legislative or policy changes must be rooted firmly in human rights and social justice. The challenge before us is not simply to become more secure but to become more just. If we rise to that challenge, Scotland can lead not only in technological resilience but in showing that safety and freedom are not opposites—they are mutually reinforcing partners.

16:46

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank the clerks and the witnesses who gave evidence on which to draw up the report, which I found very interesting. Onlookers might not find the subject matter interesting, but I do. The inquiry drew to my attention the importance of the Criminal Justice Committee taking time to tackle the issue.

The current levels of cybercrime are around double pre-pandemic levels. We are living more of our lives online, and our children are therefore more exposed to the risk of cybercrime. In fact, cybercrime is one of the most serious threats to national security. If anyone has the chance to watch the "Panorama" programme, it is definitely worth doing so—it is actually quite scary.

Cybercrime is usually associated with data theft and ransomware, but it also includes offences such as child abuse and human trafficking. Its growth does not just affect large corporations—as Maggie Chapman and others have said, small businesses are commonly targeted, as they tend to have weaker defences.

Davy Russell made an important point about intimate image-based abuse, which is an area that I have been doing work in. The rise in the number of deepfakes is alarming, particularly in relation to pornography. It is very important that we are vigilant and legislate accordingly.

I welcome Police Scotland's recent establishment of the cyber and fraud unit. The pressure on Police Scotland to investigate crime that is increasingly complex due to a cyber or digital component is greater than ever. It is also extremely important that we have the relevant expertise in our National Crime Agency to be able to deal with it, because there are clever people behind such crimes, as we know.

Last month, the chief constable, Jo Farrell, told the Criminal Justice Committee that there has been

"an increase in the use of cyber to commit crime, including fraud".

She also noted that money laundering was on the rise—I was surprised that people still use money. In a cashless economy, the greater threat is to vulnerable individuals, as many members have talked about, and to the economy itself.

The chief constable also noted that there has been a dramatic rise in reports of online abuse of children. She said that, last year, Police Scotland

"received just in excess of 700 notifications in relation to suspicions, information and intelligence about online harm relating to children. In one year, that number has increased to nearly 1,500."—[*Official Report, Criminal Justice Committee*, 5 November 2025; c 28.]

She went on to say that we are seeing online-enabled violence against young people.

Online child abuse takes many forms, but it can include sexual exploitation, grooming—as we know—and communication with children for sexual purpose. It also includes sexting and cyberbullying.

The most common type of cybercrime remains ransomware attacks, which Rona Mackay talked about. There is a type of malware that prevents people from accessing their device and the data that is stored on it, and it works by encrypting their files. An astonishing number of companies have paid a ransom in such circumstances, although they might not say that they have done so. Miles Bonfield from the National Crime Agency said at a

Criminal Justice Committee meeting earlier this year:

“Ransomware that is used for financial gain remains the foremost serious organised crime cyberthreat to the whole UK, including Scotland.”—[*Official Report, Criminal Justice Committee*, 14 May 2025; c 4.]

There were an estimated 19,000 attacks on UK businesses last year, and the typical ransom demand was about £4 million. The incident that is probably familiar to most people is Marks and Spencer falling victim to an attack, with hackers managing to blag their way into the system in, as we now know, quite a simple way. The company’s online store closed for seven weeks and the incident reportedly cost it more than £300 million in lost profits. Marks and Spencer will not say whether it paid the ransom. However, in all likelihood, it did, because reports tell us that 25 per cent to 30 per cent of companies pay the ransom. It is therefore a profitable crime. There is now debate about whether outlawing ransom payments, especially from public bodies, is the right thing to do. Ransomware attacks are one of the most difficult and challenging crimes to investigate, but they are also one of the most profitable for criminals. Early detection is important, as, once files are locked by hackers, it is extremely difficult for anyone else to unlock them.

The scale of the threat is staggering. Chris Ulliott from NatWest came to speak to the committee this year. He said that an average of

“about 100 million attacks per month ... try to break past the organisation’s defences.”—[*Official Report, Criminal Justice Committee*, 14 May 2025; c 6.]

That figure of 100 million attacks a month is quite scary.

Ransomware is also a national security threat. We cannot lose sight of the fact that it is a borderless crime. Many of the hackers are based in Russia or in states that were previously part of the Soviet Union. In 2022, a Russian-speaking hacker called C10p breached the security of South Staffs Water, which provides drinking water to 1.7 million members of the public. That is one of the cases that is covered by the “Panorama” programme, which showed a graphic representation. It was believed that there was a serious threat that could have resulted in the poisoning of the water. Of course, the water company said that that would not be possible, but it is still worth studying the case as an example of how serious such threats can be.

This year, in West Lothian, a group going by the name of Interlock attacked 12 schools, stealing data, including personal and sensitive data. It is unclear whether we are ready for a cyberattack that targets Scotland’s public bodies and other vital services, but the message is clear that we

need to be. Two years ago, the UK Parliament’s Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy warned that critical infrastructure in the UK is vulnerable to ransomware. Its report warned that the UK is unprepared for the high risk of a

“catastrophic ransomware attack”

that could

“cause severe disruption to the delivery of core Government services, including healthcare and child protection”

and

“bring the UK to a standstill”.

The digital space is growing rapidly. It is a growing frontier of crime, and Scotland needs to be better prepared to tackle the dangers presented. I believe that the importance of the Criminal Justice Committee’s report is obvious. I am sure that, when future Parliaments look back in years to come, the report’s existence will show how important it was to do that work.

16:53

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con):

From listening to today’s debate, one thing should be clear to us all: cybercrime is not a niche concern but a widespread problem that affects more and more of our society. The chief constable has spoken about the significant growth in digital crime, and the chair of the National Cyber Resilience Advisory Board has described how cyberattacks are now growing to be the norm.

The statistics—some of which we have already heard today—underscore that it is a widespread and growing problem. The Scottish Government’s crime figures show that more than 14,000 cybercrimes were recorded in 2024-25, which is the equivalent of almost 40 a day. Within that, there were more than 4,000 cases of sexual cybercrime—almost 1,500 of which involved children—and more than 7,500 cyberfraud cases.

To show just how much cybercrime underpins crime as a whole, consider this: more than a quarter of sexual offences feature cybercrime; likewise, almost half of all fraud cases and almost 95 per cent of threats and extortion do, too.

We all recognise the scale of the problem and the serious risk that it will only grow, given the advent of artificial intelligence. If we expect the police to tackle it, we must recognise that they require specialist skills, such as in digital forensics—they need cryptocurrency experts and data scientists. The advent of AI is only going to add to the complexity.

The Scottish Government needs to be in listening mode—specifically, listening to Police Scotland when it says that it needs almost £6

million to bolster its cyber capabilities. We all understand that there are budget pressures, but I point out to ministers that almost one in 10 Scots experienced fraud last year, almost 40 per cent of which involved cybercrime, and that Scotland's small businesses are estimated to lose an eye-watering £384 million a year to cyberattacks, according to analysis by Vodafone.

Audrey Nicoll: On the point that the member was making about Police Scotland and building capacity to respond to cybercrime, does the member agree that it is also important for our skills strategy to take account of our future needs with regard to cyber resilience, not just across policing but in other sectors including businesses?

Maurice Golden: I whole-heartedly agree with the member. It is not just about skills for Police Scotland and businesses; it concerns individual householders and consumers protecting themselves against cybercrime as far as they can.

On Police Scotland, £6 million is a relatively small sum in terms of Government expenditure. It is a small price to pay to help prevent and mitigate serious harm to individuals and businesses. I am sure that ministers do not need reminding that the Scottish Police Federation has been warning for some time about the risks of underfunding the police. Ignoring such warnings simply means that we will end up playing catch-up to the criminals.

The police need the training and the tools to combat cybercrime, but the police cannot do everything, so it is important that we ensure that the public are well informed about how to protect themselves from cybercrime where possible.

I have already spoken about the widespread impact of fraud, but what really struck me was that Age Concern reports that around one in five cyberfraud victims do not report it. That was down to uncertainty about where to make a report and whether anything would even be done about it. That is important, because reporting incidents helps the police to gather intelligence on the criminals behind the scams. There is scope for the Government to help educate the public and, in the process, help to build valuable intelligence and public trust in the police's ability to tackle the scammers.

I want to highlight a matter raised by Scottish Chambers of Commerce in a letter to the Criminal Justice Committee: the growing gap between smaller and larger businesses when it comes to cybersecurity. The organisation noted that its predominantly SME membership has raised concerns about falling behind on this front due to a lack of resources and expertise. It makes the point that cyber essentials certification can cost a small business more than £1,000, which is not an easy ask when many businesses are running on razor-

thin margins. I encourage ministers to look at the SCC's suggestion of publicly funded training at the local or regional level to help mitigate such barriers.

I urge the Scottish Government to step up and put in the resources where they are needed: in the police, public awareness and business support. Making that investment now will have a huge positive impact for many years ahead.

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): I call Richard Leonard.

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): Do you mean a different Richard?

The Presiding Officer: My apologies—I meant Richard Lochhead. It was a test, minister. [*Laughter.*] Please go ahead.

16:59

The Minister for Business and Employment (Richard Lochhead): I would have been content to pass on the responsibility to the other Richard, if he were here and he wanted to reply. [*Laughter.*]

In my role as Richard Lochhead, I begin by thanking the Criminal Justice Committee for securing the debate. I add my thanks to those expressed by other members to the committee for bringing this important subject to the chamber, and I welcome the valuable contributions made by members from all parties. As Sharon Dowey said, this issue is not going to go away; I have no doubt whatsoever that it will return to the chamber more and more in the years ahead.

As many members have said, the message is clear: cybercrime is not some distant threat. It is here, it is growing and it affects every single part of our society—public services, private businesses, charities and individuals. No one is immune. As many have said, too, cybercrime does not include victimless offences; it targets the vulnerable. On that note, on a recent visit to the Virgin Money branch in Keith in my constituency, the bank staff showed me how they had helped some customers—particularly vulnerable people—to spot scams and frauds. It is certain that vulnerable people are being targeted.

Cybercrime also exploits trust and undermines the principles of fairness and equality that we, as a country, strive to uphold. When a hospital system is locked down by ransomware, when a small business loses its data or is targeted, or when an individual's identity is stolen, those injustices ripple right through our society. Cyber resilience is not only about protecting victims; it is about safeguarding the future of our country. Such resilience can no longer be seen solely as a

technical issue—achieving it is a national imperative.

Digital technology is the engine of our economic growth. It drives innovation, attracts investment and connects Scotland to global markets. We welcome that, but, as Rona Mackay and others have said, we have to be clear that our economic ambitions will fail if we do not embed security and resilience at the heart of those ambitions. Every business transaction, public service and supply chain now depend on secure digital systems. A single breach can disrupt hospitals or courts, close schools or paralyse businesses and can erode public trust. The cost is not only financial; it harms our reputation and could undermine confidence in our country as a safe place in which to do business, invest, work and live.

We also recognise that the rise in cybercrime affects all sectors and that we, collectively—the Government and all our partners—need to work together to keep people safe and to secure our public and essential services. New and emerging technologies, such as AI and machine learning, bring massive opportunities for the economy and for people, but it is crucial that we are aware of the risks that they bring and the further opportunities that they offer to cybercriminals. The world is changing so fast, and we have to change at the same pace.

Cyberthreats are becoming increasingly complex and aggressive, and are being driven by nation-state activity, AI-enabled cybercrime and ransomware. We see supply chain vulnerabilities, data theft and rising regulatory demands—all those will become persistent risks. We also need to recognise the on-going geopolitical tensions that add another layer of complexity to the cyberthreat landscape. State-sponsored—*[Interruption.]*

I am sorry—I thought that someone was making an intervention.

State-sponsored cyberattacks primarily target state institutions and critical infrastructure and are aimed mainly at data theft, but they can also seek to influence campaigns around important elections—something that we are about to experience and that we take very seriously. Ministers certainly take the threat to elections and to our democracy very seriously.

As the cabinet secretary said in her opening remarks, we are taking action. We have the refreshed “Strategic Framework for a Cyber Resilient Scotland 2025–2030”, which the cabinet secretary launched in November, to ensure that our approach is current, ambitious and aligned with the fast-changing nature of cyberthreats and cybercrime.

Our vision is clear: Scotland thrives by being a digitally secure and resilient nation. We have to aim for that outcome. We want Scotland to be a place where individuals, organisations and businesses thrive in that secure and connected digital environment.

That approach requires a whole-nation effort and cross-party consensus. I am pleased that some members and parties have said that we must work together on the issue and that there needs to be political consensus on it. We must build the structures to make that happen through the CyberScotland Partnership and the Scottish cyber co-ordination centre.

As others have said, Police Scotland is playing its role by strengthening its cybercrime capacity, investing in its digital forensics capability and expanding international co-operation to pursue perpetrators right across the world. Working alongside the National Crime Agency, Europol and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Police Scotland has participated in a number of global operations to target cybercrime gangs. In addition, we are working with the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service to ensure that prosecutors have the right tools at their fingertips and the expertise to bring cyber criminals to justice.

It is also important that victims of cybercrime are supported. Through Police Scotland and our partners, we are improving access to clear, practical advice for individuals and organisations. We must embed trauma-informed approaches for victims of cybercrime and ensure that support services are accessible and responsive.

We are investing in cybersecurity learning in schools to build the talent pipeline, which, as Audrey Nicoll and others mentioned, is so important. Graduate pathways and diversity initiatives are in place to ensure that the cyber workforce meets future demand. When I was the Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science, I visited many colleges and universities, whose cybersecurity courses are producing amazing people who are playing a valuable role on behalf of the rest of the country.

On industry growth, more than 400 cybersecurity companies are now operating in Scotland, creating jobs, developing innovative products and strengthening resilience across sectors. Indeed, a few months ago, I cut the ribbon at Acumen Cyber’s new security operations centre in Glasgow. Acumen Cyber is a small Scottish company, and it was something to behold to see a massive screen on the wall that was monitoring tens of thousands of incidents. That shows what is happening out there. We might not be aware of all those things every second of every hour of every day, but we have a number of companies that are

at the front line in trying to protect us and keep our organisations and our economy safe.

I could go on to list a whole number of other initiatives that are happening. This country has a lot of expertise in tackling cybercrime, but we must always make sure that we move forward, that we have the right resources available and that we have all the necessary discussions. Cybercrime is a major threat to our society and to our economy. As I said, it is very good that the committee has brought the issue to the chamber for debate, because, as technology is advancing all the time, that brings not only opportunities but threats.

As has been said, the issue will not go away. We will return to the chamber to debate it time and again. We must keep in front of it and on top of it to make sure that we protect the people of Scotland and our economy at the same time.

The Presiding Officer: I call Liam Kerr to wind up the debate on behalf of the Criminal Justice Committee.

17:07

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): It has been a useful and important debate. On behalf of the Criminal Justice Committee, I thank all those members who have taken part in it, and I commend the Parliament for allocating time to debate what is such an important issue.

In its second paragraph, our report set out that our aim was to

“inform parliamentary debate and raise awareness of the impact of cybercrime and cyber-security.”

Rona Mackay told us that such cases are at double their pre-pandemic levels, which shows just how important it is that we put the issue on the agenda. Pauline McNeill referred to the fact that the chief constable told us that there has been significant growth in complex digitally enabled and globally driven crime, including reported sexual offending and fraud, but today’s debate has made that real.

The committee heard about “The Cost of Cyber Crime” report, which—members should note that this figure is 14 years old—set out that the estimated cost of cybercrime to the UK was £27 billion per annum. That was 14 years ago. Maggie Chapman brought that right up to date by telling us about the recorded crime in Scotland statistics, according to which cybercrimes account for more than 5 per cent of total reported crime, including more than a quarter of sexual crimes, nearly all threats and extortion crimes and nearly half of all frauds.

The Scottish crime and justice survey said that approximately 37 per cent of last year’s reported fraud involved cyber, such as online banking

scams, investment scams and phishing. An estimated 4,070 sexual crimes that were recorded last year were cybercrimes, nearly 1,500 of which involved victims under the age of 18. Jamie Hepburn and many others made the point that many such crimes will not be reported. Maurice Golden raised the evidence from Age Scotland that around 20 per cent of victims of fraud-related crime do not report it. That means that the true figures are likely to be much higher.

We have heard this afternoon about some of the forms that these crimes take and just how disruptive they are. A Vodafone business survey estimated that small businesses in Scotland lose about £386 million annually due to cyberattacks. Katy Clark told us that NatWest protects us from 100 million attacks per month. That requires huge investment to defend our money.

Jamie Hepburn raised the attack on Arnold Clark in December 2022, in which a large amount of sensitive customer and corporate employee data was stolen. That sort of attack has a massive impact on employees and customers.

Pauline McNeill talked about the £300 million in lost profits at Marks & Spencer, and Liam McArthur raised the issue of the elderly, who might be targeted through emails or text messages. As Age Scotland told the committee, developments in AI and deepfakes can make things look very convincing and difficult to differentiate from the real thing.

As the cabinet secretary said, cyberattacks can cause massive disruption, reducing trust in institutions and, in our interconnected world, resulting in outcomes such as islanders being left without food, as happened following an attack on the Co-op.

The police told us how such crimes are often borderless. Rona Mackay raised an interesting point about how such crimes might involve networks of people who do not know each other except through a screen. At an individual level, life savings can be lost and data stolen, and there is the trauma that is caused by the non-consensual sharing of images and the impact of ransomware.

As the convener said when she opened the debate, it is not always easy to identify solutions, and the public, private, commercial and charitable sectors must work with the Government, the police, security services and key cyber technology partners to develop a whole-society approach to cybercrime and cyber resilience.

This week, in her first speech in post, Blaise Metreweli, the new director general of MI6, made an interesting point when she said that

“the front line is everywhere”

in our shared struggle against cybercrime.

We have heard that there is lots of good work out there. The cabinet secretary told us of the strategic partnership between CyberScotland and the Scottish cyber co-ordination centre. Rona Mackay told us of the Scottish Government engaging closely with the UK Government and the National Cyber Security Centre. In November 2025, the Scottish Government published “The Strategic Framework for a Cyber Resilient Scotland 2025-2030”. The police have told us that they actively push out a prevention message and that, although they are there to investigate and get a positive outcome, they are also helping businesses to recover from cyberattacks. Age Scotland told the committee that people need to become more confident in reporting what has happened to them, which Maurice Golden was quick to highlight.

How do we move forward from this debate? Maggie Titmuss, the chair of the national cyber resilience advisory board, said:

“The message is clear: we must be proactive. That means building the awareness to recognise threats, the discipline to reduce risk and the readiness to respond swiftly and confidently when, not if, an attack comes.”

Fulton MacGregor raised the update that we received this morning from the SPA, which announced many welcome developments, including a new key performance indicator that counts every crime in relation to which a cyber tag has been applied on the crime system, in order to improve understanding of the scale and complexity of crime involving a cyber element. That addresses the exact point that was made about reporting.

Liam McArthur made what I thought was a really important point on the police. Cybercrime demands specialist policing skills, an investment in digital forensics, cyber and fraud specialists, cryptocurrency experts, data scientists and intelligence officers. At the outset of the debate, Sharon Dowe reminded us of the importance to the police of funding and resources, and Police Scotland’s budget submission explicitly requests additional funding for digital and cyber capability. Maurice Golden put the figure that is required at £6 million. I hope that that is in the mind of the Government when it comes to setting the budget.

Bringing things back to the proceedings of this place, I understand that the Criminal Justice Committee can look forward to receiving a written response to our report from the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs by mid-February next year. In that, I hope that the Scottish Government will take the opportunity to set out its progress with key partners on delivering the objectives of the cyber resilient Scotland 2025 to 2030 strategic framework.

The Scottish Government might also then update us on its progress regarding discussions with the UK Government on ensuring that the new Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill, which is currently before the House of Commons, is fit for purpose. It is my great hope that that bill will protect citizens and the vital public and commercial IT systems on which our society relies. However, it is important that we know about the issue in Scotland.

Richard Lochhead told us about the many good companies that are working on the front line to protect us. Sharon Dowe went into that and talked about the cyber and fraud hub, which is empowering women to get involved in cybersecurity. At this point, it is important to note that Marie McNair MSP is hosting an event tomorrow on the national cybersecurity centre’s cyberfirst secondary 2 girls competition, which aims to inspire young women who have a passion for technology to explore careers in cybersecurity.

Audrey Nicoll: On the point that Liam Kerr made about resilience and supporting organisations that are working on the front line, we must not forget about funding to support some of the organisations and third sector organisations that are working to do ground-level, granular work. That funding can be small amounts of money, but it is important.

Liam Kerr: That is an important point and it was well made. I hope that it will be in people’s minds during the budget process and also during CyberScotland week, which will be from 23 to 28 February 2026. Such representations will be important at that time.

The Parliament’s scrutiny responsibilities for issues around the digital economy, such as AI tools, safety and resilience and prosecuting cybercrime, currently lie between the Economy and Fair Work Committee and the Criminal Justice Committee. As Liam McArthur said, it is for members in the next parliamentary session to decide what issues should be debated in that session. However, the point has been well made that we must keep those issues in mind, and the Criminal Justice Committee needs to be cognisant of them when drafting its section 6 legacy report for its successor committee.

I again thank all those who provided the Criminal Justice Committee with written and oral evidence on cybercrime and cyber resilience. That was a worthwhile piece of work and this has been a worthwhile debate. It is exactly the kind of topic that we should be debating and keeping on the agenda, and I am grateful to all the members who have contributed to the debate.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on cybercrime.

Pension Schemes Bill

17:07

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of motion S6M-20172, in the name of Shona Robison, on legislative consent for the Pension Schemes Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Pension Schemes Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 5 June 2025, and subsequently amended, relating to clauses 1 (Asset pool companies), 2 (Asset management) and 5 (Scheme manager governance reviews) of Chapter 1 of Part 1, so far as these matters alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.—[*Shona Robison*]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

Business Motion

17:18

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-20199, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, setting out a business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 6 January 2026

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions

followed by Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee Debate: Civil Legal Assistance in Scotland

followed by Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee Debate: Petition PE2018: Recognise the Value of Swimming Pools and Provide Financial Relief to Help Keep Pools Open

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 7 January 2026

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business; Justice and Home Affairs

followed by Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Business

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.10 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 8 January 2026

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.30 pm Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Building Safety Levy (Scotland) Bill

followed by Financial Resolution: Building Safety Levy (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

Tuesday 13 January 2026

2.00 pm Time for Reflection

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

followed by Topical Questions

followed by Ministerial Statement: Scottish Budget 2026-27

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill

followed by Financial Resolution: Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill

followed by Committee Announcements

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 14 January 2026

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Deputy First Minister Responsibilities, Economy and Gaelic; Finance and Local Government

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

followed by Members' Business

Thursday 15 January 2026

11.40 am Parliamentary Bureau Motions

11.40 am General Questions

12.00 pm First Minister's Questions

followed by Members' Business

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Portfolio Questions: Climate Action and Energy, and Transport

followed by Stage 3 Proceedings: UEFA European Championship (Scotland) Bill

followed by Stage 1 Debate: Prostitution (Offences and Support) (Scotland) Bill

followed by Business Motions

followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week

beginning 5 January 2026, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.—[*Graeme Dey*]

17:18

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind): I wish to add to the proposed business a ministerial statement on the forthcoming rates revaluation. I have intimated the substance of my argument to Mr Dey, Mr McKee and the First Minister. If the draft valuations for several sectors were to take effect from next April, they would result in the mass closure of thousands of Scottish businesses and threaten the viability of high streets.

I gather from Stephen Montgomery of the Scottish Hospitality Group that the increases in values for some hotels and pubs are up to 300 per cent. However, I wish to direct my remarks towards the self-catering sector. There are 16,513 such properties in Scotland and they face an average increase of 120 per cent and, in some cases, increases of up to 300 per cent.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Is Fergus Ewing aware that, this morning, the Scottish Conservatives met with organisations, including the Scottish Hospitality Group, UKHospitality Scotland and the Association of Scotland's Self-Caterers, to hear at first hand their very real concerns about the revaluation process, and to launch our campaign for an immediate pause in the increases that will stem from it?

Does he agree that ministers simply cannot proceed, given that they are now aware of the devastating consequences that the tax increases will have on hospitality and tourism operators, jobs, the business-operating environment and the Scottish economy more widely, and will he—in the spirit of cross-party solidarity—visit scottishconservatives.com today and sign up to our campaign to halt this Scottish National Party business tax hike? If the Government does not listen, it will be "Last Christmas" for many of our cherished businesses.

Fergus Ewing: I think that there should be a cross-party approach, and I gather that there is a good prospect that that is what is going to happen. It is the right thing to do, so I am happy to sign any motion that sets that out. There we are.

Are those businesses doing so well? No. A survey of 444 businesses that was carried out by the ASSC found that 47 per cent said that they were doing worse than before. Some said that bookings are falling off a cliff for the forthcoming year.

The Scottish Assessors Association determines and fixes the valuations. I took up the case in

writing with its president, Heather Honeyman, who replied:

“In relation to the methodology of the valuation, reference to rents is key ... The primary evidence is rents”.

However, only 3 per cent of the 16,513 businesses have rents, because those properties are self-catering. They are not private rents. They are let on a weekly basis. There is no yardstick at all. The rent is not an arm’s-length arrangement—it is very much between connected parties.

The clincher is that it is not only the trade bodies across the sector that object to this; it is the Valuation Office Agency in England, which does the same job as the Assessors Association in Scotland. What does it have to say about the method that is being used by Heather Honeyman and the Scottish assessors? It said:

“When we value a property, we generally look at the market value”

and rent.

“However, this way of valuing would not be suitable for self-catering holiday homes”.

That is the what the Valuation Office Agency of the UK said. Let me repeat that. It said:

“this way of valuing would not be suitable for self-catering holiday homes.”

because of a lack of rental information.

It went on:

“We look at the annual income that the property is expected to generate when let at its full potential. We request details of income and expenditure from different types of self-catering operators to see what the fair maintainable trade would be.”

That is exactly the method that the assessors in Scotland used to use. The Scottish Assessors Association has abandoned the method that works in England.

Rachael Hamilton (Etrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I understand what Fergus Ewing said about the difference between the assessors in England and the assessors in Scotland, but, as the Scottish ministers will say, assessors are independent. It is the Scottish ministers who have the power to make the change, and that is where we should be looking.

Fergus Ewing: Indeed so. That is why the solution is not rates relief or tinkering around with the valuations—there is not enough time to do that. The solution is postponing the revaluation. It was done in 2022. It has been done before and it should be done again. That is the only way that this can happen. The First Minister acknowledged the serious problem last Thursday. If the revaluation is not postponed, the assessors will be akin to assassins; they will destroy businesses because the business rates will exceed the whole

annual income of thousands of businesses. How on earth is that allowed to happen? The Government must step in.

The revaluation must be postponed by the Government, or it will cause commercial Armageddon.

17:23

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I am seeking parliamentary time to scrutinise the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture on the findings of Audit Scotland’s section 22 report on Historic Environment Scotland.

This issue begins with Historic Environment Scotland itself. [*Interruption.*] Whatever the hilarity on the Government’s front bench is, surely it is not happening because of the state of Historic Environment Scotland.

Historic Environment Scotland is not a peripheral body. It is the steward of more than 300 historic properties and the guardian of national collections and archives. It is central to Scotland’s cultural identity and to a tourism economy on which many communities depend.

Across the country, around 1,600 people work for HES. Many of them are highly skilled professionals who are entrusted with assets that, once damaged or lost, are gone for good. When governance fails in such an organisation, the consequences are real. They are felt by staff, communities and the public, who expect those national assets to be protected properly.

That is why a section 22 report matters. Audit Scotland does not issue section 22 reports lightly. They are reserved for situations where the Auditor General feels that Parliament must be alerted to serious and systemic concerns. In this case, the report describes unacceptable weaknesses in governance, failures of control and risks to value for money. The Auditor General is clear that strong controls are now critical to prevent the risk of fraud and to restore confidence. Those are not minor or technical issues. The report points to long-running problems in procurement, data handling, financial discipline and leadership arrangements. It highlights the absence, until very recently, of a substantive accountable officer, and it describes an organisation where basic disciplines are not applied consistently or enforced robustly.

What gives the report its real weight is what it says and what it confirms about people. Staff and whistleblowers warn that Historic Environment Scotland is at risk of collapse. They speak of a toxic culture, deep frustration and concerns that, although raised repeatedly, have not been acted upon. The Auditor General acknowledges that

issues have been persistent for years and have been covered up rather than resolved. This is not an abstract debate about structures; it is about how people are treated, whether warnings are listened to and whether those who speak up are protected.

Whistleblowers take personal risks when they raise concerns, and Parliament has a duty to ensure that those warnings lead to scrutiny and reform, not silence. When a section 22 report echoes what whistleblowers have been saying for years, ministers must be prepared to explain why earlier intervention did not happen.

Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab): I rise as the convener of the Public Audit Committee. Is Stephen Kerr aware that the Public Audit Committee will be taking evidence on this section 22 report, and is he aware that the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee is also taking evidence on this section 22 report?

Stephen Kerr: I did not realise that there were limitations to the scrutiny of Parliament. I did not realise that it was somehow out of order for a cabinet secretary to be brought to the chamber to account for his failings in the discharge of his responsibilities, according to no less an authority than the Auditor General for Scotland. Historic Environment Scotland is a non-departmental public body and the Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture is the responsible minister. He appoints the board and oversees the sponsorship relationship. He is accountable to this Parliament for how that system of governance operates, and I think that Richard Leonard knows that.

In that context, the Auditor General has identified a failure by the Scottish Government to appoint an accountable officer. That is a clear statutory duty, and Parliament must be able to examine, in the chamber and through the committee structure of the Parliament, how that duty was allowed to go unmet and what damage that failure has caused. That is a responsibility of the cabinet secretary that cannot be delegated away; it cannot be blurred by process or shifted on to civil servants.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Kerr. You must conclude.

Stephen Kerr: It is the cabinet secretary's responsibility, and he is answerable to Parliament. Therefore, I strongly suggest to the Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans that parliamentary time be made available for the cabinet secretary to come to the chamber and address the findings of the Auditor General's report, which is of critical importance to our country.

The Presiding Officer: I call the minister to respond on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau.

17:29

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): The Scottish Government very much recognises the importance of the self-catering accommodation sector, and the hospitality sector more broadly, to Scotland's economy. The valuation of all non-domestic property is a matter for the Scottish Assessors Association, which is independent of central and local government.

However, the Minister for Public Finance is absolutely alive to the issues that Mr Ewing raises and will be meeting stakeholders to discuss the matter—in fact, he met the Association of Scotland's Self-Caterers today.

I know that Mr Ewing has highlighted those issues to ministers, as he has repeated. The Minister for Public Finance will respond directly and will be happy to meet Mr Ewing and others following the recess. Of course, non-domestic rates and reliefs will be announced at the Scottish budget on 13 January.

On a more general point, members are all too aware of the pressure on the parliamentary business schedule, although that may not always be apparent, judging by the volume of additional asks for statements and debates that land on my desk weekly. A significant volume of bills—both Scottish Government bills and members' bills—are still being considered, and those proceedings must be prioritised for chamber time. In addition, standing orders require that a certain amount of chamber time is allocated to committees and to Opposition parties.

Taking all of that together, it is clear that, following recess, there will be little—if any—time for additional activity led by the Scottish Government.

Rachael Hamilton: I recognise that the Parliament is under huge pressure with legislative requirements. However, an increase in rateable values of up to 300 per cent, as we have seen, is even more of a pressure on businesses. We might not see those businesses operating into the spring, so we need to put them before us.

Graeme Dey: I have already identified the importance that Ivan McKee places on the matter. However, I point out to Rachael Hamilton that we constantly hear from members, particularly on her side of the chamber, about late sittings and then they come back to Parliament and demand that more be added to the programme. *[Interruption.]* I think that Kevin Stewart's comments were heard by members.

The business motion that is before us includes committee and Opposition debates in the first week of January, and, across the first two weeks, there are four stage 1 debates and a stage 3 debate. I think that that supports the point that I have made.

Given the genuine engagement that the Minister for Public Finance has undertaken on the matter, and given the pressures facing the business schedule, a statement on the topic will not be scheduled at this time. As I said, however, Ivan McKee will engage directly with Fergus Ewing and others post recess, in advance of the budget.

Turning to Mr Kerr, I am not clear whether his latest demand, while challenging the business programme, is for a statement or a debate. However, I point to the fact that he serves on the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee, which has been looking closely at the matter that he raised and which will—as I understand it—provide further opportunities for him to progress it.

As Richard Leonard pointed out, the Public Audit Committee is also considering the matter that Mr Kerr highlights. I have great respect—seemingly more so than Mr Kerr—for the committee process; I think that it is the engine room of the Parliament. We have not one but two parliamentary processes under way, and, given the pressure on parliamentary business, I would not be inclined to schedule the item that Mr Kerr is seeking.

The Presiding Officer: The question is, that motion S6M-20199 be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 6 January 2026

2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Topical Questions
<i>followed by</i>	Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee Debate: Civil Legal Assistance in Scotland
<i>followed by</i>	Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee Debate: Petition PE2018: Recognise the Value of Swimming Pools and Provide Financial Relief to Help Keep Pools Open
<i>followed by</i>	Committee Announcements
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business

Wednesday 7 January 2026

2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and Parliamentary Business; Justice and Home Affairs
<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Business
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.10 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business

Thursday 8 January 2026

11.40 am	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
11.40 am	General Questions
12.00 pm	First Minister's Questions
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
2.30 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.30 pm	Portfolio Questions: Education and Skills
<i>followed by</i>	Stage 1 Debate: Building Safety Levy (Scotland) Bill
<i>followed by</i>	Financial Resolution: Building Safety Levy (Scotland) Bill
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time

Tuesday 13 January 2026

2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Topical Questions
<i>followed by</i>	Ministerial Statement: Scottish Budget 2026-27
<i>followed by</i>	Stage 1 Debate: Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill
<i>followed by</i>	Financial Resolution: Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill
<i>followed by</i>	Committee Announcements
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business

Wednesday 14 January 2026

2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Deputy First Minister Responsibilities, Economy and Gaelic; Finance and Local Government
<i>followed by</i>	Stage 1 Debate: Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill

<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
Thursday 15 January 2026	
11.40 am	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
11.40 am	General Questions
12.00 pm	First Minister's Questions
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business
2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Climate Action and Energy, and Transport
<i>followed by</i>	Stage 3 Proceedings: UEFA European Championship (Scotland) Bill
<i>followed by</i>	Stage 1 Debate: Prostitution (Offences and Support) (Scotland) Bill
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.00 pm	Decision Time

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 5 January 2026, in rule 13.7.3, after the word "except" the words "to the extent to which the Presiding Officer considers that the questions are on the same or similar subject matter or" are inserted.

Points of Order

17:33

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

On a point of order, Presiding Officer. This afternoon, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs has written to me, confirming that she is requesting a change to the *Official Report* of this Parliament for the meeting of 16 September. This came under questioning today at the Education, Children and Young People Committee, and that request has come after weeks and months of MSPs in the chamber asking for the record to be corrected. That was refused by Angela Constance, and it was refused by John Swinney. Now, Angela Constance has agreed to do so.

However, the advice on correcting information during proceedings is different from that for after proceedings. If a mistake is not notified during proceedings, there are different aspects that a member has to go through. The advice to members states that a

"member may ask to make a statement during the next available plenary session"

to explain the change in the *Official Report*.

First, can I ask you, Presiding Officer, whether you have received any requests from the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs to make a statement? Given that we have only one sitting day until the festive recess, how will Parliament have the opportunity to review the change that the cabinet secretary wishes to make to the *Official Report* if it is not made in tonight's *Official Report*? We will not get tomorrow's *Official Report* until Parliament has risen.

Has a request to make a statement been made? That is supposed to happen in the next plenary session after the mistake was identified. We know that Professor Alexis Jay wrote to Angela Constance on 26 September, identifying the correction and clarification that she wished to have made. It is now being made on 17 December. In our standing orders, what remit is there for you, Presiding Officer, to deal with a member who takes so long to correct the official record?

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There were several points, which I will seek to address. I will begin by saying that anything that is said in proceedings of the Parliament or in committee is recorded in the *Official Report*, so any statement of the Parliament can be used to correct the record.

As members are aware, and as Mr Ross referred to, a mechanism exists whereby a member can seek to correct any inaccuracy on

their part within 20 days of publication of the relevant proceedings. That time limit exists because *Official Reports* are then finalised and they cannot be changed again.

Other ways of ensuring that a correction is made widely known include writing to me and copying the correspondence to all business managers and any members who are not represented in the Parliamentary Bureau, and placing a copy of the correction in the Scottish Parliament information centre. Of course, a member of the Scottish Government can seek to make a statement to the Parliament, and I confirm that, at this moment, that request has not been made.

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. For information and for the benefit of the chamber, I note that I have received confirmation from the official report that it has received my request and that it is

“not able to make”

my

“proposed change under the Official Report’s remit”

but that it is forwarding my

“request for a correction to the Business Team for consideration under the members’ corrections procedure. The Business Team will inform”

me

“of the decision about”

the

“correction request.”

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. We will continue with our business.

Business Motion

17:37

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-20200, in the name of Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on the timetabling of a bill at stage 1. Any member who wishes to speak to the motion should press their request-to-speak button now.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Digital Assets (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be completed by 23 January 2026.—[*Graeme Dey*]

The Presiding Officer: I call Pauline McNeill. [*Interruption.*] It appears that the member unintentionally pressed her button.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that consideration of the Digital Assets (Scotland) Bill at stage 1 be completed by 23 January 2026.

Parliamentary Bureau Motions

17:38

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of three Parliamentary Bureau motions: motions S6M-20201 and S6M-20202, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments, and motion S6M-20203, on committee membership. I ask Graeme Dey, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motions.

Motions moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Food Safety Act 1990 Amendment (Scotland) Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Management of Offenders (Scotland) Act 2019 and the Prisoners (Early Release) (Scotland) Act 2025 (Consequential Modifications) Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that—

Gillian Mackay be appointed to replace Patrick Harvie as a member of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee; and

Patrick Harvie be appointed to replace Ross Greer as a member of the Finance and Public Administration Committee.—[*Graeme Dey*]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motions will be put at decision time.

Decision Time

17:38

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

There are two questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that motion S6M-20172, in the name of Shona Robison, on a motion on legislative consent for the Pension Schemes Bill, which is United Kingdom legislation, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the relevant provisions of the Pension Schemes Bill, introduced in the House of Commons on 5 June 2025, and subsequently amended, relating to clauses 1 (Asset pool companies), 2 (Asset management) and 5 (Scheme manager governance reviews) of Chapter 1 of Part 1, so far as these matters alter the executive competence of the Scottish Ministers, should be considered by the UK Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: If no member objects, I propose to ask a single question on three Parliamentary Bureau motions.

As no member has objected, the final question is, that motions S6M-20201 and S6M-20202, on approval of Scottish statutory instruments, and motion S6M-20203, on committee membership, be agreed to.

Motions agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Food Safety Act 1990 Amendment (Scotland) Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that the Management of Offenders (Scotland) Act 2019 and the Prisoners (Early Release) (Scotland) Act 2025 (Consequential Modifications) Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.

That the Parliament agrees that—

Gillian Mackay be appointed to replace Patrick Harvie as a member of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee; and

Patrick Harvie be appointed to replace Ross Greer as a member of the Finance and Public Administration Committee.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Recognising Small Business Saturday 2025

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-20035, in the name of Rachael Hamilton, on recognising small business Saturday 2025. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

I invite members who wish to speak in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons now or as soon as possible. I also alert members to the fact that there is a lot of interest in participating in the debate, and there are events going on in Parliament this evening that will already be running late, so I give due warning that I intend to hold members strictly to their time limits.

With that, I ask Rachael Hamilton to lead the way in opening the debate. You have up to seven minutes, Ms Hamilton.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament marks Small Business Saturday UK on 6 December 2025, an annual grassroots, not-for-profit campaign that celebrates and encourages support for small businesses across the UK; acknowledges that the campaign aims to highlight small business success while encouraging consumers to shop locally; recognises the vital role that small businesses play in communities across Scotland, including in the Scottish Borders, by driving growth, creating jobs and sustaining vibrant town centres; understands that micro and small businesses represent 98% of all enterprises in Scotland, employ more than 900,000 people and turnover £93 billion annually, according to the Federation of Small Businesses; considers that small businesses, particularly in rural communities, face increasing pressures from rising costs and economic uncertainty; notes the view that, although the Small Business Saturday occurs only once a year, support for and recognition of small businesses must continue throughout the year, and celebrates the vital contribution of small and rural businesses to Scotland's economy.

17:41

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I begin by declaring an interest as a business owner. That declaration of interests also applies to the interventions that I made earlier on Fergus Ewing in relation to rates revaluation.

Today, I pay tribute to all those enterprises and entrepreneurs across Scotland who work hard all year round. Those are the people who take risks, invest their savings and work long hours, and who keep going even when the economic environment is stacked against them. Their efforts provide the tax revenue that we need to fund public services; their success supports our national health service, schools and local councils and the services on which communities depend; and their hard work

provides the good-quality paid jobs that we all need.

On small business Saturday—and, indeed, all year round—we should celebrate, and encourage support for, small businesses, including those in my area of the Borders—Border Eco Systems in Jedburgh, Thomas Sherriff & Co machinery and Border Padel Company, which I recently visited, are all fantastic examples. They need our help at this critical time more than ever, as it is an incredibly challenging time to be a small business. Owners are facing relentless pressure from rising bills and from inflation and energy prices, and on-going economic uncertainty is at the forefront of their minds. Many feel that, just when they start to recover from one challenge, another is placed in their way.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Will the member take an intervention?

Rachael Hamilton: If it is quick, because we have to “Hark the Herald”.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Craig Hoy for a very brief intervention.

Craig Hoy: Rachael Hamilton will be aware that, in many small businesses, the owners are the last to be paid, and are the lowest paid. Does she agree that it is disgusting that Labour's attack on jobs, with the increase in employer national insurance contributions, comes at the cost of the last of the wages of some of those people around the country who are working hard—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Rachael Hamilton.

Craig Hoy: —to deliver for our communities?

Rachael Hamilton: I completely agree with my colleague, Craig Hoy. Businesses have cited the hike of 3 per cent in employer national insurance contributions as incredibly challenging, and they are not investing in their workforces as they used to do.

Businesses are dealing with persistent workforce challenges, including skills shortages and the difficulty of recruiting and retaining staff in key sectors such as hospitality, care and tourism. Footfall on the high street has not fully recovered since the pandemic, placing further strain on retailers who are already competing with online giants.

On top of that, as Craig Hoy has said, the national insurance hike has been particularly painful. For years, Scottish businesses have also had to contend with the Scottish National Party's failure to pass on business rates reliefs that companies elsewhere in the United Kingdom have benefited from. That has left many firms in Scotland at a competitive disadvantage.

Today, I visited an Edinburgh hospitality venue, where I and my colleagues heard about crippling tax rises as a result of the current business rates revaluation. Alongside business groups such as UK Hospitality, the Association of Scotland's Self-Caterers and the Scottish Hospitality Group, my party is urging the SNP Government to pause the proposed changes to non-domestic rates; we heard the same plea from Fergus Ewing today, too. There has to be a cross-party approach, but the Government urgently needs to review the methodology.

If the rates rises go ahead and businesses see their bills rise dramatically, it could ruin so many small enterprises—and that is not me talking, but people who have written to me with their case studies. Business owners have spoken to me about their anxiety, uncertainty and genuine fear for their futures.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (Ind): Will the member give way?

Rachael Hamilton: I will give way to the member.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Fergus Ewing. Please be brief.

Fergus Ewing: Does Rachael Hamilton agree that the Scottish Government does have the power to put the proposed changes on hold and that, if the Government denies it, that is not true?

Rachael Hamilton: I completely agree with Fergus Ewing. Scottish ministers do have the power, they make the rules and it is in their gift to pause the revaluation and change the methodology. Hotels, self-catering businesses and retail hospitality operators are absolutely terrified of the revaluation's impact on them. The Government must pause it, and I ask Richard Lochhead to address that in his closing speech.

All of those issues form an economic environment in Scotland that is far from helpful. Small businesses feel as though they are an afterthought. Sometimes, they believe that the Government treats them like the enemy. Too many small businesses feel that their concerns are acknowledged only after decisions have already been made, instead of those concerns being meaningfully considered from the outset. Policies are often designed with large organisations in mind, leaving smaller firms to absorb the same costs and comply with the same rules without having the resources to do so.

Small businesses do not think that Holyrood helps them. They do not think that the Parliament understands business or gets the challenges that they face. They feel that entrepreneurial risk taking is not rewarded. Every year, they face bigger bills

and the burden of more rules and regulations, which stifles innovation.

The knock-on consequences are that our economy does not grow as quickly as it should, and, because economic growth is critical to increasing tax revenue, that means that there is less money to fix and improve public services. It cannot go on like that. More growth means more money to target spending effectively and efficiently. A rising economy is essential to produce the higher tax revenues that our NHS, our schools and all our public services need.

I believe that the Government's attitude to business must change. Given that it is the festive season, perhaps we can hope for a Christmas miracle—a miracle in which the SNP stops acting like Scrooge to Scotland's small businesses and instead begins to celebrate, champion and encourage their efforts. That is exactly what needs to happen.

Practically every year, we hear the SNP promise to reset the relationship with the business community, but, like a new year's resolution, the promise is never kept. In 2026, there must be a major reset in Scotland's economic approach so that Government encourages aspiration instead of just taxing ambition, and Scotland is once again open for business. That is what the Scottish Conservatives want to see, and, in 2026, that commitment must be kept.

The Government also needs to make a serious effort to cut red tape. My party has proposed a reduction of red tape bill that would give businesses the opportunity to apply for regulations to be repealed or amended. That bill should be adopted by the Government and introduced to Parliament, because cutting red tape would help attract more investment, give Scotland's economy the chance to thrive, give entrepreneurs a hand and spur innovation.

However, the biggest things that the Government could do to help small businesses would be to reduce their bills to make the cost of doing business more affordable; commit to bringing down business rates; overhaul the system so that it is fairer; and stop viewing tax cuts as morally wrong. After all, businesses earn that money.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate. Members have a strict four minutes.

17:48

Jamie Hepburn (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP): I am very pleased to be able to speak in this debate marking small business Saturday and to help recognise the extraordinary contribution

that small and micro businesses make to our economy, our communities and our national life.

Small business Saturday is, at its heart, a simple idea. It is about encouraging people to look first at the businesses on their high streets and doorsteps and in their own communities, and to recognise the value that they bring to those communities.

The motion alludes, rightly, to the fact that small businesses across Scotland are the backbone of our economy. In my constituency—and I am sure that this will be the case for every member who speaks in the debate—that reality is evident every day. The impact of those businesses, from the independent retailers and cafes in the town centres in my constituency to the many local innovative manufacturers on the various industrial estates dotted across it, is keenly felt.

I have been very keen to support small business Saturday for many years, and this year is no different. As I do every year, I visited one Cumbernauld-based business and one in Kilsyth. This year, I was pleased to visit RM Blinds, a family-run business that has been providing blinds across the west of Scotland for more than 20 years, and which operates its factory from Kilsyth, with a showroom attached.

I was also happy to visit NutriKing Meal Prep at the business's kitchen in Cumbernauld. Started by Chris Jones, who has a background in fitness and nutrition, NutriKing provides nutritionally assessed, pre-prepared meals directly to customers in Cumbernauld and Kilsyth and the surrounding area on a weekly basis. The business is hoping to expand in 2026, and it will be looking to partner with gyms and various other businesses in the locality. It is a reminder that small businesses can support one another, too.

In previous years, I have visited many great businesses that serve my area. Last year, I visited World of Wings Birds of Prey, Scotland's largest birds-of-prey centre, and McLachlan Opticians, which has two branches in my constituency. In 2023, I met the team at Serpent Kings Barbershop, in Cumbernauld village, which launched that very same year. Its success since then has been underlined by the fact that, just this week, it announced that its business would be moving to bigger premises, which are, thankfully for its dedicated customer base, still located in Cumbernauld village.

In 2022, I visited the Scarecrow bar and grill in Kilsyth, which won the best gastropub award at the town's 2019 and 2021 food awards. That visit followed my visit to Banton to see the equally excellent community-owned and run Swan inn, an acquisition by the community that was assisted by

funding from both the Scottish Government and the national lottery.

All are superb examples of small businesses in Cumbernauld and Kilsyth, and small business Saturday provides a focal point and an opportunity to celebrate and encourage such businesses. However, our commitment should be year round, through policy, partnership and practical support. Of course, the commitment that we show must also be backed by another P-word—patronage. We should all value and use the many small businesses that we are lucky to have in our local communities, and we should do so—as the motion sets out—not just on small business Saturday, but all year round.

17:51

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. Before I begin, I thank my colleague and friend Rachael Hamilton for bringing this important debate to the chamber.

Business has been in my DNA from a young age. When I was growing up in Glasgow, my parents started with a small grocery business in Argyle Street. I remember my mum not only running a small business but bringing up me and my siblings in the shop. It was a community hub where people could come together to share their problems.

My parents laid the foundations for me not only to run the family business but to understand the issues that businesses face and help them with my more than 30 years of experience. That has included trying to cut red tape in my years as a trading standards officer and, later on, working on inward investment, helping businesses through the 2008 financial crisis and onwards.

Today, as an MSP, I stand in the chamber to be the voice for businesses. Small businesses are the backbone of the Scottish economy. According to the Federation of Small Businesses in Scotland, micro and small businesses represent 98 per cent of all enterprises in Scotland, employing more than 900,000 people, with a turnover of £93 billion annually.

Small business Saturday celebrates our small businesses and encourages people to show their support by spending and shopping locally. Even though small business Saturday takes place on the first Saturday of December, it is a year-round movement that recognises businesses that make a difference in our communities, so it is important for us to support such businesses throughout the year.

My West Scotland region has many amazing small businesses that serve as the backbone of

not only our local economies but our communities, including by employing local people. That is why, for the past three years, I have been hosting my own small business awards to recognise the work that they do. As I do not have a lot of time in the debate, I will mention only some of the great businesses in my area. Cafe Crème in Bearsden, Gavin's Mill in Milngavie, No. 40 by Bruin in Bearsden, Mahony's steak house in Bishopbriggs and Billington's of Lenzie all offer unique services in the area. As they did during Covid, many of them, even today, still go out of their way to check on their local customers who are elderly and housebound.

We also have many young entrepreneurs stepping into the world of business, including Leah Mitchell of Rise & Reform Pilates in Lenzie, Eilidh Sirel of Florella Studio in Milngavie and many more who are creating businesses from scratch.

However, for such businesses to thrive, we need local councils and the UK and Scottish Governments to support enterprises. Businesses today are under immense pressure from many factors, including increased employer national insurance contributions from the United Kingdom Labour Government, a failure of the SNP Government to pass on rates relief, higher material costs due to inflation, parking charges, and an increase in break-ins, shoplifting and other forms of retail crime.

Let us be clear: business growth does not come from Governments. However, Governments need to provide the right environment for businesses to thrive. Unfortunately, as we can see, more regulations and taxes will only hinder growth and make operations more expensive. All of us in the Parliament have a duty to support business growth and keep taxes low.

17:55

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Small business Saturday is an annual opportunity to celebrate the hard work of small businesses across the UK. Shopping locally is not just good for the economy; it is good for our communities and good for Glasgow. It is also not just for Christmas. We need to do it all year round.

There are so many small businesses in Glasgow to celebrate in this great city today. In the south side, there is the brilliant Bespoke Beauty, a family-run business that not only provides incredible therapies such as massage and skin care but acts as a sanctuary for many of its customers who enjoy the peace of self-care at the hands of brilliant, highly trained professionals.

Then there is Launch Coffee on Cresswell Street, where you can get the best homemade cookies out there and know that every purchase

will help feed a child in the city of Glasgow; or Mootz, the brilliant, new Italian-inspired sandwich shop on Byres Road, whose menu is so delicious that you will find those sandwiches nowhere else.

Roots, Fruits and Flowers also has its own unique offer. Established in 1980, it has supplied organic wholefoods, fruit and veg and bespoke flowers for 35 years. If you grew up in Maryhill, the Jaconelli's roll and sausage or full breakfast will have been a constant feature of your week.

Last December, Byres Road was ranked number 9 in the American Express top 10 list of UK high streets—the only high street in Scotland to make the list. The business improvement district there worked tirelessly to get that in order to bring customers to Byres Road and to showcase what the area has to offer. Its work to organise events such as the Vinicombe Street Christmas gala, which I enjoyed very much this year, and its collaborations with WestFest do much to keep the vacancy rates in the area low—they sit at 3 per cent against a national average of 14 per cent.

All those fantastic businesses represent the hard work of Glaswegians who are committed to entrepreneurship and their communities. They are often the product of years of passionate grafting and long hours, but that pays off in spades for our local economy and community. However, those businesses have endured years of difficulty, and they have felt let down by the Scottish Government. Many worry about parking provision, including charges, yet Glasgow City Council does not seem to listen. In the south side, many have raised concern about Glasgow City Council's plans to introduce parking charges in Shawlands, Strathbungo and Battlefield, with businesses such as the Battlefield Rest speaking out about the detrimental impact it could have.

We should empower and not constrain our small businesses. That means increasing flexibility to unlock potential and giving certainty so that great ideas can flourish. Scottish Labour believes that we can and should do that in many different ways, such as through a new approach to planning. We would better incentivise investment, support bricks-and-mortar retail, tackle empty properties, make town centres attractive places to visit and support entrepreneurship.

We would also modernise business rates to reflect changes in local economies. The UK Labour Government is already doing a lot of that and is delivering comprehensive packages of support and reform for businesses across England and Wales. Those measures include permanent reductions in business rates with multipliers for retail, hospitality and leisure, funded by higher rates for online giants to level the playing field.

Since the 2024 general election, Labour has delivered £10.3 billion of additional funding for the Scottish Government. There is a real opportunity to deliver for small business owners across Scotland, if there were the political will to do so. Scottish Labour would also help businesses to partner and share the delivery of apprenticeships, which could be transformational for businesses in Glasgow, because, as in many areas, skills in key sectors, including in small businesses, are in short supply.

Small business Saturday happens once a year. However, as I said, support for and recognition of small businesses is not just for Christmas, but for every day. To all those who are listening and watching today, I say: pop out to your local street, find a local business and support it. You will get what you need, you will feel great and you will be celebrating the vital contribution of small businesses to this great country.

17:59

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con):

I congratulate my friend and colleague Rachael Hamilton on securing this important and topical debate. We have just been through small business Saturday and, as every speaker has said, we should support our small businesses throughout the year, not just on that one Saturday in December.

I will focus my remarks on one small business and one small business owner in Moray. The minister and I do not agree on an awful lot, but I hope that, when I have concluded my remarks, he will agree with what I am about to say. I want to use this opportunity, on the penultimate day of the parliamentary year, to say a big thank you from our Parliament to a Moray businesswoman who has done so much, not just for her business but for small businesses in Moray, the Highlands, Scotland and across the UK. She is Pearl Hamilton of Pearl's Pet Care.

Pearl is retiring on Christmas eve after 43 years in business. Pearl started work in her teens on the croft where she was brought up and she has worked throughout her life. When she made her announcement, I reminded her that I had been a regular customer of hers, and I should declare an interest because I have my order in for Christmas eve for chicken food and cider vinegar for the chicken water. When she announced her retirement, I said that she had been in business longer than I had been alive. I meant that as a compliment to show her durability in business through good times and bad.

Pearl has been a stable part of Moray business for so long, starting off in Kinloss and then becoming a stronghold on Tolbooth Street. Last

Friday, other traders on Tolbooth Street used their annual Christmas party to throw a surprise retirement party for Pearl. I am told that there would have been some pretty sore heads after it, as it was a very joyous affair.

Pearl just has a way about her. She is great at customer service, whether someone is a regular customer, as I am, or a first-time entrant to her shop. She will find what the customer needs and deliver it with great style and enthusiasm. That is why she has built up such a strong customer base over many years.

Throughout much of her 43 years in business, Pearl was supported by her family. Sadly, her husband Jeff died earlier this year. When I was a councillor on Moray Council, Jeff was an independent councillor for Kinloss and the wider Forres ward. They were a double act. Whenever I think of small business Saturday, I will think of Jeff coming out with Pearl and me to go round the other shops in Forres and Moray, getting our picture taken with our blue boards and supporting the FSB and small business Saturday. Pearl did a power of work with the FSB in Moray and across Scotland. Indeed, she also held national positions with the FSB.

Pearl and Jeff together built up their business to what it became. Jeff has sadly passed away, but Pearl is keen to continue with the pet care element of the business, so she will continue to look after pets in Moray and the Highland area.

When I saw that the motion was about small business Saturday, I thought that it was an opportunity for me to use my four minutes to give my personal thanks to Pearl for what she has provided to Forres, Moray and the wider community, not just through the business that she built up with her family and the support that she has given her customers but through the knowledge and expertise that she was ready and willing to pass on to other businesses in the area. Other businesses in Moray are doing well because of the help and support that they received from Pearl Hamilton.

I say to Pearl from the Scottish Parliament chamber that we are grateful for everything that she has done and we wish her a very long and happy retirement.

18:03

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I, too, congratulate the member on securing the debate and wholly endorse the vital role of small businesses in sustaining the town centre and local economy. They are embedded in communities and support local events, football clubs and charities. They come in all shapes and sizes: shops, cafes,

takeaways, pubs, manufacturers, a local cinema, a bingo hall—and that list is not exhaustive. Many survived the Covid years, which was tough going, and I thank them all for that. From Peebles to Penicuik and from Galashiels to Gorebridge, small businesses give our towns local employment and their character.

In passing, I note the exchanges on the issue of revaluations, which has been raised by my constituents. I am pleased that the Public Audit Committee is already initiating an inquiry, that the minister is on the case and that there is a willingness to work together across the parties. I welcome that, but I also gently remind the Opposition that there was once co-operation between the Conservatives and the SNP in here, which brought about the small business bonus scheme, meaning that some businesses pay no rates at all. Those were good days.

There are particular challenges in Gala and Penicuik, both of which have major supermarkets right on their doorsteps—Tesco and Asda in Gala, and Tesco and Lidl in Penicuik. However, I am not bashing supermarkets. They have their place, but their arrival has changed those town centres, although the town centre businesses are fighting back.

In Gala, the first festive gala was on Saturday 29 November, with live performances, markets, creative activities and the grand tree light-up. The gala brought a real sense of energy, with thousands of people choosing to spend their day in the town centre, which translated into meaningful support for local businesses. Indeed, many enjoyed an exceptional trading day, with several reporting record takings. There is an endeavour now to replicate that at different times of the year.

Penicuik town centre precinct hosts many local events. There is a very active community council that runs regular street fairs, summer fairs, the pumpkin patch and, of course, the biggest event of the year—the Christmas fair and Christmas lights switch-on. It is a great opportunity for local businesses to showcase what they are doing, and it draws local people back to the heart of Penicuik.

In those towns and across the Borders and Midlothian, the common ridings not only emphasise the local history and culture but help the tills to ring and provide work for blacksmiths, stables and hospitality.

I know many of my local businesses. For me, it would be invidious to name some and not others, but, following Douglas Ross, I will make one exception and name the Central Bar in Peebles, which is a free house that is small but perfectly formed. During Covid, Roddy MacKay, the owner, did not qualify for a bean in financial support.

However, he did not lie down in defeat—he spruced up the interior, and there are now hanging baskets outside. He recently won an award for his little pub. For me, that is the spirit of a local business, which is replicated throughout my constituency. During those tough Covid years, and during the tough days now due to inflation and the economy, they can flourish—but they will always need local support.

18:07

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests: I am a small farmer in Moray.

I join others in thanking Rachael Hamilton for securing a very important debate about the value of small businesses, not just on small business Saturday but across the year, and the value of what they do, particularly in rural communities such as those in Moray, where I live.

Although Moray might be home to some of the bigger names such as Walker's Shortbread, Johnstons of Elgin and Baxters, it is also home to some really promising new starts and growing small businesses. I have had the pleasure of lodging motions to welcome some of their major achievements this year. They include Kompassion Kombucha, W Reid butchers in Hopeman, and the microbrewery Mind Hop Brewery, which produces Moray's newest non-alcoholic beer and stout, as well as supporting mental health charities.

However, as members might expect me to say, often overlooked are some of our farmers and fishermen, who are themselves small business owners. Many are developing their businesses to support local enterprises, and they are bringing their food to the market in a variety of different and quite innovative ways. I want to recognise the value that they bring to their communities.

I will focus on a particular concern that my colleague Fergus Ewing brought up earlier, which is the changes to non-domestic rates. My inbox has been filled with messages about that issue over the past couple of weeks, and I appreciate people getting in touch with me. I will give a few examples. One small holiday-let business emailed me to say that, when it started its business, in 2020, which was already a tricky year with Covid-19, its business rates bill was £6,000 a year, and it has just received its draft valuation for 2026, which informed the business that it faces a new bill of £30,000 a year. In its words—

Rachael Hamilton: Will the member take an intervention?

Tim Eagle: Absolutely.

Rachael Hamilton: We are all congratulating businesses. Christine Grahame just congratulated

the Central Bar, but a cursory look at the Scottish Assessor Association's website shows that the Central Bar is facing a rates increase from £13,700 to more than £20,000. I wonder what the small businesses that go over the threshold and do not get any small business rates relief will be saying about how sustainable their businesses are.

Tim Eagle: I agree with Rachael Hamilton. If we believe in everything that we say about the circular economy and in supporting rural businesses and local economies, we need to support small businesses. They are the root and branch of everything that we do, and we must get behind them. I wanted to raise that point today.

Christine Grahame: Will the member take an intervention?

Tim Eagle: Yes, although I have almost finished.

Christine Grahame: I was tempted to intervene on the intervention. Of course, what happened to the Central Bar is wrong—that is why I am so pleased that there is going to be an inquiry. I am not opposed to what you are saying, because we must work together to make common sense prevail.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I cannot give you much time back Mr Eagle.

Tim Eagle: That is okay, because I am about to finish anyway.

A small business that runs bothies emailed me to say that it faces a rates bill rise from £11,000 a year to £31,000 but that nothing has changed at its site that would justify a tripling of rates. Finally, a small self-catering company in the Western Isles—somewhere I am passionate about—told me that it is facing a 209 per cent increase in its rates bill and that, if that goes ahead, the business will have to be wound up. I say that not as a joke but because I genuinely think that it will happen.

We heard earlier from Graham Dey, the Minister for Parliamentary Business, that the Scottish Government is taking the issue seriously, but I want to hear that the Government really is doing that and that things will change, because, otherwise, businesses will go under.

18:10

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): I will speak briefly and will not try to compete with any of my parliamentary colleagues' recitations of the names of local small businesses that deserve praise and support. We are here to celebrate those businesses, and I am grateful to Rachael Hamilton for bringing the debate to the chamber.

It is interesting to listen to colleagues in Parliament talking about businesses in general and small businesses in particular, because there is a clear dichotomy between left and right. The left like to emphasise, as Pam Duncan-Glancy did, the importance of Government spending in supporting small businesses, whereas people of a more conservative persuasion like to think that there is some truth in the famous saying by Ronald Reagan:

"I've always felt the nine most terrifying words in the English language are: 'I'm from the Government, and I'm here to help.'"

He said that 40 years ago next year, but it is still true.

Most businesspeople whom I have come across have one simple request for politicians: "Get out of the way and let us get on with running our businesses." They make that simple request, but what they get from this Parliament in particular is an unending torrent of regulation and interference that just gets in the way of business, adds to their costs and takes them away from their driving purpose.

In the time that I have left, I will talk about one specific thing. We must not believe that there is somehow an endless supply of well-motivated, brilliant small businesspeople in this country, because there is not. They are a precious commodity and the backbone of our economy. We all agree with that, but if we want more businesses to exist in Scotland, we have to stop pretending that those people will suddenly pop up.

Businesses emerge from a culture, and the thing that most concerns me in our country is that we need to nourish the spirit of enterprise and entrepreneurship, which is not going to happen in a vacuum.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): Does the member also recognise that one part of the culture that people come from is the public services that we all rely on, including roads, street lighting, street cleaning, schools and healthcare, all of which rely on taxation, and that we need both?

Stephen Kerr: There will come a point when people of Mercedes Villalba's persuasion will kill the goose that lays the golden egg. We do depend on businesses as a source of taxation, but, if we want great public services in Scotland, as the Labour party claims it does, we have to stop taxing and regulating small businesses to the point of near death. That is what we see being called for by the parties of the left.

Christine Grahame: Will the member take an intervention?

Stephen Kerr: I will give way. I had meant to sit down by now, but I will give way.

Christine Grahame: I am aware that other Conservative members have referred to the body blow caused by the increase in employer national insurance contributions. If we add to that energy and supply costs, the blame can be laid at the door of the Labour Government at Westminster.

Stephen Kerr: The reality is that the parties on the left all believe in the policy of increasing taxation, growing the size of the state and having more and more Government interference, but all of that strangles the vital spark of our economy, which is the spirit of entrepreneurship and enterprise. That is the spirit that drives someone to get up in the morning with an idea and to go out to work to make it a reality and to find customers to sell goods and services to. If we do not accept the nature of that spirit and its fragility, and if we do not recognise the importance of our speaking often and speaking up about those things, we will gradually strangle the lifeblood of our economy.

That has to start in schools, colleges and universities. Across our society, we must make it easier for people to start businesses. We must relegate the risk-averse fear of failure to something else.

I am being told to sit down, so I will sit down.

18:15

Foysoyl Choudhury (Lothian) (Ind): I thank Rachael Hamilton for bringing this important debate to the chamber. The subject is very close to my heart. Before I joined politics, I was heavily involved in the catering industry—I draw colleagues' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests.

Small businesses are the lifeblood of our neighbourhoods. They create wealth, provide community and bless their neighbourhoods with a rich and distinctive identity. Take Argonaut Books, a thriving independent bookshop down the road from my office on Leith Walk, which I visited last month. Argonaut is a shining example of the qualities that small business Saturday seeks to champion. It satisfies our niche tastes. I was amazed by the sheer range of books on sale. It gives the area a distinctive identity and, with its bustling cafe, it provides a kind of community that a larger business simply could not replicate. It ensures that the community grows with it. The cafe buys its coffee from Artisan Roast Coffee Roasters, its cake from Tasty Buns Bakery and its tea from PekoeTea—an example of local businesses working together. Leith Walk today is a rich tapestry of successful local businesses.

While I firmly believe in the role of the state in regenerating communities, that role must be played in partnership with small businesses. Despite the successes, I am aware of the challenges that small businesses face. To run a small business is to take a risk. The UK Government is helping small businesses to face that risk, with funding to make training for apprentices under 25 completely free for small and medium-sized enterprises, the chance to open up individual savings accounts—ISAs—for investment in SMEs and a guarantee that customs duties will be levelled on parcels of any value, to stop online firms undercutting high-street businesses.

The motion notes that the

“recognition of small businesses must continue throughout the year”,

beyond small business Saturday. I agree, and I would echo the words of Guy Hinks, the Scotland chair of the Federation of Small Businesses, in his statement on the recent UK budget:

“All eyes will be on the Scottish Government's own Budget in January and how they invest the extra £820 million they are set to receive”.

Small businesses in Scotland have made clear to the Scottish Government what they need. It remains to be seen whether the budget will honour the spirit of small business Saturday and lend a helping hand to those—like my family—who want to take the chance to establish a small business.

18:18

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): This evening's debate, secured by Rachael Hamilton, has been really important, and it is an opportunity for all of us to acknowledge the fantastic small businesses that we have in our constituencies and regions.

I will take the debate in a different direction, however, and talk about business improvement districts, or BIDs as we know them. I acknowledge the value that they can bring to our towns and city centres, but very real concerns have been raised by businesses right across Scotland about how the programmes operate in practice. Many BIDs have delivered positive outcomes: they have supported local events, improved town centre marketing and enhanced public spaces, and they have helped to create a local sense of pride. Where they work well, they are driven by committed people with a shared vision for town centre regeneration. However, we have to listen very carefully to the voices of businesses that feel that the system is not always fair, is not always representative and is not always delivering value for money for all those who are required to contribute.

One of the most consistent concerns raised by businesses is about the fairness of how BIDs are applied. Typically, the levy is based on rateable value, yet the benefits are not always felt equally. Many small businesses tell me—other members are probably told this, too—that they struggle to see a clear return on their contributions, particularly at a time when operating costs remain high and economic pressures persist. We have heard a lot about that in this evening's debate.

There is also a growing perception that BIDs tend to favour shops that sell goods over businesses that provide services. Retail businesses may benefit directly from footfall-driven initiatives, such as marketing campaigns, festivals, street furniture and seasonal events. However, that contrasts with the situation of service-based businesses, such as accountants, mortgage advisers, tradespeople, childcare providers and professional services, which often operate on an appointments basis and rely less on passing trade. For those businesses, there is less of a link between the BID levy that they pay and the benefits that they receive, and it can feel almost as though they are not part of the BID system. They are asked to contribute equally, but their business model means that they are less likely to benefit from initiatives that are designed primarily to promote retail visibility. That imbalance raises legitimate questions about equity and whether the BID structures are sufficiently flexible to reflect the diverse nature of our town centre economies.

Concerns have also been raised about the transparency of the BID process and the engagement that is undertaken as part of it. Some businesses report that there is limited consultation beyond the initial ballot that takes place, and decisions are perceived to be driven by a narrow range of interests. I hope that that is not the case, but that reflects what businesses have told me. If BIDs are to remain credible, it must be ensured that there is on-going engagement with all levy payers, particularly small businesses, which often feel less heard.

There is a point that I want to put directly to the minister. I spoke to South Lanarkshire Council about the issue, which referred me to the Scottish Government, but when I spoke to the Scottish Government about it, I was referred back to the council. What I am trying to figure out—I hope that the minister will be so kind as to provide an explanation in his summing-up remarks—is who is in charge of the BID policy, who can amend that policy and who can make exemptions for businesses that do not benefit from BIDs, if it is the case that that is happening. Enabling such exemptions would be a good way forward. It would show our small businesses that we support them, but that we also recognise that not all initiatives benefit them.

18:22

The Minister for Business and Employment

(Richard Lochhead): I thank Rachael Hamilton for bringing this important topic to the chamber. We can tell from the speeches that have been made how strongly people feel about the contribution that their local small businesses make to their communities and the local economy. The community dimension is very important, as Pam Gosal and Christine Grahame said. Local businesses are the hub of our local communities and they play an important role in supporting economic development at community level.

I am old enough to remember when members' business debates were quite consensual and were not intended to be too party political, but a number of highly political issues have been raised this evening. I cannot promise to respond to them all, but I will address the rates issue later in my response.

Some members have mentioned businesses in their own constituencies. I celebrated small business Saturday by visiting Crepes & Coffee and Chuck McCall Highland Wear in Elgin, and I bought my dinner from Ada Turkish Restaurant—it was fantastic.

This debate is about not only the businesses but the people behind the businesses, so I very much associate myself with Douglas Ross's comments about Pearl Hamilton, who I have known well for many years. I have dealt with her many times over the years, either wearing her FSB hat or as someone running her own business in Forres. I wish her all the best for her future as she prepares to retire in the next few weeks.

We are also celebrating resilience among the small business community. Many members have mentioned some of the pressures that the small business community has been under in recent years and decades. The advent and expansion of supermarkets in our towns have been mentioned, and online trading has had an impact on our high streets. Rising energy bills and national insurance contributions have taken their toll on profitability, while general inflation and the increasing costs of raw materials are big issues that our small business community has had to contend with.

As a Government, we recognise and welcome the huge contribution that small businesses make to the economic and social fabric of communities across Scotland. They are valued everywhere, whether they are on our high streets or online, but they are particularly vital in our rural areas—I say that as an MSP who represents a large rural constituency. Rachael Hamilton, who lodged the motion for the debate, also represents a rural constituency. Often, small businesses are a lifeline

for those who are living in more remote areas and in our towns and villages across the country.

As part of my official duties as Minister for Business and Employment, I see examples of small businesses almost every day. Those businesses are in our hospitality sector, where family-owned restaurants and providers continue to be a key part of our high streets; in our retail sector, where small stores provide essential products and are just as essential for our communities; and in the wider tourism sector, which has been referenced by many members. Those businesses promote the best of our country to the global market and make Scotland a world-class destination to visit, which, in turn, benefits small businesses across the country.

As Tim Eagle said, it is not just about retail, tourism or hospitality; we also have fishing and agricultural businesses. I also visit many tech businesses around the country, including games businesses in Elgin. We have to remind ourselves that they are also small businesses, and there are many of them across the country. It is not just about our high streets.

Meghan Gallacher: The minister has rightly raised all the varying types of businesses. In doing so, he is making the point that I was trying to raise about BIDs. Some businesses will not benefit as much as others. Is it time to review the BID process, to see whether it can be made fairer?

Richard Lochhead: I am unaware of local demand for a review of the BID system, but, if it is an issue, we should reflect on that. If the member wants to write to ministers about it, we will certainly investigate whether there are issues that need to be reviewed. In the past couple of weeks, Glasgow has voted successfully to put a BID in place in the city centre, which is a good sign and a sign of the BID system's vitality. Many businesses in Glasgow's city centre will benefit, as will the local economy.

The business community is diverse and it provides a pipeline for skills, careers and employment. The opportunities that it creates inspire young people to get into the market.

Christine Grahame: I appreciate the point about some businesses feeling that they do not benefit from BIDs. My office in Galashiels took part in the BID that has just started in that area. It is important to recognise that if BIDs are operated properly, they benefit the surrounding environment. A BID may not mean direct footfall to an individual business, but it will make the place look and feel better, which is good.

Richard Lochhead: According to "Businesses in Scotland: 2025", which was published on 3 December, between 2024 and 2025 there was an increase in the number of small-sized businesses

in Scotland. That is an important backdrop to the debate, given some of the points that members have made. As of March 2025, an estimated 381,855 small and medium-sized enterprises were operating in Scotland, which provide an estimated 1.2 million jobs and 56.2 per cent of private sector employment. Of course, for many of the reasons that have been mentioned by members, we cannot be complacent and we want the data to be positive in all parts of the country.

Although I cannot comment about the details of future support, which, of course, is a matter for the budget that will be published on 13 January, I point to the support that we are already providing to the small business community in Scotland. A range of measures are in place, including place-based, community-led regeneration in our most disadvantaged communities, which has seen investment of up to £62 million in 2025-26. That approach is very popular in the small business community because it delivers our regeneration policy by revitalising town centres, supporting town centre living, addressing the blight of vacant and derelict land and buildings, and supporting community ownership. When I meet the Federation of Small Businesses or individual small businesses, they point to the importance of that support.

Meghan Gallacher: *rose—*

Richard Lochhead: Am I able to take one more intervention, Presiding Officer?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: No, minister.

Richard Lochhead: Apologies. I would otherwise have taken that intervention.

Those projects are revitalising our town centres and villages. We have worked with Scotland's Towns Partnership on the Scotland loves local campaign and various other measures.

Given that I am running out of time, I will turn to the rates issue. I remind members that our small business bonus scheme is the most generous in the UK and that around half of properties in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors are eligible for 100 per cent relief under that scheme, on top of other reliefs that have been introduced.

Members have mentioned revaluation. We are listening and we recognise the concerns that are being expressed. The First Minister made that point last Thursday in this chamber. We reiterate the point that the assessors are at arm's length from Government and are independent, but I am sure that the issue will be on-going, and we are listening closely. I am an MSP for many businesses that will, potentially, be affected, and we will listen to the concerns that are being expressed. Clearly, I am not in a position to make

any announcement about that during this debate. In addition, the budget is coming up.

Meeting closed at 18:31.

Again, I thank Rachael Hamilton for bringing the debate to the Parliament. Small business Saturday is a great opportunity to celebrate our small business community and to recognise how resilient it has been, over past decades in particular, and the valuable role that it will play in Scotland.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* for this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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