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Scottish Parliament

Wednesday 9 September 2026

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

Committee Convener

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Good afternoon. We begin with the election of the convener of the Criminal Justice Committee. We have received one valid nomination, for David Linden. The election of the member as convener will be confirmed if no other member objects. If I receive an objection, the election will be subject to a secret ballot.

If any member objects to the election of David Linden as convener, please press your point-of-order button now.

As no member has objected, I confirm that David Linden has been elected as convener of the Criminal Justice Committee. *[Applause.]*

Portfolio Question Time

Deputy First Minister Responsibilities, Finance and Local Government, Parliamentary Business and Veterans

14:01

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): We move to portfolio question time. The first portfolio is Deputy First Minister responsibilities, finance and local government, parliamentary business and veterans. If a member wishes to request a supplementary question, they should press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question.

UK Fishing and Coastal Growth Fund

1. **Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what funding it expects to receive from the United Kingdom Government's fishing and coastal growth fund, broken down by financial year. (S7O-00182)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): Scotland's consequential from the fishing and coastal growth fund for the remainder of the UK spending review period are: £2.1 million in 2026-27; £2.7 million in 2027-28; £2.8 million in 2028-29; and an estimated £3.4 million in 2029-30.

It is important to understand that Scotland has been allocated a total of £28 million—or less than 8 per cent—of the £360 million UK fisheries fund and yet, in my constituency and in Ms Adam's constituency, fishing is existential. Shetland lands more fish than Wales, Northern Ireland and England combined. That is another example of a consequence of Brexit, which Scotland and the people of Shetland did not vote for.

Karen Adam: Scotland has more than 60 per cent of the UK's fishing capacity and lands more than 75 per cent of UK quota species, yet Westminster allocated less than 8 per cent of the fund to Scotland, or £28 million over 12 years. That was a political choice as, previously, agricultural funding was devolved without being Barnettised. I fully understand why fishers are looking to the Scottish Government for help, because businesses, jobs, and communities matter. Will the minister press the Treasury for a fairer settlement to reflect Scotland's share of the industry, while working across Government with industry to maximise support now?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: I strongly agree that the decision to grant only a Barnett share of the fund to Scotland was a deliberate political choice by the UK Government. Over the years, fishermen have been used as political pawns. It happened

during Brexit, as well as with the 12 years of unchecked access to UK waters, and now, the UK has Barnettised the formula for the fishing fund. It is clear that fisheries are an irrelevance to Westminster, yet the industry is important for Scotland and is existential for Ms Adams's constituency. The Scottish Government has always been clear that the application of a population-based model to fisheries fails to recognise Scotland's greater share of our UK seas. We will continue to make that point strongly to the UK Government in pursuit of a fairer share of the fisheries and coastal fund being allocated to Scotland.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Given the climate and biodiversity crises facing our seas, how can the Scottish Government ensure that the funding that comes to Scotland does not simply subsidise business as usual, but is used to support genuine ecological sustainability and, importantly, community benefit, ensuring that there is decent work and supporting resilient coastal communities?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: Our fishers are great stewards of the sea. It is in their best interests to ensure that fish stocks are sustainable now and well into the future. It is important that, as we move forward with our Scottish fisheries fund, which will sit alongside the UK fisheries fund, we take a merit-based approach to allocation. When we talk about economic, social and environmental perspectives on allocation, we must consider all that in the round.

Town Centres and Local Economies (Assistance for Local Government)

2. David Barratt (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government, following the publication of the programme for government, how it is planning to assist local authorities with regenerating town centres and strengthening local economies. (S7O-00183)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): The Scottish Government is committed to supporting the regeneration of our towns and town centres to ensure that they are vibrant, thriving places. With our agencies, we work regularly with many local authorities on work to strengthen local economies. For example, in 2026-27, we will provide up to £40 million of regeneration capital investment to support local authorities to bring unused properties back into productive use, to revitalise our town centres and to make the communities that people live in thriving places.

David Barratt: I welcome the Scottish Government's continued investment in regeneration projects across Fife, particularly in the Cowdenbeath constituency. What further

action will the Government take to ensure that the benefits of regeneration and economic growth in renewed town centres are felt more widely across communities in the constituency, so that no area is left behind?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: A key part of the programme for government is ensuring that we have growth and regeneration in every region and part of Scotland. Thriving places are absolutely key to our communities and to our country as a whole.

To focus on Fife in particular, which was the subject of Mr Barratt's question, Fife Council has received more than £43 million in regeneration capital investment from the Scottish Government since 2014, including £1.1 million for 2025-26 and £3.8 million for 2026-27 to develop new units at the Glenfield industrial estate. Funding has also supported regeneration projects in Lochgelly and Inverkeithing, such as the transformation of the Inverkeithing townhouse.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to improving our high streets. The minister will know the importance of place-based improvements to local economies and wellbeing. I was also encouraged by the Prime Minister's announcement that the United Kingdom Government is committed to introducing clear design standards for high street shopfronts.

In Glasgow, there is a good example of how that can be achieved. I have seen that in Saracen Street in Possilpark, where shopfronts were upgraded to their traditional shopfront standards due to Scottish Government funding, which I campaigned for with the local business improvement district. A similar scheme has been implemented in Govan, which has led to increased footfall, making the community feel safer for everyone. Will the minister commit to introducing similar design standards at a national level, learning the lessons from Possilpark and Govan, so that other high streets can benefit in the same way?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: I would be delighted to learn more about those shopfronts, both in Govan and across Glasgow more broadly. Over the summer, I have engaged with planning authorities and local government about the purpose of planning across our town centres, so that we can make them more liveable, accessible and pleasurable places to be. I am very happy to engage with the member on the matter and perhaps even visit the shops themselves.

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): The Scottish Government has announced plans for a last provider fund to support the final remaining shops and pubs in our rural towns and villages.

Sadly, for many of the communities that I represent, that fund comes too late, and the lack of support from the Scottish National Party in the previous parliamentary session means that many businesses have been lost, potentially for good. That is the case in Canonbie, where the Cross Keys hotel closed last January and now stands empty.

Will the minister confirm that the cash that is being made available is genuinely new money, and will she also confirm which areas will qualify? Will she commit to ensuring that any additional Barnett consequential that flow from additional rates relief for hospitality in England are passed on in full to this vital but faltering part of the Scottish economy?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: It is important to note that the last provider fund is a signal from this Government to our rural and island communities that this is a Government that stands behind our rural and island communities, and the shops that are sometimes at the very heart of these communities and the high streets that they represent.

As Mr Hoy will know, we are reviewing our business rates perspective when it comes to small businesses and hospitality in the round. The Deputy First Minister and I are leading work on that. A wide package of reliefs is already present for businesses across Scotland; indeed, our business package is the most generous across the UK in terms of small businesses being able to qualify under that £100,000 mark.

When it comes to the 20 per cent business rates relief that Mr Burnham has imposed across hospitality, it is yet to be seen what the Barnett consequential is. However, I would be happy to engage with the member on how we potentially explore how that transfers across in relation to ring fencing.

Civic Licensing (Local Authorities)

3. Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of ministerial comments regarding concerns about the discharge of licensing functions by Highland Council, whether it plans to review the governance arrangements under which local authorities discharge civic licensing functions. (S7O-00184)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): Under the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982, it is for local licensing authorities to make decisions relating to the day-to-day operation of licensing matters. That reflects the decision making that can be done best locally, with the wishes of communities in mind. That regime includes decisions on, for example, taxis and private hire licences. An independent task

force will shortly report to the Scottish Government with general recommendations on how the licensing regimes under the act may be modernised and reformed. That report will be considered carefully before any next steps are taken.

Julie MacDougall: To reiterate my point, I will quote Maree Todd, who described the situation where a convicted rapist was allowed to keep his taxi licence as “incomprehensible”. She also said:

“I’m struggling to understand what they were thinking of when they were making that decision.”

Will the minister confirm whether she supports her fellow minister’s comments? Does she agree that all licensing approval meetings should be held fully in public, in exactly the same way as licensing boards decide alcohol licence applications, to prevent such situations from ever happening again?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: I first want to state my utter disgust at the abhorrent nature of the case and how the licence holder was able to retain his licence. I also want to put on record that Highland Council eventually came to the right conclusion. However, the case should never have been able to get to that stage.

I support Ms Todd in her comments as a concerned constituent. I fully stand behind the words that she, and many other members of the chamber, shared about their disgust at that man’s keeping his licence.

Julie MacDougall raises a good point about where power lies in taking such decisions. The public sector reform approach provides us with the opportunity to start having such discussions and engaging with local authorities on where the power rests and lies in the next three months and the next quarter of this calendar year, as we head towards the Christmas period. We will explore that. As I said, a review has been kicked off, and we will see where that concludes.

Programme for Government (Engagement with Local Authorities)

4. Kate Campbell (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what engagement it has had with local authorities regarding its programme for government, to ensure alignment on shared objectives. (S7O-00185)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): Discussions that took place with local government partners over the summer recess established an agreed need for reform of public services to meet the complex demographic, fiscal and demand-led challenges that those services face. I met Convention of Scottish Local

Authorities leadership and political group leaders, and the Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform, and the First Minister also held discussions with COSLA, on behalf of local authorities, which informed our approach. On Friday of this week, the First Minister, Mr McKee and I will again meet COSLA.

As we take forward implementation and the wider reform agenda, we will continue to work closely with local government to build the consensus that is needed around a shared direction and the changes that are needed to deliver better outcomes for communities across Scotland.

Kate Campbell: Does the Deputy First Minister agree that the review of local government must prioritise the delivery of high-quality local services with fewer managers and more front-line workers? What assurances can she give that services will still be tailored to the needs of local communities?

Jenny Gilruth: Kate Campbell is absolutely correct to point to the need for local service delivery to be maintained and improved as a consequence of public service reform. Ultimately, public service reform is aimed at improving services rather than preserving structures, as was discussed at this morning's meeting of the Social Justice, Housing and Local Government Committee.

Through public service reform, we will ensure that services are much more joined up, sustainable and responsive to local communities' needs, while reducing unnecessary duplication. We are absolutely committed to engaging further with local government partners, as I have already outlined, with communities and, of course, with Parliament to design a reform package that delivers against those objectives.

Breakfast Clubs (Local Authority Funding)

5. Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the funding it has made available to local authorities to expand and enhance breakfast club provision. (S7O-00186)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): The Scottish Government has provided funding to Scotland's councils to deliver on the roll-out of free breakfast clubs in primary schools throughout Scotland from August 2027. That commitment will be delivered flexibly to meet the needs of children, families and communities across the country.

In 2026-27, £15 million has been provided to local councils to expand and enhance breakfast club provision. From 2027-28, that will be followed by the provision of an additional £44 million

annually to deliver that national offer. Allocation letters confirming individual local authority allocations were issued on 31 August.

Jackie Dunbar: Will the Deputy First Minister give further detail on what the expanded and enhanced provision will look like in practice and what the benefits for pupils, parents and teachers will be? Will she also advise on how that investment will help with the Scottish Government's wider action to eradicate child poverty and put more money into the pockets of families across Scotland?

Jenny Gilruth: As education secretary, I was proud to begin our national roll-out of breakfast clubs. We know what a key role they play in enhancing and supporting attainment in our schools and, more broadly, in cutting the cost of the school day.

The Government recognises the pressure on households at the current time, which is why, in 2026-27, we are allocating around £3.5 billion to policies that tackle poverty and the cost of living. It is worth recounting that around half of Scotland's schools already have some sort of breakfast club provision as a result of direct investment from the Scottish Government through, for example, the pupil equity fund.

NHS Pension Scheme (Remedial Service Statements)

6. Steven Bonnar (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to address delays in the provision of remedial service statements to national health service pension scheme members affected by the McCloud/Sargeant remedy, including measures to prevent financial detriment to members, in light of reports that some former NHS employees have been waiting almost four years to receive their statements. (S7O-00187)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): I recognise that a number of retired NHS employees have yet to receive their remedial service statement. Although the original timescales have been extended, it is important that scheme members receive them as soon as possible.

To support that work, we have increased the Scottish Public Pensions Agency's budget year on year, from £25 million in 2022-23 to £38 million in 2026-27. The SPPA has expanded its workforce and is investing in technology. Governance and oversight arrangements have also been strengthened.

Importantly, members should not suffer financial detriment as a result of any delay. Any benefits that are due will be paid in full, with arrears and with interest.

Steven Bonnar: My constituent has experienced prolonged delay in receiving her remedial service statement from the Scottish Public Pensions Agency, in the way that that the cabinet secretary described. What further discussions has the Scottish Government had with any relevant successor committees regarding the SPPA's delivery of the remedy and the steps that are being taken to address the issues further?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: In the summer, the Deputy First Minister met the chief executive of the SPPA, who then wrote to the successor committees with an update on progress on the McCloud remedy. In response, the Finance and Public Administration Committee indicated that it intends to take further evidence this autumn. I ask the member to feed that information back to his constituent.

The Government is clear about the urgency of this work, and has put resource and time into it. It continues to support the SPPA to deliver the remedy as quickly as possible, while recognising that the original United Kingdom Government legislative timetable was not achievable.

The SPPA continues to work closely with employers and staff representatives to ensure that scheme members are kept up to date on progress.

Town Centres (Local Authority Funding)

7. Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it will ensure that local authorities have sufficient resources to support town centres. (S7O-00188)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): Local authorities are in receipt of record funding in this year's budget. As I noted earlier in my response to David Barratt, we are committed to supporting the regeneration of our town centres, backed up with £40 million of regeneration capital investment this year. That investment has supported local authorities to deliver local regeneration activity, including revitalising town centres, accelerating town centre living, tackling vacant and derelict land and supporting community ownership.

Just this summer, as part of my ministerial tour, I went to Dumfries and was encouraged by the extended town centre living that had been supported by the Scottish Government, which included converting blocks of flats to bring people back into town centres. When I consider planning, the question of how we can get more people back into town centres is on my agenda, because that is part of the answer when it comes to social cohesion.

Finlay Carson: The Deputy First Minister recently provided £5 million of Scottish

Government support to businesses affected by the fire on Princes Street in Edinburgh. However, businesses in Stranraer have endured more than three years of road closures, disruption, reduced footfall and uncertainty as a result of the redevelopment of the former George hotel. Although the minister in her response argues that it is a matter for the local authority, because it is a council-led regeneration project, the impact on local traders is no less real.

The Scottish Government recognises that redevelopment is a key part of the wider reshaping Stranraer strategy. Does the minister accept that businesses in Stranraer, through no fault of their own, should not be expected to shoulder the cost of failures of a publicly funded regeneration project on their own? Will she commit to looking into the hugely significant impact that prolonged disruption has had on businesses, particularly on Church Street, and explore how the Scottish Government can provide assistance to the affected traders, just as it did for businesses that were impacted in Edinburgh?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: I am well aware that the council owns the hotel in the Stranraer development that Mr Carson speaks about. I also know that he has written extensively to the Deputy First Minister on the issue. In relation to upcoming budget negotiations, our door is open.

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): One of the crucial commitments in my campaign to win the support of the communities of Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse was to drive forward the regeneration of Hamilton town centre. There is capital funding set aside by the local authority and through the pride in place programme, and there is revenue funding from the Scottish Government for the business improvement district. Will the minister meet me to discuss whether there is any potential for additional capital funding from the Scottish Government to be leveraged into the regeneration efforts?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: I would be very happy to meet and discuss the matter. In addition to the projects that we will be supporting through our capital regeneration investment programme, we continue to provide funding to Scotland's Towns Partnership to provide support to stakeholders with engagement on and the implementation and development of town centre visions and strategies. I ask Mr Kerr to please write to me, and I will be happy to engage.

Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform): Local authorities across Scotland are carrying a £22 billion net debt. While local authorities are left to look after their own borrowing risk, is the Government looking at aggregated

exposure if borrowing costs remain high or increase? What would the impact be on public services, including the regeneration projects that the minister has talked about?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: We had a discussion on that issue this morning at the Social Justice, Housing and Local Government Committee, and it falls into the public sector reform space in terms of how we, as a Government, are taking some of that execution power and putting more of the decision making in at local authority level.

Angela Ross will be well aware that, under the Scotland Act 1998, local councils have more borrowing power than the Scottish Government itself. However, there are conversations to be explored in order to understand how local government can take that risk and a multiyear perspective when it comes to borrowing. Perhaps there should also be a conversation about and an exploration into how national Government backs and stands behind that.

Future Framework for Universities

8. David Kirkwood (South Scotland) (Reform): To ask the Scottish Government what funding provision it plans to make in its upcoming budget to support the implementation of the initial findings of the future framework for universities. (S7O-00189)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): Work is under way on the 2027-28 budget and, as part of that process, we will work closely with the Scottish Funding Council and Universities Scotland. I very much recognise the need to ensure a sustainable model of funding that recognises the wider financial pressures that our universities face in Scotland and, indeed, across the United Kingdom. That is why, when I was the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, I was pleased to commit to our joint work alongside Universities Scotland. The funding gap analysis report provides the necessary foundation, and it is the first step in that joint work to identify the solutions that are required for a successful and sustainable future to be delivered for all Scotland's universities.

David Kirkwood: The projected savings from the public sector reform programme are relatively modest, at less than 1 per cent of the total spend, but they would be sufficient to cover the more than £200 million annual shortfall in Scottish university funding that the future framework has identified. Will the Government commit to using that money to safeguard an essential investment in Scotland's future prosperity, and can some of the rest be given to schools so that teachers can be issued with more than 23 pencils per year?

Jenny Gilruth: I have to confess that, in my time as a teacher, I do not recall ever being issued with 23 pencils per year. It might be an equation that Mr Kirkwood is acquainted with, but it is not one that I ever engaged with as a teacher.

The broader point about sustainable funding for our universities is important. That is why, last year, in my discussions with the then Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government, I was able to secure an uplift for our universities, with the investment for financial year 2026-27 exceeding £1.4 billion, which includes a combined increase of more than £55 million in resource and capital funding from the Scottish Funding Council.

We will take forward further engagement with the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic and the Scottish Funding Council in relation to the allocation for our university sector this year.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I call question 9. Stuart McMillan joins us remotely.

Cruise Ship Levy

9. Stuart McMillan (Inverclyde) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its plans to allow local authorities to introduce a cruise ship levy. (S7O-00190)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Please put your camera on, Mr McMillan.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): As Stuart McMillan will appreciate, the Scottish Government has begun a three-month engagement period on the future shape of regional and community governance. We will be looking to establish effective reforms that improve our services and can achieve the support of the Parliament. As that process will consider where responsibilities for a number of powers should sit, I urge Mr McMillan and all members to feed into that process, not least on the suggestion of a cruise ship levy.

Stuart McMillan: The Deputy First Minister will be aware that there is cross-party support for the introduction of a cruise ship levy, with various MSPs, including Liam McArthur, highlighting that in the previous parliamentary session. Will the Deputy First Minister confirm that a cruise ship levy bill will be introduced in this parliamentary session, as it would assist my constituency a great deal more than the tourism or visitor levy does?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr McMillan will be aware that the Government carried out a consultation on the potential for a cruise ship levy over the spring of 2025, and the analysis following that consultation was published in March 2026.

A broader consideration with regard to the member's original question is about public service reform, which I view as relevant in this context. The amended Visitor Levy (Scotland) Act 2024 also allows local authorities to set a levy of a fixed amount instead of a percentage, and that can help generate resources for visitor services and facilities.

More broadly, however, because of the interaction with public service reform, I encourage the member to engage with the Government. A focused time period of three months is being provided to local government to engage with the Government on those issues, and I encourage members, including Mr McMillan, to make necessary representations about their own constituencies. I have heard Mr McMillan's point about the cruise ship levy, and I am happy to engage further with him further on his ask.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I thank Stuart McMillan for raising the issue. For clarification, as I am sure the cabinet secretary is aware, the alternative of a point-of-entry levy is felt by many who work in the island tourism sector, including in my Orkney constituency, to offer a fairer, simpler and more effective solution to the existing visitor levy on overnight accommodation. Will the cabinet secretary confirm whether the Government will ensure that that option is at least available to island local authorities, as part of any work to take forward the findings of the cruise ship levy consultation?

Jenny Gilruth: To give Mr McArthur some assurance—and I am happy to engage with him on such issues—I very much recognise how important those matters are in island constituencies such as his. I see my minister, on my right, nodding at me. We need to consider more broadly where powers and functions best sit in the context of public service reform, but I will engage with Mr McArthur on the substantive point relating to his question in the broader consultation.

PFI Payments (Public Sector Finances)

10. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update regarding the latest assessment it has made of the impact of private finance initiative payments on public sector finances. (S7O-00191)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): The latest published data shows that the total estimated projected unitary charge of payments for 74 private finance initiative contracts across the public sector in Scotland, from 2025-26 onwards, is approximately £12.9 billion. We are committed to ensuring that PFI contractual obligations are delivered and that contracts are as

affordable as they can be. That is why we asked the Scottish Futures Trust to support public bodies in optimising value for money for those contracts.

Alan Brown: The Deputy First Minister is probably aware that Labour's PFI scheme for the Royal infirmary of Edinburgh has already cost the taxpayers more than £1 billion. Despite that, there is a current estimated repair bill of something like £90 million, which will leave a debt liability of potentially tens of millions of pounds when the hospital is returned to public ownership next year. What assessment has the Government made of other PFI schemes when it comes to potential debt liabilities, considering that we were promised that the buildings would be returned to public ownership in perfect condition?

Jenny Gilruth: Across the public purse, the toxic legacy of Labour's PFI contracts continues to impact on the Scottish Government's broader spending power, even to this day. The Scottish Futures Trust has expanded contract management capacity and has established a dedicated PFI expiry service to look at consistent support to public bodies as contracts move towards their expiry. We are also working closely with authorities to reduce the risk of avoidable costs, and PFI hand-backs that have been completed to date have been delivered smoothly and within the parameters that we would have expected.

We need to look at stronger governance in that regard, and earlier planning, but I very much recognise the challenge. The member will be aware that I am having to deal with some of the consequences that, many years later, stem from those contracts.

Public Service Reform, Europe, External Affairs and Energy

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): We move to the public service reform, Europe, external affairs and energy portfolio. I ask that any member who wishes to request a supplementary question press their button. My ability to bring in such questions depends, as always, on how succinct questions and answers are. I will give a few moments for members on the front benches to change over.

Energy Infrastructure (Community Benefits)

1. Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that communities hosting energy infrastructure receive direct benefits from it. (S70-00192)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy (Stephen Gethins): [*Inaudible.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Your microphone is not on. Is your card in, Mr Gethins?

For the future, if any member forgets their card when coming to the chamber, they can always get a replacement from the front desk.

Stephen Gethins: Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer. It should be working now.

I ask Jenni Minto for her forgiveness and I thank her for raising the issue, because it is important to her and her constituents. Communities that host infrastructure should see some benefits. She will be aware of my recent comments when the United Kingdom Government announced upgrades to lines but the community did not see as much benefit as it might have expected.

The Scottish Government has some limited powers and we are taking action by refreshing our good practice principles for community benefits from onshore renewables developments. The guidance will reflect the renewable energy sector's evolution, ensuring that host communities receive sustainable, meaningful outcomes from renewables developments.

Jenni Minto: Renewable energy is a key part of our journey to net zero and Scotland already produces huge amounts of renewable power, with the potential to create much more. However, too often, communities such as those across Argyll and Bute host the required infrastructure without feeling the benefits, while continuing to pay some of the highest energy bills in the UK.

Does the minister agree that all energy powers should be devolved to Scotland so that we can ensure that Scotland's energy production has greater benefits for the people of Scotland?

Stephen Gethins: Jenni Minto is right to raise that, and people in Argyll and Bute will be particularly concerned. I agree, and—despite what others might think—the majority of parliamentarians in this Parliament agree, that full control over energy policy should sit in this Parliament, where the benefits of Scotland's energy wealth can be achieved. They cannot be achieved within the current devolution settlement.

Jenni Minto has rightly raised the fact that Scotland is energy rich yet our bills remain among the highest in Europe, despite the promises from the Labour Government. The Scottish Government wrote to the UK Government to formally request that those powers be devolved, on the basis of a vote in this Parliament, so that we can take decisive action in areas such as reducing bills, tackling fuel poverty and making sure that we feel the benefit of Scotland's vast energy wealth, but we have still not had a response.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Communities hosting the Kintore to Tealing energy infrastructure in Aberdeenshire report that it will reduce the value of their properties by up to 40 per cent. They have heard absolutely nothing from the Scottish Government about what benefit they will get out of it. What action is the Government taking to get them direct benefit from hosting that infrastructure, or are they right that the Government has abandoned them?

Stephen Gethins: Mr Kerr will be aware that I cannot comment on certain applications for consent. He will also know that those grid upgrades were a matter for the UK Government in terms of the money off bills and that, further north, in his region of North East Scotland, that was—as I have already commented—insufficient.

Public Service Reform (Public Infrastructure)

2. Max Bannerman (Highlands and Islands) (Reform): To ask the Scottish Government whether its plans for public service reform will include improvements to public infrastructure. (S70-00193)

The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee): The draft infrastructure strategy, which was published in January, highlights how important it is that all sectors have long-term asset strategies. In line with public service reform principles, those strategies need to reflect opportunities to improve services and maximise value for money through, for example, shared spaces and joined-up services across different public bodies.

The single Scottish estate programme brings together organisations from across the public sector, including national health service boards, local authorities and public bodies, to plan, share,

and jointly use space. The programme is reducing the size, cost and emissions of the public sector estate. It is currently pursuing more than £52 million of projected cash-releasing benefits by March 2028, which is well on the way to the target of £50 million to £80 million of benefits over the five years of the programme.

Max Bannerman: Bridge infrastructure in Moray has been in a state of huge disrepair for far too long. This week, we learned that essential repairs to Fochabers bridge, which is a vital artery over the River Spey, are at least 70 days behind schedule, which is causing utter chaos on the A96.

If that was not bad enough, the Cloddach bridge has been closed since 2022 because the Tory-run council voted to axe the repair project, blaming the Scottish National Party for underfunding it. The Scottish Government's response is that bridge upkeep is the responsibility of Moray Council. Shoulder shrugging and passing the buck is not good enough. Does the cabinet secretary agree that reform of public services means cutting through those silos, ending the blame game and getting on with delivery for local people?

Ivan McKee: Public service reform absolutely means cutting through bureaucratic structures and getting on with delivery—that is at the heart of the programme. I am not familiar with the specific examples that the member raises—he might want to take them up with the relevant cabinet secretary—but I can reassure him that, where there are barriers to public service delivery, this programme is about cutting through them in order to deliver for the citizen.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I am sure that the cabinet secretary agrees that Scotland cannot cut its way out of its current fiscal challenges and that, instead, it must invest its way out of them. That is why mention of the Clyde metro project in the programme for government was welcome. It is a project that will transform connectivity across the greater Glasgow city region and drive the economic growth that we all want to see.

An infrastructure project of that scale needs relentless momentum to get out of development hell. Can the cabinet secretary confirm that the development of the Clyde metro case for investment remains on track to meet its early 2027 deadline? Can the cabinet secretary outline what capital support the Government will provide for the project over the course of the session, so that we can see construction start by the end of the decade?

Ivan McKee: If the member engages with the cabinet secretary who is responsible for that project, I am sure that he will get answers on the specific points that he is raising.

The general point about the strategic focus on projects that benefit the whole region is critically important. The public service reform programme is absolutely focused on making sure that we maximise the opportunities to unlock the potential of projects such as the Clyde metro project, which, as the member rightly indicated, was committed to in the Scottish Government's manifesto and in the programme for government.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Rather than there being a blame game, is it not a fact that Scotland's capital budget is constrained by cuts that were made by the United Kingdom Government, and that there is a risk of further cuts because the UK might move money to defence spending? Further, does the cabinet secretary agree that Scotland is also constrained by the fiscal framework, which strictly limits the amount of capital borrowing for infrastructure investment?

Ivan McKee: The member makes a valid point. If Scotland, as a normal independent country, were to be in full control of all the relevant powers, it would have the ability to borrow to invest in those capital projects in order to deliver precisely the benefits that he and other members around the chamber have identified.

Public Service Reform (Transfer of Responsibilities to Regions and Communities)

3. **Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government, as part of its public service reform efforts and intent to empower regions and communities stated in the programme for government, what responsibilities and competences it would consider transferring from the Scottish Government and its agencies to regions and communities. (S7O-00194)

The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee): As set out in the programme for government, we will engage in an intensive dialogue over the next three months with partners in local government, members across Parliament and stakeholders, including representatives from local communities, to reach a clear, shared direction about the future of local governance in Scotland. As part of that engagement, we will consider which functions and responsibilities might be better delivered at a regional level, and which powers and resources should sit closer to communities. Through my engagement with representatives of local government, including a meeting this morning, I have made that point. I look forward to people coming forward with suggestions about which powers they and others may feel would be better delivered at a regional or community level.

Daniel Johnson: As the cabinet secretary will be aware, reform is necessary, but speculation in recent days has been about council mergers and powers being sucked into new bodies. Can he confirm that it is the Government's intention that the public service reform programme is about pushing power out from Holyrood and that it will consider areas such as transport, enterprise support and skills? Most importantly, will the programme involve the creation of fiscal competencies such as the business rates allocation that Greater Manchester enjoys in its combined authority?

Ivan McKee: I do not want to speak for my colleague the Deputy First Minister with regard to rates, but we are absolutely open to a discussion on all the other aspects that the member has identified in order to understand whether various responsibilities sit best at a regional or a national level. As I said, that is a conversation that we will take forward with colleagues in local government at pace over the next few months.

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): Much council autonomy is undermined by the Scottish Government overruling planning decisions that are made by local planning boards. Will the cabinet secretary confirm whether any changes to the planning system will allow councils to exercise more freedom from the Scottish Government to make planning decisions in their communities' best interests?

Ivan McKee: It is fascinating that, in a debate that I took part in last week, we heard Reform members saying that the Scottish Government should be more interventionist with regard to such matters when it comes to hyperscale data centres. I think that they need to get their act together.

The planning system is designed in a way that allows decisions to be made by the planning authority to which the application is made, but there is provision in that system for Government involvement, depending on the nature of the application and the issues concerning it. That system serves us well. The vast majority of planning decisions are made locally, but where there is a need for the Government to call them in, it does so in the national or strategic interest.

Public Service Reform (Mental Health and Neurodevelopmental Services)

4. Jenny Young (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government, in light of its proposal to reduce the number of national health service boards as part of its public service reform programme, what assurances it can provide that staffing and support for mental health and neurodevelopmental services will not be adversely affected. (S7O-00195)

The Minister for Community Care (Alison Thewliss): The ambitious proposals in the programme for government will improve mental health and neurodevelopmental services, ensuring that they are sustainable, responsive and effective for future generations. As the First Minister has confirmed, there are no plans for compulsory redundancies.

Jenny Young: I thank the minister for that response, but it fails to address the serious issues that have been raised with me by dozens of constituents in the Forth Valley area who have been waiting years for treatment and diagnosis through child and adolescent mental health services and the paediatric neurodevelopmental service pathway. Data that was released following a freedom of information request showed that 56 per cent of CAMHS roles in NHS Forth Valley remain unfilled.

We must recognise the context in which changes to NHS structures might be being made: services are already operating far below capacity due to chronic staff shortages. In the light of the Government's plans to reduce the number of health boards in Scotland to two, can the minister provide a guarantee to my constituents that there will be no increased delays or further cuts to the PNDS and CAMHS head count in NHS Forth Valley?

Alison Thewliss: If Jenny Young wants to write to me with the details of the cases of her constituents, I will be more than happy to look into them. We are embarking on a process to remove arbitrary barriers, reduce waiting times and ensure that people have better access to services and are not constrained by arbitrary geographical boundaries. People should be able to access better services, and we are embarking on that journey.

Israel (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions)

5. Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what work it has carried out following the Parliament's vote to boycott, divest from and sanction Israel. (S7O-00196)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy (Stephen Gethins): I acknowledge yesterday's announcement by the Foreign Secretary, which was welcome, but I am sure that we both agree that it was long overdue. I have asked officials to engage with their counterparts in the United Kingdom Government to explore what the changes will mean in practice and how they might impact the Scottish Government's ongoing work.

We both agree that we need to go further. The Scottish Government has repeatedly called on the

UK Government to end all licensed arms exports to Israel. As Ms Mackay will be aware, in September 2025, the Scottish Government announced an immediate pause on new awards of public money to defence companies whose products or services are provided to countries where there is plausible evidence of genocide being committed by that country.

Gillian Mackay: The movement from the UK Government is absolutely welcome, and I am pleased that the Scottish Government is engaging with it. However, as the cabinet secretary will be aware, the announcement covers only goods, and only those from the occupied West Bank, so we need the Scottish Government to go further on affected services and other economic drivers. When will we see a plan to meaningfully implement the vote of the Parliament, which the Government supported?

Stephen Gethins: As Gillian Mackay knows, the announcement was made yesterday, and I have asked colleagues to engage on the issue. We can come back and discuss the matter once we have engaged with the UK Government to figure out what the announcement means for the Scottish Government. I acknowledge the Foreign Secretary's personal commitment to the matter, but we can all agree, especially those of us who believe in the international rules-based system and the need to protect it, that the announcement was long overdue and that we need to go much further.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Does the cabinet secretary agree that the escalation of extreme physical brutality and violent raids by illegal settlers in the West Bank and by the Israel Defense Forces represents Palestinian ethnic cleansing—a deliberate erasing of the Palestinian state? I am glad that he welcomes the Foreign Secretary's announcement yesterday, but will he also acknowledge that the policy is backed by the new Prime Minister? It represents action, not just words. It is perhaps the bare minimum, but the UK Government took a big step yesterday. I hope that the Scottish Government will work alongside the UK Government in good faith, so that we can be clear with the international community that this is where we all stand.

Stephen Gethins: I have acknowledged the work of the Foreign Secretary, who is obviously backed by the Prime Minister. Moreover, as I mentioned to Gillian Mackay, I have asked officials to engage with their counterparts in the Foreign Office on the matter. Pauline McNeill will understand that we are not even 24 hours out from the announcement, so I think it only appropriate that we give them time to work through matters.

In reply to Pauline McNeill's other point, I would note that, earlier this week, Ratko Mladić was given state honours when he returned to Belgrade and that the worst humanitarian crisis on earth is going on in Sudan. She is right to raise issues about the West Bank, and I am glad that the UK Government has acted, but those events underline the fact that the international rules-based system is under attack as never before, and it is incumbent on us all to react.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I am glad that the UK Government has belatedly taken this action, but I would point out that Britain Owes Palestine, a cross-party campaign, is calling on that Government to formally acknowledge and apologise for its actions during the British occupation of Palestine. In September 2025, the campaign submitted a petition to the UK Government on behalf of 14 Palestinians, documenting systematic breaches of international law during the mandate period. A year on, however, the petition has received no response. Does the minister agree that the UK Government should issue that apology?

Stephen Gethins: Jenni Minto has raised another important issue. I am a great fan of learning about history, and we cannot seek to understand the current situation in the Middle East—or anywhere else, for that matter—without such an understanding.

The Scottish Government's concern about the situation in Palestine is well documented, and I pursued it when I was at Westminster, as well as in the Scottish Parliament. Our focus has been on the necessary steps towards peace and humanitarian—

Mark Simpson (North East Scotland) (Reform): On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I am sorry to interrupt, minister. We have a point of order from Mark Simpson.

Mark Simpson: Why are we are wasting time discussing issues in the chamber that, per schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998, we have no power or influence over?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): That is not a point of order.

Stephen Gethins: As a member of an internationally outward-looking Parliament, I am pleased that colleagues in my own party and others are raising such issues, and for an important reason—it tells us who we are. Based on that—and based on the good question that was raised by Gillian Mackay, and which was followed by Pauline McNeill and pursued by Jenni Minto—I say that the Scottish Government will continue to do all that we can within our devolved powers to

support those suffering in Gaza and the West Bank.

A two-state solution is the only way in which the Palestinians and Israelis can live side by side in peace, prosperity and security. Regardless of what the member from Reform has said, I am going to continue to talk about that.

Public Service Reform (NHS Boards)

6. Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of how the proposed reform of national health service boards will contribute to its public service reform agenda, including by reducing administrative costs and enabling resources to be directed towards frontline services. (S7O-00197)

The Minister for Community Care (Alison Thewliss): We are transforming health and care services so that people in Scotland receive the best treatment, care and support to stay healthy, independent and connected to their communities for as long as possible.

As the member will appreciate, the development of detailed proposals supported by a business case will include engagement with NHS boards, staff, trade unions, local government, integration authorities, social care partners and the public to understand how we better ensure that front-line services are delivered and that administrative costs are reduced.

Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill: I appreciate that the work is still in its early days and that a three-month programme of engagement has been planned, but it is still not clear what the scope will be. When will we have clarity on what impact splitting the health boards and creating two will have on local authorities that already carry the bulk of social care and prevention work?

Alison Thewliss: As the member has said, this is a three-month process, and it is still at an early stage, but we are already seeing the benefits of working across the east and west of Scotland to make the decision slightly better and more streamlined. We aim to make further progress on that, and more details will come through. I encourage the member, along with her party, to engage in the process.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The former SNP health secretary, Michael Matheson, has described the notion that we can save money by merging health boards as "fool's gold." The problem is that we do not know whether he is right, because there is absolutely no detail before us. We do not know what the savings will be, how many jobs might be lost, what the head count will be, whether the resources freed up will be redeployed elsewhere or whether they will go

towards filling the £5 billion black hole. When will we get the detail on that, given that the country is crying out for it?

Alison Thewliss: As I said in my previous answer, we are still early in this process, and I encourage Murdo Fraser to engage with it in good faith. *[Interruption.]* He says that he will, which is reassuring.

We know that reform on its own is not enough to deliver the cost reductions that we need or to make services work better for the people who rely on them. It will take a range of efforts to achieve that—reform on its own will not be sufficient. I think that Michael Matheson was acknowledging that fact.

Public Service Reform (Rural Communities)

7. Calum Kerr (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it will ensure that its programme of public service reform strengthens rural areas, including the Scottish Borders, and empowers communities. (S7O-00198)

The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee): Public service reform is central to our programme for government, which commits to delivering improved outcomes by putting more power in the hands of people and communities while ensuring high-quality, sustainable public services. It includes actions to empower regions and communities through engagement on the future of local governance and community empowerment, alongside a community-first approach that shifts services closer to home.

Through prevention, early intervention and people-centred services, the Government will continue to support rural areas, including the Scottish Borders, to thrive and shape local priorities.

Calum Kerr: From my experience of large change programmes in business, I know that it is stakeholder engagement and communication that decide whether they succeed, so I always encourage my teams to overcommunicate. As rural areas such as the Borders and smaller authorities such as Midlothian look on at reform of this scale, what will the Government do to ensure that those communities are engaged with early and kept informed throughout?

Ivan McKee: I appreciate the perspective that the member brings from his career in business. His experience, like mine, is that the need to overcommunicate is central to success in such endeavours.

I reassure him that engagement will be at the heart of the reforms. We recognise that

communities, particularly in rural areas, and smaller local authorities will want to understand what the changes could mean for them and will want a meaningful opportunity to shape them in a positive way. We will provide regular updates and work closely with staff, local government, partners and the public across the country as proposals are developed.

No final decisions have been taken, and the engagement process will help shape the reforms, putting citizens' needs at the heart of our approach throughout.

David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): For years, Highlands and Islands Enterprise has successfully worked with communities, businesses and social enterprises to support growth and create opportunities. However, HIE's budget has faced staggering cuts in recent years.

Now, the programme for government proposes looking again at the governance and structure of regional economic partnerships, echoing proposals from 10 years ago to abolish HIE's board. The businesses that I represent are best served by an agency that is rooted in their communities. Does the cabinet secretary agree with that, and will he allay concerns that these reforms represent yet another attempt to centralise HIE?

Ivan McKee: It is quite the opposite. The reforms are about ensuring, as I have indicated on many occasions, that we have the right level of focus on regional empowerment in order to provide strategic regional entities around the country with the power to address specifically the economic development opportunities that the member identifies and to empower communities to shape the places where they live. I am happy to engage with the member on the specifics as we develop the proposals with partners, specifically with regard to Highland.

Regional Energy Strategic Plans

8. Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government how it is engaging with the National Energy System Operator to ensure that the development of regional energy strategic plans support democratic decision making and meaningful local engagement in energy planning. (S7O-00199)

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Energy (Stephen Gethins): I acknowledge Dawn Black's hard work on this issue on behalf of her constituents. She is a strong advocate for them.

The Scottish Government recognises the importance of ensuring that democratic decision making and meaningful local engagement are effectively included in the energy planning

process. Consequently, we are actively engaging with the National Energy System Operator as the regional energy strategic plan for Scotland is developed.

We will continue to ensure that communities and other stakeholders are able to engage effectively with the development of RESPs for Scotland by supporting their engagement with NESO directly.

Dawn Black: Constituents across my constituency of Angus North and Mearns are increasingly concerned about the proliferation of speculative applications for battery storage facilities, substations and overhead transmission lines. How will the Scottish Government ensure that regional energy strategic plans move communities from being consultees at the end of the process to being genuine partners in decision making from the very outset?

Stephen Gethins: Dawn Black is right, and she raises these issues on behalf of her constituents extremely effectively. Communities need their voices to be heard in this process, and that needs to happen early, as Ms Black has said.

That is why we will shortly be launching a consultation setting out our statutory expectations with regard to how onshore and offshore developers must engage with local communities and stakeholders in advance of applying to the Scottish Government for new energy infrastructure. That will ensure that communities' voices are heard much earlier, and I am happy to engage with Ms Black to hear her ideas on how that work can be progressed.

SPSO (Investigation Powers)

9. Lorna Slater (Edinburgh Central) (Green): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will introduce legislation to grant the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman own-initiative investigation powers to identify systemic public service failures and improve outcomes for service users. (S7O-00200)

The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee): We recognise that the ombudsman is a Parliament-supported body. It is therefore for Parliament to take the lead on any changes. However, the Government is well positioned to provide support as necessary. The SPCB Supported Bodies Landscape Review Committee recommended the move that Ms Slater has identified, and it will be for Parliament to take that forward if it chooses to do so.

I am pleased to share the fact that I met the ombudsman earlier today, and we talked about this issue among a range of issues where the ombudsman is keen to develop their work further so as to support improving outcomes for service users. The Government is committed to working

with the ombudsman and Parliament to make proposals where we think it is right to do so.

Lorna Slater: Will engaging with the Parliament on this specific issue be part of the three-month push at the beginning of the minister's public service reform agenda, so that we can get any necessary legislative provisions into the year 1 bill?

Ivan McKee: I should clarify that the three-month engagement period specifically concerns the future and shape of local governance. We are, of course, continuing to work in parallel with health colleagues in taking forward the health board restructurings, while I and other colleagues take forward initiatives to restructure public bodies. The issue that the member has raised is absolutely on the list of considerations that are being examined in detail at the moment.

Should there be a legislative requirement for any changes, we have the PSR year 1 bill that is targeted to be brought forward, as the member identifies, and which will address exactly those measures that can add value to service delivery.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): That concludes portfolio questions. Apologies to the member who was not able to get in.

Bluetongue Virus Serotype 3

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The next item of business is a statement by Jim Fairlie on the response to the detection of bluetongue virus serotype 3 in the south-west of Scotland.

Questions will be taken at the end of the statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:04

The Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands (Jim Fairlie): I would like to update the Parliament on the Scottish Government's actions in response to the detection of bluetongue virus serotype 3, or BTV-3, in the south-west of Scotland.

Over the past three years, the Scottish Government has been watching with concern the developing disease outbreak in England and Wales, and we have engaged with the livestock industry to develop, jointly, a control strategy that is effective against the threat of bluetongue but also proportionate. I thank all the stakeholders who have been involved for their constructive engagement, and I thank the wider farming community, who have had to endure a difficult time, particularly over the past few weeks.

I have been clear about what lies ahead. The risk of bluetongue spreading further across Scotland next year is increasing, so it is essential that all animal keepers review their vaccination plans now and prepare for the very high likelihood that cases might emerge in new parts of the country next season.

Bluetongue is a notifiable disease of ruminant livestock that affects cattle, sheep, goats, deer and camelids. It does not affect humans or food safety. I repeat: it does not affect humans or food safety. However, it is a very serious disease for animals, causing deaths in sheep and severe fertility problems in sheep and cattle.

Bluetongue is spread by midges rather than animal to animal, although it can be passed from an infected mother to its offspring or through breeding. Movement of infected animals can take the disease long distances, which is why animal movement controls are effective in slowing the spread of disease in the initial stages.

Culling of infected animals is also appropriate but, crucially, once the disease is being transmitted locally by midges, those measures become less effective. Another feature of bluetongue is that the virus transmission is dependent on weather. It can be completed only at

average temperatures above 13°C, meaning that there are times of the year when some restrictions can be eased.

I will recap the recent history of the virus. Although there are other serotypes of bluetongue in Europe, BTV-3 has been the most serious in recent years, and it has hit some European countries, such as the Netherlands, Germany and France, quite hard. It was first detected in the south-east of England on 10 November 2023, with a wind-borne incursion over the Channel from continental Europe being the most likely plausible hypothesis.

At that time, there was no vaccine for the virus and existing vaccines against other serotypes did not offer cross-protection, but the pharmaceutical companies worked quickly to produce new vaccines. Prior to full market authorisations, which were given only in 2025, officials worked with other United Kingdom nations and the Veterinary Medicines Directorate to permit the use of those vaccines under emergency licences.

Since then, the Scottish Government has repeatedly issued advice to the industry in which we strongly advise keepers to consult their private veterinary practice to consider vaccinating their flocks and herds. That is because vaccination remains the only long-term strategy for controlling the disease. The disease has spread gradually from the south-east of England, with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs declaring all of England a restricted zone in July 2025. The virus then reached Wales, the Isle of Man and Northern Ireland, which then meant that it could reach the Scottish border.

In response, last year, I met representatives of the Scottish livestock industry to review our control strategy and consider whether to continue attempting to keep the disease out for as long as possible or to accept some level of risk to allow more flexible movements into Scotland. We recognised movement controls would disrupt the free flow of livestock from the border but, following the meeting, I agreed to maintain the tight restrictions to keep the disease out of Scotland for as long as possible, allowing keepers time to vaccinate their stock. The strategy was successful—until recently, Scotland was free from bluetongue, and most of it remains so.

Unfortunately, on 8 August, the first case of the virus in Scotland was detected on a farm near Newton Stewart. That was followed by three more cases that were clustered around the area over the following week. After initial attempts to contain the disease, further positive cases were found. In response, and with close engagement with livestock industry representatives, we quickly took the decision to strengthen controls and, from 20

August, put in place a temporary control zone to help to contain the disease and prevent it from spreading to other parts of Scotland. Bluetongue has now been confirmed on 20 Scottish premises, all of which are in the temporary control zone. The most plausible source of infection is a plume of infected midges blown from other affected areas over water, and no links with livestock movements have been detected.

I want to be clear that I fully understand that the restrictions have caused pain and concern in the industry, especially for those who rely on trade with other parts of the country. My officials have been working closely with stakeholders to understand and mitigate those effects where possible.

Industry stakeholders as well as EPIC—the Scottish Government-funded consortium of experts on animal disease outbreaks—and the national reference laboratory for bluetongue provided evidence that informed the Scottish Government's response. Immediately, we published a suite of movement licences to help mitigate some of the impacts that were caused by movement restrictions without compromising our efforts to control the disease. Some of those licences have been adjusted based on our ongoing dialogue with the sector and in recognition of the close industry-Government co-operation on the disease control strategy. I am extremely grateful for that co-operation.

I also put on record that the only long-term sustainable strategy against a disease that spreads through the air is to vaccinate against it. All authorised vaccines are effective against the worst effects of bluetongue, but vaccination must happen well ahead of the expected resurgence of the disease next year. I urge all keepers to talk to their vets and to seriously consider vaccinating.

I encourage MSPs across the chamber to please do likewise and, when speaking to their constituents who are ruminant livestock owners, I urge them to have conversations about vaccination. I am aware that there is concern about the supply of vaccines, but I am assured that that is only short term. The manufacturers and wholesalers have been diverting millions of doses from European stock to Great Britain, and there is more vaccine in production, so I repeat my message: please speak to your vet and put in an order to avoid a repetition of the shortages that we have seen this year.

On a more technical point, I must inform the Parliament that the temporary control zone will change tomorrow. The deputy chief veterinary officer has determined, after considering all available evidence that, regrettably, the disease is in circulation in the south-west of Scotland. That means that, legally, the temporary control zone

must be replaced by a restricted zone covering the same area on 10 September. The change means that livestock trade within the zone and with other restricted zones in England and Wales will be more relaxed, as they will have equal disease status. Taking livestock into the free area will continue to be done under licence and with conditions.

Although we have no choice but to establish a restricted zone, the risk of spread reduces during the colder months. That is why, after listening to industry feedback, we will relax some of those restrictions on the movement of some animals out of the zone from 10 September. From that date, store, fattening and non-pregnant female animals will no longer need to be tested or vaccinated to move from a restricted zone to a disease-free area of Scotland. However, some breeding animals, such as breeding bulls, pregnant cows and heifers, will require testing before leaving the zone, unless they have been vaccinated with a vaccine that prevents viremia. Breeding male camelids and deer and pregnant camelids and deer will also require pre-movement testing.

We have to be honest about the limits of the movement controls. Once the virus is circulating in midges, those controls offer no meaningful protection, so we should not rely on them as a safeguard going forward. Vaccination is, and will remain, the only viable long-term strategy for controlling bluetongue. I urge anyone with susceptible livestock to speak to their vet as soon as possible to discuss the right approach for their animals as well as to ensure that a vaccine is available when they need it.

It is important that we plan on the basis that bluetongue is becoming an endemic disease in parts of Scotland that we will need to live and work with, rather than one that we can simply keep out. Tackling that challenge will depend on us working together—Governments, vets and the farming community. That means sharing information honestly and timeously and acting on the best available evidence.

I am committed to continuing that partnership, and I take the opportunity to thank the livestock industry for its continued constructive engagement in the efforts to help us control the disease and in the resilience that stakeholders have shown through an incredibly difficult period.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I will allow around 20 minutes for the minister to answer questions on the issues raised in his statement. Members who wish to ask a question should press their request-to-speak button now.

Donald MacKinnon (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of interests, which shows that I have a

crofting business. I also thank the minister for advance sight of his statement.

It is regrettable that we find ourselves in the situation that the bluetongue virus is now circulating in south-west Scotland. We have seen the devastation that the disease has caused in parts of the rest of the UK, and the significant economic impact that it has had. The timing of the outbreak presents some real challenges at the busiest time of the year for livestock sales and as we enter the sheep breeding season. However, with temperatures dropping, there is now an opportunity to prepare for what we might be facing in the spring and summer next year.

Although I accept that this is far from an exact science, can the minister advise on any plans to model what we could expect the spread of the disease to look like next year to help provide accurate advice to livestock keepers in other parts of the country?

Jim Fairlie: I absolutely take on board all Donald MacKinnon's points. As we are moving into the sales season, the spread could not have happened at a worse time. Store stock and breeding stock will be moving all over the country, and I absolutely get the difficulty that that will cause.

We have modelled where animals are moving to, but we cannot tell whether a midge or an infected animal has moved. It is incredibly difficult to do that. However, it re-emphasises the point that the only way that we will be able to manage the disease in the livestock sector is to get those vaccines into animals.

Jamie Langan (South Scotland) (Reform): I thank the minister for advance sight of his statement.

After what has been a very challenging summer for Scottish farming, the spread of bluetongue has added further pressure, particularly for many of my South Scotland constituents. Given that the disease had clearly established a foothold in the south-west of England from 2025, following its initial detection in 2023, what was the Government's plan apart from sitting on its hands and naively hoping that the disease would not spread further north?

The moment that bluetongue survived the winter months in other parts of mainland Britain, it was clear that it would make its way to Scotland. Why did the Scottish Government not use that time advantage to instigate a programme of vaccination, such as the one that was successfully carried out in the Netherlands, to proactively pre-empt bluetongue's inevitable spread?

All the statement tells us is what we already knew: vaccination is crucial, south-west Scotland

will continue to suffer with restrictions without any support, and bluetongue will likely affect other parts of Scotland. Where is the co-ordinated support package for a mandated vaccine roll-out across Scotland, starting with the south-west as a priority?

Jim Fairlie *rose*—

Jamie Langan: It is now clearly—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Minister.

Jim Fairlie: I have to say that I find the tone and the way that some of the questions that come from the Reform MSPs who sit in the chamber to be utterly deplorable. We are talking about people whose livestock are under serious threat, and Jamie Langan has made political comments.

Regarding the movement restrictions that were imposed as the disease took hold in England, it was DEFRA's decision to bring the border up to Scotland. We were not consulted on that decision—it was done, and we had no way to deal with it.

I decided to ensure that we protected Scotland as long as we possibly could, which was why I met the industry in the early part of the season to talk about the disease's potential. That approach worked until August. Had we got through the entire season, I do not think that Jamie Langan would have come here and said, "Well done, minister, you made the right decision there."

However, we are in the position that we are in, so, as I said to Donald MacKinnon, I say to Jamie Langan: encourage your constituents to ensure that they get in front of the disease next year and vaccinate their stock.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I note the minister's points about vaccine availability to address shortages. However, what action is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that farmers and crofters who wish to vaccinate their livestock are able to do so, particularly in rural and island communities such as those in my Argyll and Bute constituency, where small independent veterinary practices might face additional challenges in securing vaccines?

Jim Fairlie: There is no doubt that that has been an issue. I have heard several times that there has been a shortage of vaccines through this period, but that is because there was a great surge of people looking for them.

The Scottish Government, along with its counterparts across the UK, has met manufacturers and the Veterinary Medicines Directorate to look at ways of replenishing the stocks as quickly as possible. The Veterinary Medicines Directorate has informed the

Government that the special import certificate is now in place to allow stocks of the vaccine into the UK from the European Union. That has already allowed for the import of several million doses, and more are expected over the next few days and weeks.

I reiterate that vaccination remains our best long-term defence, and keepers are strongly encouraged to discuss that option with their vets and to place orders so that manufacturers know what the demand will be and can keep ahead of it.

Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green): For many farming families, the farm is their home and way of life, and at the heart of that is caring for their animals. The impact of disease understandably reaches far beyond the immediate financial cost and disruption.

A farmer in the Machars recently told me that they felt unsupported in coping with the mental and emotional impact of the bluetongue outbreak. How will the Scottish Government ensure that farmers who are affected by bluetongue can access appropriate mental health support during the outbreak and in its aftermath?

Jim Fairlie: I absolutely do not underestimate the impact that this disease, or any other disease in livestock, has on the keepers. Having spent more than 30 years of my life looking after livestock, I am completely aware of the impact on people when they see the kinds of effects that the bluetongue virus is having.

To answer the question directly, the Scottish Government has put money into the Royal Scottish Agricultural Benevolent Institution—RSABI. There are also other organisations out there who are constantly working with the farming community. Isolation, working alone, working very long hours—all of those issues have to be taken into account, and that is why there is excellent support out there. If anyone is feeling unsupported, those organisations are there to make sure that they get help.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Given the minister's acknowledgement that vaccination is the only viable long-term strategy against bluetongue, will the Scottish Government consider committing to a fully supported national vaccination programme, including assistance to secure a reliable vaccine supply?

Will that include exploration of the use of student vets to maximise uptake ahead of next year's risk period, with the clear aim of avoiding area-based movement restrictions, which have brought significant disruption to farmers in rural Dumfries and Galloway?

If the Government is unwilling to support a national vaccination programme, will it at least

provide farmers with clear, timely information on low, medium and high-risk areas, so that they can make informed decisions about vaccinating their stock and protecting their businesses?

Jim Fairlie: I genuinely welcome those questions from Finlay Carson.

On the issue of getting information out there, people have to understand that, when a disease is moving, things change rapidly. I understand the point that Finlay Carson is making about ensuring that information gets out there as quickly as possible, and we did that to the greatest degree that we possibly could. I commend my officials, who worked day and night—they were taking phone calls at all times of the day and night—as this situation was progressing.

On the roll-out of the vaccine, as I already said to Ms Minto, there is a lot of work ongoing and to be done to make sure that vaccines are available. However, I take the point about student vets. Let me take that one away and find out whether that capacity is required in order to get the vaccine into animals. We will look at that and see whether anything needs to be done.

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD): I thank the minister for advance sight of his statement.

As we have heard, farmers in the south of Scotland urgently need two things: access to vaccines and absolute clarity on livestock movements. When I speak to Dumfriesshire vet practices, they tell me that, if they have too much or too little vaccine, they are not legally able to share it with other practices. Will the minister ask the veterinary medicines directorate to change that regulation? Will he also meet me and other MSPs for the South Scotland region, where the disease is at risk of becoming endemic, so that we can continue to provide our constituents with clarity on this fast-moving issue, at a time when there are a lot of ram sales and store stocks moving around the area?

It is disappointing to hear that many of our store lambs move north at this time of year. If there are licences around that, we need to give certainty to farmers—otherwise, this may become a more hidden issue and we will have worse problems.

Jim Fairlie: The member brings up a number of points.

On the issue of legally sharing the vaccine, if he will let me take that away to look at, I will come back to him in writing.

In fact, the vast majority of our store lambs go south; more of our store cattle go north. However, I will absolutely meet MSPs from the south-west

and, indeed, any part of the country. I have no issue with that.

As far as the movements are concerned, as I said, the restrictions will change on 10 September so that store animals and animals to slaughter will be able to move without licensing. Pregnant animals and breeding bulls will still need a licence and so on, though. However, I will be happy to meet up and talk about the details so that they can be disseminated among constituents.

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): It is crucial to recognise the stress and alarm caused to farmers and crofters. Will the minister therefore commit to engaging with industry to ensure that the voices of those affected are heard when responding to the issues?

Jim Fairlie: I have to push back on that question slightly, because we have been engaging with the sector from day 1—from as soon as we knew that the virus had reached Scotland. That does not, however, diminish the point that David Torrance is making; it is absolutely essential that we get out there with the information as quickly as we possibly can. In these fast-changing circumstances, though, there can sometimes be a lag.

I reiterate that my officials did a sterling job of making sure that information got out to people as quickly as it possibly could. I absolutely take on board the point that people need to know what is happening.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank the minister for his statement and his update on movement restrictions.

The implementation of control zones meant that the livestock holdings of a small number of farmers were divided across different zones, which left them unable to move animals between parts of their holdings. For one of my constituents that was a difficult time, because they thought that they might lose their winter grazing arrangements. Therefore, I am glad that the restrictions are being changed. What engagement will be undertaken with farmers who have smallholdings that might be split across zones, with a view to seeing what can be done in the future?

Jim Fairlie: The lifting of restrictions on 10 September should alleviate the situation that Carol Mochan referred to, which relates to someone who is moving their livestock to a winter holding.

It is a serious point that, if someone's holding is just inside the restricted zone, the whole holding will be restricted. Unfortunately, that is just a part of the process that farmers have to go through until we come out the other side of this. I completely understand that that is a difficult thing for people to get their heads round, but, in trying to control a

disease such as bluetongue, it is essential that we know what movements are taking place and that we try to stop them as much as we can.

Martyn Day (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP): Given the existence of midges throughout Scotland, can the minister provide details of what biosecurity measures are available to Scotland's farmers and crofters?

Jim Fairlie: The biosecurity measures in relation to midges are very limited, because midges fly and we cannot control them. The disease is now circulating in the south-west of Scotland. I reiterate to farmers the point that I have made a number of times, which I will continue to make: vaccinate your animals to protect them against this disease.

Senga Beresford (South Scotland) (Reform): Given the impact that a bluetongue outbreak can have on livestock farmers, and also the significant cost of vaccination, what specific financial and practical support will the Scottish Government provide to farmers in the south of Scotland to help them to protect their livestock? Will the minister consider providing assistance towards the cost of vaccination across Scotland?

Jim Fairlie: I completely understand the difficulty in dealing with a disease such as bluetongue. It is a new disease, so we need people to have the right mindset when it comes to managing it.

The Scottish Government already provides the most comprehensive package of support to the livestock sector. We are the only part of the UK in which farmers still receive direct payments, and we will continue to support the farming industry in as many ways as we can.

Making the decision to vaccinate is a commercial decision for a farmer to take, but, as someone who has kept a lot of livestock, I know that I would want to protect that investment. It is entirely up to farmers to ensure that they do that.

Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP): I thank the minister for providing sight of the statement.

Bluetongue is widespread in Europe. How are EU countries responding to the disease? What lessons can Scotland learn from the response of other countries with a similar climate about their approach to combating the disease?

Jim Fairlie: Laura Mitchell is absolutely correct. The EU is three years ahead of us, and it has had much longer to understand the best way to manage the disease. It has come to the conclusion that—I have said this before, and I will reiterate the point until the message gets out—the only way to control the disease is through vaccination.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): The bluetongue situation is likely to be dire not only for livelihoods in the south-west of Scotland, but—judging by the minister's statement—those in the Highlands and Islands region, too. I expect that bluetongue could have a severe impact on our crofting community, so we need to get the information out there quickly, as the minister has said. What work is the Government undertaking to support the crofting community proactively, for example through public information, veterinary advice and a support scheme?

Jim Fairlie: The Government is communicating with people in numerous ways, but let us be clear: anyone who is a livestock farmer in Scotland will know that bluetongue is circulating. We provide regular updates on social media and on our website, and we are in regular contact with the livestock auction centres. In addition, we disseminate information through NFU Scotland and the Scottish Crofting Federation.

We are getting as much information out there as timeously as we can, but people have a responsibility to pay attention to it and to ensure that they know about the situation that we are in. To them, I say: if you want to protect your stock next year, make sure that you get prepared through vaccination.

Jack Middleton (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Has the Scottish Government conducted any modelling on the potential projected impacts of the disease on Scotland's sheep and cattle industry?

Jim Fairlie: That modelling has been done. We definitely know that the modelling tells us that the only way to protect the livestock is through vaccination. If we are talking about the modelling of livestock movements, we know that the vast majority of cattle in the south are going to the north-east for fattening, and we know that the vast majority of store lambs are going south. Therefore, we know where the livestock is going. That tells us that there is every likelihood that, next year, the disease will spread to other parts of the country, so I ask farmers and crofters to make sure that their stock is vaccinated.

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I spent the weekend at the Benty show in my constituency, where, understandably, there was no livestock. Local farmers in Dumfriesshire are clearly anxious and are unsure when local vets will have sufficient vaccine supply. They know that the process could be costly, with one Langholm hill farmer telling me that the cost of vaccinating her flock could be close to £20,000—money that is not readily available.

Given that my constituents are paying a heavy price to provide the circuit breaker that might or might not be successful in stopping the virus

spreading in Scotland, how will the minister ensure that adequate vaccine supply can be assured for the south-west? How will he determine how financial support can be made available to farmers who were already struggling before the worrying outbreak of bluetongue in the south-west?

Jim Fairlie: We are not just looking to make sure that vaccine is available for the south-west; we are looking to make sure that vaccine is available across the whole country, because, as I have said many times already, the likelihood is that the disease will spread. That is why work has gone on with countries in the rest of the UK to ensure that we are getting vaccine diverted into Scotland just now.

On support, I reiterate what I have said before. We have the most comprehensive package of support anywhere in the UK, and we will continue to support our farmers and crofters.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): That concludes the ministerial statement on the response to the detection of Bluetongue—*[Laughter.]* That slip has been made before. I mean the statement on the response to the detection of bluetongue virus serotype 3 in the south-west of Scotland.

Stronger, Safer and Inclusive Communities

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S7M-01084, in the name of Simita Kumar, on building stronger, safer and inclusive communities.

15:33

The Minister for Equalities and International Development (Simita Kumar): I am pleased to open the debate on building stronger, safer and inclusive communities together.

Colleagues, I am not sure whether my accent gives me away, but I hope that it does not come as too much of a surprise to hear that I was not born in Scotland. My parents, my wee sister and I migrated from the Fiji islands more than 20 years ago and settled in a community in the east end of Glasgow.

As with any period of transition, it was not always easy. Collectively, we were, unfortunately, subjected to racialised name calling. My family and I have been spat at and shouted at. Our windows have been broken more times than I care to remember.

The incident that broke me was when our shed was deliberately set on fire. The memory of that fire will, unfortunately, live with me for ever. However, what I remember just as strongly is what happened afterwards. In the midst of that pain and anguish, my neighbours stood beside me. They showed up, they offered solidarity, they stood beside us and they wrapped their arms around my family and reminded us that we were not alone.

That is what community means to me—it is not the absence of hardship; it is the presence of people around us who refuse to let us face hardship alone. My neighbours, who are predominantly white working-class people, chapped on almost every door in the community to have discussions with one another about our experiences. I did not even know that that was happening, but they did community cohesion before someone had ever put those two words together. Presiding Officer and colleagues, have you ever felt your heart expand tenfold because of the kindness and empathy of the people around you? That is the community that I grew up in and the Scotland that I know and believe in.

I do not like labels, but I stand here before members as a woman, a person of colour, a new Scot and, very proudly, an immigrant. That is only part of my story and who I am—it is not the whole picture—but, just for a moment, I urge you to walk in my shoes and those of people just like me. Imagine coming to the Parliament, which is my

place of work, week after week, wearing all those labels and preparing myself mentally to sit here and listen to speech that is filled with hatred, misinformation and intolerance. Colleagues, I genuinely ask whether that would be acceptable in your workplace, place of worship or community, yet it is being normalised in this very Parliament. Of course it is then repeated in the media and by some bad actors; the words that we hear in this Parliament are often used as soundbites that can be showcased online later for clicks and impressions to extend the rhetoric, spread misinformation, scapegoat and dehumanise people. I fear that I will be hearing a lot of that this afternoon, if the amendments are anything to go by.

I sometimes do not know whether I should feel outraged, sad or angry. I wish that I could say to all of you that my experiences are unique, but the truth is that my lived experience is shared by most, if not all, people of colour and by anyone who is just a wee bit different. However, although part of me remembers the incidents of 22 years ago, another part remembers the beauty of Scotland and its people. It is that beauty—the kindness, generosity and humanity of the Scottish people and our communities—that gives me the strength and the hope that I need to carry on, to show leadership and to remind everyone that we bleed the same.

At its heart, this is a very simple principle: everyone in Scotland should be treated with dignity and respect; we should all be able to feel safe in our communities; and we should be able to live our lives free from prejudice, hatred, discrimination and fear. I hope that the Parliament will unite around that today.

Every day, we build connections with people whose experiences might be different from our own. We choose understanding over assumption, conversation over division and inclusion over exclusion. When we share a commitment to fairness, respect and opportunity for all, we create places where everyone feels that they matter; the labels—my labels—do not matter.

The Scottish Government has a well-established approach to tackling hate and building cohesion. However, we have recently seen an increase in divisive rhetoric and intimidation, which has led to fear and alarm for those who have been targeted. That includes the disorder in Glasgow in July and the distressing attacks in Edinburgh in June.

Legitimate concerns about issues such as violence against women and girls have been exploited, which is unacceptable. Violence against women and girls is a serious and persistent issue that requires a determined response from us all.

We must not allow it to be weaponised as a means to scapegoat entire communities. I have been engaging extensively with a range of communities and have heard directly of the impact that that has had.

Let me be absolutely clear. These are the actions of a small minority who create fear, division and hostility in Scotland's communities in person and online. They do not reflect the communities or Scotland's values, and there can be no justification for, excuse for or tolerance of such behaviour.

Our task is not simply to respond when tensions emerge but to strengthen the conditions that allow communities to flourish, so that everyone can feel safe, valued and able to contribute.

It is against that backdrop that visible action and leadership are important. Ensuring community cohesion is everyone's responsibility and it cannot be built through a single programme or intervention. We are taking co-ordinated action across Government and with partners to address the social, economic and cultural factors that shape people's shared sense of belonging and connection to one another and the community.

The distinct focus on community cohesion in the newly published programme for government signals practical next steps to enhance our work in that important area. Those actions include establishing a ministerial task force on community cohesion to address our shared urgent concerns and issues and identify priority areas for action. That responds directly to what communities and stakeholders have told us through our engagement. The first meeting of the task force will take place as soon as possible.

Building on the success of the initial community cohesion fund, we are increasing our investment from £300,000 to £500,000 in this financial year. The fund is designed to take a broad approach to cohesion at grass-roots level, in the recognition that issues such as poverty, the cost of living, housing challenges, social isolation, misinformation and a lack of opportunities for people from different backgrounds to connect can all impact on community cohesion.

That is why we are supporting practical, community-led action that tackles those underlying challenges and helps to build trust, strengthen relationships and create a stronger sense of belonging. That investment reflects our commitment to prevention and the long-term work of building stronger, safer and more connected communities across Scotland.

We are committed to taking a comprehensive approach to preventing violence against women and girls, supporting victims and strengthening the accountability of perpetrators. Among a range of

actions, that includes further investment in prevention, the introduction of a misogyny bill and the establishment of a trauma-informed sexual offences court—which will strengthen the alignment between priorities in addressing violence against women and girls and approaches to public protection.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con): In the previous parliamentary session, my colleague Pam Gosal brought forward proposals for a domestic abuse register. Is the Government considering that, to tackle violence against women?

Simita Kumar: I am sure that the Minister for Victims and Community Safety, who is sitting next to me, will consider that as part of the next approach, but I do not believe that that was taken forward in the previous session.

We are continuing our important work to advance inclusion across Scotland, including action to understand and address the root causes of hatred and prejudice, improving outcomes for LGBTQI+ people and supporting disabled people to live the lives that they choose. We will continue to challenge institutional and interpersonal racism and ensure that Scotland is a place in which people of all faiths and beliefs can practise freely and flourish. That is inseparable from the action that we are taking to eradicate poverty, improve access to services and ensure shared prosperity. It is a whole-Government approach.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I do not think that the minister will find anyone in the chamber who disagrees with the sentiment behind her remarks on respect across all the communities that make up Scotland. However, she has also alluded, I think, to the fact that we need a strong justice system. Why, then, in the Government's spending review, is there a plan to cut funding for the courts and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service? At the very moment at which we need a rigorous and strong justice system, why is the Government undermining those fundamental pillars of our justice system by imposing cuts?

Simita Kumar: We do have a strong justice system, but we also have an issue with men—it is mostly men—perpetrating violence against women and girls, and addressing that should be at the core of everything that we do in this Government.

Addressing shared issues, including violence against women and girls, in dialogue makes us more effective and able to work towards outcomes that benefit us all. I sincerely hope that every member in the chamber will join me in unequivocally condemning hatred and prejudice

and will show leadership in rejecting divisive rhetoric and hate.

I hope that all party leaders will join the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing in attending the cross-party meeting that is being organised by the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations following the recent fire in Possilpark in Glasgow. I welcome that discussion with social landlords, which not only provide housing but play a key role in our communities. Their role is critical at a time when responsible leadership and constructive dialogue are needed more than ever.

I have to confess that I was a wee bit disappointed to read the Labour amendment. At First Minister's question time yesterday, Paul Sweeney showcased exactly the kind of cross-party leadership that we need, and I had sincerely hoped that that would be replicated in the amendment today—but alas, here we are.

That aside, as I said, I hope that we can lead by example, by listening to and having respect for one another, being thoughtful about the impact of the words that we use and showcasing solidarity with all our communities in Scotland.

We all want to feel safe in our homes and our communities; to be treated with kindness and respect; and to have a sense of belonging and connectedness. As we leave the chamber tonight and return to our constituencies, I ask members to consider what action we can all take, individually and collectively, to fulfil the needs of the people we work for.

If we succeed, the benefits will be felt far beyond the chamber. We can, together, build cohesive and prosperous communities. That is the kind of Scotland that we should all be working towards.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I know that the minister has taken a couple of interventions—

Simita Kumar: I am winding up, Deputy Presiding Officer.

I urge members, if we can come together—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The minister has spoken for more than 14 minutes and 30 seconds. I appreciate that she has taken some interventions, but she will have to wind up.

Simita Kumar: Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer.

Again, I urge everyone to come together and speak with those values, not just for the communities that we have been elected to serve but for our children and young people, to show collective leadership and help to create a future that is built on dignity and kindness.

I move,

That the Parliament agrees that all individuals should be treated with dignity and respect and able to feel safe in their communities; supports robust criminal justice responses to violence, intimidation, hatred and disorder that harm individuals, and damage community relations; rejects attempts by the small minority of people who create fear, division and hostility within Scotland's communities in person and online, and supports efforts to build trust, strengthen cohesion and ensure that everyone can live safely free from prejudice, hatred and discrimination.

15:48

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): As we begin the seventh session of the Scottish Parliament, it is clear that there is a need for parties that believe in challenging the narrative of the various protests, some of which are stirring up anti-immigration sentiment and causing wider harm to our ethnic communities, to come together. I agree with the minister and pledge today that Scottish Labour believes that we must work together—I hope that that is clear.

I am personally alarmed when I talk to friends and constituents who tell me that they have experienced an increase in racism and feel less safe. They have always faced racism, unfortunately, but there has been a change, which is alarming. That is why I was proud to be part of the Stand Up To Racism “Off our streets—no to the far right” rally in June. In fact, it was that rally that featured in the BBC documentary on Glasgow. Where there was a counterprotest that spilled over, it proved to be febrile and menacing, and the police had some difficulty in keeping order. I saw the angry faces of men, some who had face coverings. That is not the Glasgow that I know, which has a proud history of welcoming immigrants and refugees. I have spent my political career arguing for that, so I am clear about where I stand on it.

For those who have not seen it, the documentary gave a large chunk of the airtime to the far-right vigilante group Scots Active, whose spokesperson talked about cultures not aligning and there being a race war. Unfortunately, the documentary had a lack of voices from refugee charities, which I think would have helped to provide some balance.

The documentary also showed open drug dealing, violence, theft and antisocial behaviour in Glasgow's city centre. I am sure that Glasgow's city centre is not the only place where that happens, but that activity intensified when there was no police presence. Policing our streets and our city centres is absolutely essential to making a difference. We used to police Glasgow a lot more visibly than we do now, and the current situation has to change.

Stephen Kerr: I agree with Pauline McNeill. Does she agree that, sometimes, when we talk

about available police numbers for the front line, we forget that, of the 16,000 or so police officers, a large percentage are not available for front-line duty? There are modified officers and there is a very high level of sickness and absence. We are putting intolerable pressure on the police officers who are available to go on the front line. Does she agree that we need to be honest about the true resource strength of Police Scotland to do the kind of policing that many of us in the chamber would like to see done in Glasgow and throughout Scotland?

Pauline McNeill: I agree with Stephen Kerr that there is a bit of a crisis in policing that the Government needs to recognise. If we do not have officers on the front line, we cannot uphold the rule of law. Upholding the rule of law is also about ensuring that we have cohesive communities and public confidence in tackling hate crime, but we cannot do any of that if we do not have police officers visible on our streets. The latest statistics show that, over a 10-year period, we lost 1,000 police officers from our streets.

Crime is on the rise, and youth violence remains a serious concern, with an increase in the number of 11 to 15-year-olds carrying knives. Although a good job has been done on the number of people carrying knives—there was a bit of a reduction in those figures, which has to be recognised—the numbers are increasing among that particular age group. The Government is in denial about that, but I think that it has to be addressed. It makes no sense to me that the Scottish Government would cut funding for initiatives such as the no knives, better lives programme, which was mentioned last week, when we clearly have an issue.

On violence against women and girls, it is also important that the Government recognises that boys need positive role models. That needs to be part of the solution. Time and again in this chamber, I have argued that we must tackle the root causes of the epidemic of violence against women and girls. A year ago, Gareth Southgate—we know him as a former professional footballer—gave a lecture. I think that his words resonated a lot with many young men when he said that there is “a growing crisis” among young men and that they need positive role models so that they do not turn to misogynistic behaviour and “toxic influencers”.

The latest Crown Office figures show that, over the past two years, the most serious domestic abuse crimes, such as murder and culpable homicide, have almost doubled. We have to look at the root causes of that, or those figures will continue to rise.

This summer, Stacy Hunter was murdered by a former partner who had been bailed after

previously trying to strangle her, and had been told to stay away from her. Stacy's family has urged the Scottish Government to expedite the roll-out of GPS tracking of violent offenders. The Cabinet Secretary for Justice has spoken about that and about the Government's plans, but he has not been able to tell the Parliament that there has been any progress on that, which gives me cause for concern.

If the Government is serious about reform and tackling what I think is a crisis in criminal justice, it cannot be done without up-front investment. The Criminal Justice Committee was told this morning that we cannot adhere to the legal time limit for High Court trials and that, instead of 30 days, it will be 900 days. That is an absolute outrage. Criminal justice has to be a priority for this coming budget.

As well as joining with the Government in its work in this area, as I said earlier, we will also be arguing for better funding for criminal justice for those reasons.

I move amendment S7M-01084.4, to insert at end:

“; recognises that Scotland will only build safe and inclusive communities by fundamentally tackling inequality and delivering better opportunities and living standards for everyone, and calls on the Scottish Government to restore policing at a local level, while addressing the needs of communities across the country, including by reversing declining Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores, reforming the skills system and improving access to good local health and social care.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I remind the chamber that, if any member wishes to speak in the debate, they need to be present for the full opening and the full closing speeches. If they need to leave the chamber for any reason, they can give a reasonable explanation to the clerk or send a note to the Presiding Officer. More than one member has left the chamber during opening speeches, and I hope that they have heard this message.

15:54

Thomas Kerr (Glasgow) (Reform): Community cohesion is not achieved by simply putting different groups of people in the same postcode and declaring the job done. Cohesion requires something much more fundamental: people living alongside one another, respecting one another, participating in their communities and sharing a commitment to the laws, values and responsibilities of the country that we call home. We need to be honest about where that is not happening. Across parts of Scotland, communities have experienced rapid demographic changes while struggling with the pressures on housing, public services and local infrastructure. Too often, people who have lived in those communities for

generations feel that their concerns are dismissed rather than heard.

What is the Scottish Government's solution? It is to fill our communities with people whose values do not align with those of ordinary Scots and who have no interest in integrating—strangers.

Pauline Stafford (Bathgate) (SNP): Will Thomas Kerr take an intervention?

Thomas Kerr: I know that that word makes the Holyrood establishment uncomfortable, but tough luck. To assist those who are easily offended, here is the official definition of the word: “strangers”, the plural of “stranger”, refers to

“people whom you do not know, have not met before or are not familiar with.”

If that does not describe the hundreds of fighting-age young men who are arriving daily on our shores, I do not know what would. *[Interruption.]* I can already hear a collective groan about immigration policy being reserved, but we know that these men arrive in our country and then come to Scotland to exploit our rules and be prioritised over our own people, thanks to this Government.

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): Will Thomas Kerr take an intervention?

Thomas Kerr: However, what is the response of the political establishment? It is simply to scapegoat working-class people and gaslight them into believing that they are the problem, not those in power or those with alien cultures. It is not on. Enough is enough.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Will Thomas Kerr take an intervention?

Thomas Kerr: Multiculturalism has failed.

George Adam: Will Thomas Kerr possibly take an intervention?

If we want an example of why, let us look at my home city of Glasgow, where we have more asylum seekers than anywhere else in the United Kingdom—so much so that my city is the asylum capital of Great Britain, hosting 1 per cent of the UK's population but 6 per cent of asylum applicants.

George Adam: Will Thomas Kerr take an intervention?

Thomas Kerr: Not from a has-been—take a seat. *[Interruption.]*

Individually, asylum seekers are putting overwhelming pressure on the homelessness system and, because of that and failed years of Tory, Labour and Scottish National Party mismanagement, Glasgow risks becoming—

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing (Shirley-Anne Somerville): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Although I respect the fact that it is Thomas Kerr's decision whether he wishes to take interventions during a debate, I query whether his last remark to my colleague fits with the Parliament's standing orders in relation to members treating one another with respect. Regardless of our differing views, this has gone downhill rapidly already.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Could the cabinet secretary refer to the particular comment that she is talking about? A number of comments have been made.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I will not repeat the comment in the chamber. I would like someone to reflect on the entirety of Thomas Kerr's speech and judge whether it breached standing orders in any way, shape or form, but I will not give any more heat to the debate by saying the particular comment.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): As the cabinet secretary knows, all members must extend courtesy to one another at all times.

Thomas Kerr: I want to be clear that, just before the recess, the member in question—

Mark Simpson (North East Scotland) (Reform): Will Thomas Kerr take an intervention?

Thomas Kerr: I will.

Mark Simpson: In relation to that point of order, Reform members have been labelled Nazis and members of the Third Reich, so if we want to talk about respect in the chamber—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): As Mark Simpson knows, if he wants to make a point of order, he should not just press his button but reference the standing order to which his point of order refers. If any other member wishes to make a point of order, they need to refer to standing orders.

Thomas Kerr: As I was saying, the member who was heckling from a sedentary position accused me personally of being part of the reason why someone in Edinburgh ran about with a knife before the summer recess, so I will take no lectures from this lot about anything to do with respect.

George Adam: Will Thomas Kerr take an intervention?

Thomas Kerr: No, I will not.

Individually, asylum seekers are overwhelming the homelessness system, and, because of that and the failed years of Tory, Labour and SNP mismanagement, Glasgow risks going bankrupt, with that issue alone costing us between £74

million and £75 million. That is not a sustainable approach.

If you want to look at where multiculturalism has failed and integration does not work, look no further than Govanhill, where a once-great community has become a ghetto. Govanhill was once the historic heart of Glasgow's Jewish community. Now, its reputation is for nothing more than daytime drug dealing, child exploitation, mass illegal migration and street gangs.

The residents of Govanhill deserve safer streets, decent housing, functioning public services and a genuine sense of community. They deserve politicians who will listen when they see rapid change and put pressure on when they need to. Sadly, the population change means that the community is now represented by an MSP who is more interested in Gaza than in Glasgow. That cannot be good for community cohesion. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Mr Kerr, could you sit down? The standing orders make it clear that there must be courtesy towards other members at all times.

Thomas Kerr: We should be able to discuss immigration honestly, without branding everyone who raises it as racist. Sadly, this chamber is too small minded to do that.

Kirsten Oswald: Will the member take an intervention?

Thomas Kerr: No, I will not.

I will now state some facts that I know the SNP and its extremist pals in the Greens will not like. Coming to Scotland is not a right—it is an honour and a privilege. People who come to Scotland legally should be expected to speak the language, respect the law, learn to participate in wider community and respect the traditions and freedoms of the society in which they will be living. People who come to Scotland illegally, on the other hand, should be detained and deported immediately. That should not be controversial to say.

It is time that public policy starts to recognise the needs of people who already live here. Housing allocation, access to services and investment decisions must be transparent, fair and based on clearly understood rules. When politicians talk about community cohesion, they should remember that cohesion works both ways. Strangers who have arrived here illegally have a responsibility to the communities that they join, the Government has a responsibility to the communities that receive them and elected representatives have a responsibility to listen to everyone—not only those from the loudest campaign group or those who follow the latest political fashion.

We should not be afraid to say that Scotland has a culture, a history and a set of shared civic values that are worth preserving. By filling our communities to the brim with outsiders who have alternative interests to those of local Scots, we risk losing our culture entirely.

If we genuinely want community cohesion, we need to build communities where people know their neighbours, respect the law, contribute where they can and feel that the Government has not forgotten them. That is what a cohesive Scotland should look like, and that is what Reform will always champion.

To those watching outside, let me say this: we on the Reform benches will always prioritise you, the people of Scotland. We will never change who we are or apologise for saying what needs to be said. If members feel uncomfortable with it, they better get used to it. Unlike those who have invaded our country, we are here to stay. Reform will always put Scotland first.

I move amendment S7M-01084.1, to leave out from the first “supports” to end and insert:

“believes, however that many people do not feel safe in their communities and that the Scottish Government is ignoring the genuine issues created by a lack of integration and assimilation by previous generations of immigrants to Scotland; highlights the example of the Scottish Government withdrawing the funding of one year English lessons for child asylum seekers, prior to mainstream school, as an example of direct policy choices which, it believes, have driven division and destroyed cohesion in communities across Scotland, and calls on the Scottish Government to recognise the undue pressure put on Scotland's working-class communities as well as the genuine concerns raised by communities regarding the impacts of its policy decisions and not to dismiss them.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I call Kate Nevens to speak to and move amendment S7M-01084.3. You have six minutes.

16:02

Kate Nevens (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): I declare an interest as a former employee of Amnesty International UK.

First, I thank the minister for lodging today's motion and for being so candid about her own experiences. It is important that we stand united in the face of this rising hate and work together to ensure that everyone in Scotland is treated with dignity and respect and can live safely and free from prejudice and discrimination.

As we have seen in recent months, and unfortunately in this chamber, Scotland is far from immune from the corrosive forces of racism and hatred. If we are to become the safe, welcoming and inclusive country that I truly believe most of us want to be, and if we are to cement ourselves as a

nation of friends, not strangers, urgent united action is needed.

I want to be very clear what we are actually talking about when we talk about the rising number of public safety issues: we are talking about harm and violence both on our streets and online that is disproportionately affecting marginalised groups. We are talking about violence and harm against migrants, asylum seekers, Muslims and people of colour, as well as those who are part of our trans and queer communities.

We are talking about this week's fire at a Glasgow tenement, which our colleague Paul Sweeney has rightly condemned in this chamber. That fire was deliberately started after disinformation was shared online that the building was housing asylum seekers. It was then celebrated by far-right groups.

We are talking about the violent Islamophobic attacks that have taken place in Edinburgh and Glasgow, the Nazi salutes and the deliberate intimidation of people in hotels in Falkirk. We are talking about the targeted threats to and intimidation of community-run organisations that are providing support to marginalised groups across Scotland. And we are talking about the disgusting events in Dover and Portsmouth, where hundreds of balaclava-clad men gathered to block incoming boats carrying asylum seekers—people who have every right to seek safety in the UK.

In my Edinburgh and Lothians East region, constituents are telling me that they feel afraid. They are afraid to leave their homes, afraid to take their children to school and afraid to use public spaces, with some reporting being harassed in public parks, for example, for being visibly Muslim.

I am devastated to see that the latest data on hate crime in Scotland paints a similar picture. There has been a 17 per cent increase in the total number of charges reported as containing at least one element of hate crime since last year, with racial crime being the most commonly reported category.

I also want to be really clear about where the threat is coming from. It is the result of dangerous and hateful language against migrants, asylum seekers, Muslims and people of colour and other marginalised groups, and the deliberate spread of disinformation, which is fanning the flames of the rising violence and fascism and making all of us unsafe. As the Scottish Trades Union Congress has said, this has not happened by accident but is

“the product of right-wing forces, both in our politics and in our media, whipping people into a false frenzy of hatred and division.”

On Monday, Neil Cowan, Scotland programme director at Amnesty International UK, called on

“political leaders in Scotland”

to

“show clear moral leadership, challenge racist narratives, meaningfully tackle online misinformation and stand firmly alongside those who are being targeted.”

I urge my colleagues to heed his calls.

I was really pleased to see the emphasis in last week’s programme for government on tackling violence against women and the importance placed on prevention. Gender-based violence is endemic in our society, and I am pleased to see the Government giving it so much prominence.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member give way?

Kate Nevens: Not at this time.

However, I want to note that we are seeing the deliberate weaponisation of violence against women and girls by hate groups. Far-right groups are making themselves out to be the protectors of women, when their behaviour is in fact making all women less safe. I was appalled to see reports over the weekend of a protester at the Reform UK conference being grabbed by the hair by audience members and having fingers stuck in her mouth.

When considering what steps we can take, we must listen to voices across our communities, invest in community-led approaches, address trauma and tackle systemic inequality. Criminal justice responses are one part of the picture, but they should not subsume wider efforts to bring about systemic change. We should be working with community groups to co-design strategies for community safety, ensuring that any response is shaped by those most impacted by violence and discrimination. We should be offering support to individuals in our community who are at the sharp end of this violence—

Stephen Kerr: Will the member give way?

Kate Nevens: I am afraid not.

That includes funding accessible and culturally-informed mental health and trauma services. We should be offering resources to community groups that are supporting people facing injustice, including investing in third spaces that support communities to feel safe, and supporting the provision of sustained anti-racist education and training.

In my region, many fantastic community projects are already doing that vital work, providing community meals and safe spaces, and organising walking buses to help children get to school safely. That is not just true of our urban centres; as my colleague Laura Moodie mentioned to me, rural Scotland is too often overlooked in discussions about community cohesion. Our villages and towns frequently demonstrate what genuine

inclusion can look like. They understand that strong communities are built through participation, contribution and relationships, and that such work does not happen by accident, but is carried forward by volunteers who give their time, energy and compassion to others, much like Simita Kumar’s neighbours. I cannot emphasise enough how important that community-led work is to our communities’ health, safety and wellbeing, and to the support that we provide to one another.

The Greens support the Government’s motion, but our amendment calls on the Government to strengthen investment in community-led safe spaces, in mental health and crisis support, and in the safety and security of front-line charities and community organisations that are facing threats and abuse.

The challenges that we are facing right now are big, and are growing, but they are not insurmountable. By working together and listening to and involving people from across our communities, we can develop a robust strategy to build stronger, safer and more inclusive communities for everyone across Scotland.

I move amendment S7M-01084.3, to insert at end:

“recognises the disproportionate harms to marginalised groups, and condemns the far right’s deliberate incitement of violence against migrants, asylum seekers, Muslims and people of colour; further recognises the need to work with community groups to co-design strategies for community safety, ensuring that any response is shaped by those most impacted by violence and discrimination; and calls on the Scottish Government to increase investment in community-led safe spaces, culturally appropriate mental health and wellbeing services, crisis support as well as the safety and security of frontline charities and community organisations that are facing threats and abuse.”

16:09

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con): The Scottish Government’s motion will apparently build

“Stronger, Safer and Inclusive Communities”.

To be fair, I agree with the premise, as we all want people to feel safe in our towns, cities and communities. Where the Scottish Government is sadly misinformed, however, is in believing that warm, comforting words and a motion can resolve years of built-up tension in our society.

The motion before us lays it bare—it

“rejects attempts by the small minority of people who create fear, division and hostility within Scotland’s communities in person and online”.

The Scottish Government has to be clear about who it is referring to, because vague and unexplained criticisms do not bring people together; instead, they lead to disconnect, division

and hostility. They create exactly the finger pointing that the Scottish Government claims that it wants to avoid. Instead of debating what we all want to achieve—which I think is clear—we should be debating how we achieve it.

Simita Kumar: I thank Ms Gallacher for her comments. Will she acknowledge that, when I say a “small minority”, I include people in this chamber, having noted the language that we have heard this afternoon—for example, calling people “strangers” and saying to people like me that immigrants have failed to assimilate and integrate—and I include people who have been out demonstrating, covering their faces and doing Nazi salutes? Those are the minority of people I meant.

Meghan Gallacher: Where is that in the motion? It is not clear. We are talking about various different people who are raising concerns about various different issues, but we should be debating how we achieve the differences that we want to make. That means perpetrators of serious crime not being released back into our communities prematurely under early release schemes. Our police officers need more support, not only to deal with workload pressures but to be visible, present and properly resourced on our streets. The Government needs a serious and credible plan to reduce the number of crimes involving sexual violence against women and girls.

I have spent a lot of time in the chamber over the years talking about the neglect that the SNP Government has imposed on communities such as mine in Central Scotland and Lothians West. We have seen the undermining of public services that are already under enormous pressure and which are clearly not working as they should. That typically happens in working-class communities, where people are struggling with the cost of living, childcare costs and the lack of good, skilled employment. Where is that reflected in the motion? Ministers cannot lecture communities about cohesion while failing to maintain the cohesion of the public services that those communities depend on.

I want to talk about two specific cases from my region, and I hope that they will give members an indication of why so many women do not feel safe in our communities. The first case relates to an individual, Robert Davie, who was found guilty of offences including rape, indecent assault and serious assault following a trial at the High Court in Edinburgh in 2024. Those offences took place against a woman in the Falkirk area over a period spanning the years 1994 to 2022—and that relates to some of what the minister said earlier about how violence against women and girls usually involves someone whom the woman might know. Robert Davie was sentenced to five years in prison and given an order for lifelong restriction. This is a man

who has demonstrated that he is a real danger to women.

However, it is not always the case that women know who the perpetrators are. We also have the case of Muhammad Sheikhi. He was staying at the Cladhan hotel in Falkirk in 2025, when he targeted two women after they left two different nightclubs in the early hours of a Sunday morning. He was an illegal immigrant, and he sexually assaulted both women. He was subsequently arrested, jailed for four years and ultimately placed on the sex offenders register indefinitely, with an order preventing him from contacting the women for 10 years.

There remains a fundamental question about what happens next. If someone who is not entitled to remain in this country commits serious offences of that nature, the public—in my view, quite rightly—expects that individual to be denied permanent access to our country. People who commit serious offences involving violence against women and girls must face the most serious of consequences.

Those are two very different cases, but they have one thing in common: violence against women and girls. Standing here today, we must ask ourselves why women do not feel safe in our communities. Why do women feel the need to look over their shoulder when they are walking home at night? Why do young women have to think about whether it is safe to go out and enjoy themselves?

Kirsten Oswald: [*Made a request to intervene.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I am afraid that the member is in her last minute.

Meghan Gallacher: Incidents such as the ones that I have just described continue to happen. Community safety is not achieved through slogans or vague statements about division and hostility. I would much rather debate visible policing, effective public services, holding dangerous perpetrators accountable and, most importantly, how we protect victims. That is how we restore confidence in politics and trust in Government.

I move amendment S7M-01084.2, to leave out from first “supports” to end and insert:

“believes that the first duty of government is to protect the public and that public safety must never be compromised by political choices, financial pressures or a lack of capacity within the justice system; further believes that there must be consequences for committing crime and that those who commit acts of violence, intimidation, hatred, disorder and other offences must face swift and meaningful punishment; notes concerns that the scale and pace of asylum and immigration arrivals in some communities has placed pressure on local services and community cohesion, and calls on the Scottish Government to review the housing rules which have contributed to that pressure; gives its full support to the police and other law enforcement agencies

in taking firm action against those who openly flout the law; rejects early release policies that put dangerous offenders back into communities because of pressure on the prison estate; calls for bail laws to be reviewed so that the protection of victims, particularly women and girls, is given greater weight; condemns unacceptable court delays that leave victims waiting years for justice and undermine confidence in the system; calls for sufficient police numbers and resources to maintain visible, effective frontline policing, and believes that safe and cohesive communities depend on upholding the rule of law and ensuring that criminal behaviour has consequences."

16:15

Yi-pei Chou Turvey (North East Scotland) (LD): Dignity, respect and safety—those words thrive at the heart of the motion. I speak on this matter not just as a bystander or an ally but—like Simita Kumar, who moved the motion—as someone who has personally felt the cold hand of those seeking to create division and hostility. As I look across the chamber, yes, I see allies and I also recognise people like me—people who look or sound different, who are the ones at the cold front of the necessity of this kind of debate.

When *Holyrood* magazine uploaded a video of my oath taking on its social media account—an oath that I proudly took in three languages—it gathered more than half a million views. For comparison, the maximum is usually 50,000. I wish that I could say that many of those views reflected joy and support of internationalism, but the cold shower that X can create is different, and people said, "Deport her", "Another spy" or "Show-off". I felt threatened and minimised due to my background, the way that I look and the way that I sound. It twisted my heart—it hurts.

When I first moved to Scotland, to a lovely wee village in the Mearns, the local mums warmly welcomed me—and they still count me as one of them, even years after I moved out. I have spent the past decade of my life here volunteering—as I always do—and contributing to my community, like many other people who come to Scotland. I hope that my background has brought opportunities to the people of the north-east and to those in this chamber.

Liberal Democrats value internationalism. It is at our core and is one of our founding values, alongside those of equalities, community and support for human rights, so it is second nature for us to support the motion in its entirety. We support having a fairer and more equal, tolerant and connected world. We fall fiercely against Brexit, understanding that a world that is more deeply connected with its neighbours brings not only peace but prosperity. Sadly, Brexit has opened a Pandora's box. Some people felt that it was a justification to openly hate people who are not like

them. That hate has been growing, fuelled by misinformation and tunnel vision.

Jamie Langan (South Scotland) (Reform): Does the member agree that it is disingenuous to associate the legitimate cause of Euroscepticism with hate and division in society?

Yi-pei Chou Turvey: Frankly, I have felt that since Brexit happened. People in this country who are foreign like me have been feeling very different, so I am totally not going to change what I said.

The support of those diverse communities also plays a special role in my region. Migrants support our energy industries, our farms, our national health service and social care, our higher education institutes and our third sector. People who come to Scotland and who choose here as their new homeland all come with their own stories. When we label someone "a stranger", what do we mean? We just mean someone we do not know. Yet, when the term is used collectively—"strangers"—that takes away the individual story behind every single person who comes to Scotland to start anew. To use it as a word of fear and anger removes all the curiosity and closes the open mind that we should have. It stokes the very division and hostility that we should be working to eliminate and that the motion seeks to address.

I close on a note about prosperity. Historically, in times of economic boom, the newcomer has been welcomed. Over the past two centuries, millions of Scots have travelled the globe, settling in North America, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere. Tens of thousands of new Scots like me have moved to the United Kingdom in the past generation. We have settled here and contributed, and we have helped with our economy, our communities and our churches. In times of economic insecurity, such as exist today, an initial warm welcome can fade as people look for someone to blame for their issues.

I recognise that there are serious problems in people's day-to-day lives and that tensions are understandably high as people face the rising cost of essentials, increased fuel bills and the struggle with youth engagement, to name but a few challenges. However, I urge my colleagues to be more specific with their language. A stranger is just someone you do not know, so, out of a wish to achieve dignity, respect, and safety for all, including all who may still be a stranger to me or to you, I support the Government's motion.

16:21

Katie Hagmann (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I thank the minister for speaking so powerfully and for proposing the debate. This was a difficult speech for me to write—not because I

did not have anything to say, but because I wanted to say everything. I am driven by a deep sense of what is right and by wanting to ensure that equality and fairness are at the heart of all that I do. I wish to stand up for what I believe in, and I will strive to ensure that Scotland is—and remains—a welcoming, inclusive and, most of all, safe space for everyone who calls Scotland their home. Community cohesion can happen only when we see each other not in terms of race, gender or sexuality, but as human beings.

I pay tribute to the brave young women who recently spoke at the festival of politics about their experiences in school and of having to deal, day in, day out, with misogyny—the age-old tactic of attempting to gain power and control over women. Although it may be dressed up all fancy and rebranded in its new title of the “manosphere”, let us not pretend that it is anything new. A minority of men are looking to assert power and control over women, and we absolutely must draw a line to say, “No more”. I welcome the announcement of a bill to tackle misogyny. It is incumbent on every member in the chamber to ensure that the bill is robust and that it delivers the tools that are required to bring an end to the violence, harassment and abuse in our communities.

I turn to the unacceptable racial violence that we have witnessed, which I believe is driven by a minority of far-right voices whose sole intent is to create division and fear. As with the dressing up of misogyny in its new form known as the manosphere, I firmly believe that the far-right rhetoric on asylum and immigration is nothing but racism that is driving hate and division. That is unacceptable. I thank the organisations that have shared with me their experience of what is happening on the ground, including BEMIS, the Council of Ethnic Minority Voluntary Sector Organisations and the Anti-Racism Observatory for Scotland. Those organisations are doing what they can, but they need our support to call out racism at every opportunity.

I turn to our LGBTQ+ community. I say to them: I hear how unsafe you are feeling, and I see it. As the minister has done, I want to share a small part of my story and in doing so honour my fierce and wonderful big sister, Nikki Grace Hagmann. Nikki is not here to tell her own story as, sadly, she died not long after her 40th birthday. I miss her every day. She taught me so much and, although losing anyone you love is hard, the loss of a sibling can be particularly tough. You lose the only other person in the world who knows and understands your shared memories of childhood and the peculiarities of your unique family.

I am talking about Nikki in this debate because she was trans and she was my sister—she was my family. She was not a faceless statistic, and her life

mattered. The trans community is not feeling safe, and I do not believe that my beautiful sister would be feeling safe today, either.

It is important to acknowledge the calls on the Scottish Government to introduce its bill on ending conversion practices. I thank the minister for her commitment to engage extensively with a range of Scottish stakeholders on the issue.

I also want to use this opportunity to remind everyone in the chamber, and those who are listening online, that equality is not a pie in which sharing a slice means leaving less for anyone else. That simple truth seems bafflingly hard for some to understand, so let me repeat that thought in another way: a person does not lose their voice or freedom just because a new group or individual gains theirs.

At a time when people are too often dehumanised, reduced to labels and turned into targets, the need for community cohesion could not be more urgent. We need to think of one another not as strangers. We must learn one another's names, listen to one another's stories and recognise the hopes and humanity that we share. We must replace fear with understanding, hostility with solidarity and isolation with belonging. That is the Scotland that we must build together—a country where everyone is safe, everyone is valued and everyone has the chance to belong.

16:26

Irshad Ahmed (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): People in communities across Scotland do the work that the Government cannot, in many ways that are unseen and unheard. Volunteers, sports coaches, shopkeepers and neighbours—those community figures shape our lives and our communities. If they fail, it shapes the news headlines and the national data that is published years later.

In 2007, the Scottish Government created a performance framework that measured wellbeing in our society. Those indicators should be at the heart of our policy decisions. Instead, measures for community, culture and poverty will now be refreshed for a third time.

What does the data show us? One in five Scots felt lonely in the past week. Two in five do not have places to meet. Only one in five feels that they can influence decisions that affect their neighbourhoods. Many Scots feel disconnected from their communities and they lack hope and support.

That is why fewer than two thirds of Scots voted at the election. We must look again at the red tape that places limits on the lives of people in our local communities, and we must devolve decision-

making powers back to those communities. If we do not address those challenges today, they will become the crises of tomorrow.

Sadly, the past decade has been a desperate one for Scotland's public health. There have been alarming trends in economic activities, substance misuse, delayed discharge, shoplifting, poor mental health among our young people, and violence against women and girls.

Members have rightly mentioned hatred and violence in our communities. Voices that promote intolerance and conspiracy are increasingly hard to ignore. Last week's protest in England and attacks closer to home in Glasgow and Edinburgh show the real-life impacts of anger that is being redirected towards minority communities. I am shocked by each new story of racist attacks. People in our communities should not live in fear. Scotland is a friendly and welcoming country, but sadly we are beginning to see such incidents happen more often.

I believe that our communities will not tolerate that kind of abuse directed toward our neighbours and friends. I promise that I will counter the misinformation that is used to incite those attacks, and that I will challenge those who profit from feeding division in our communities.

I call on the Government to publish the data that helps us to measure wellbeing in our communities and to renew investment in local authorities and public services to keep our communities running. I also encourage the Government to match the warm welcome that it gives to new Scots with action to integrate our communities.

16:30

Colm Merrick (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): Deputy Presiding Officer, before I begin, I take the opportunity to apologise to the chamber, as I will be unable to stay for the whole of today's debate. I have secured prior permission from the Presiding Officer to leave early.

I thank Simita Kumar for her passionate, honest and hopeful speech. I am pleased to speak in support of the motion. Unlike what we have heard from some members, I note that this is a simple motion: it is simply about the kind of Scotland that we all want to live in. It is about feeling safe, respected and valued.

We cannot wait anymore until things go wrong. We have to act before we reach that point. For me, that means investing in communities.

Stephen Kerr: These are lovely words and I do not disagree with the member. However, the reality is that we want to get to the substance of the policies that underpin public safety and, in those

areas, the SNP Government seems to have very strange priorities: for example, responding to overcrowding in prisons by releasing dangerous people back into the community before their due time.

Surely the member shares the concern that many of us feel in this chamber about a reckless policy—which, by the way, the senators of the College of Justice have already commented on today.

Colm Merrick: I thank Mr Kerr for his intervention. I am a page and a half into a seven-minute speech, so I will continue.

I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to increase investment in the community cohesion fund, supporting grassroots initiatives across Scotland. Those initiatives are of critical importance because community cohesion cannot simply be delivered from the centre. It needs to be built locally by people who know their neighbours: that is, by community centres, youth groups, schools, sports clubs, charities and voluntary organisations; by the people who understand the challenges facing their own communities, because they live those experiences every single day. It is almost, as a famous American president once said:

"government of the people, by the people, for the people".

We are lucky to have excellent examples of that sentiment in Glasgow Anniesland. The Whiteinch Centre is literally at the heart of its community, providing activities, support and volunteering opportunities that bring people together. It describes its purpose as creating

"opportunities and services that will sustain individual, family and community wellbeing".

Kingsway Community Connections is another excellent example, with a vision of a proud, capable, confident, multicultural community. It works to build social capital, confidence, connection and a sense of belonging. Organisations such as Linkes, Temple/Shafton Youth Project and many others are doing similar work with young people, families and communities. I also acknowledge the invaluable work that many community councils do across Scotland. These are people who turn up consistently, rain, hail or snow.

That brings me back to something that I said in this Parliament last week during our debate on child poverty. I asked how we can ensure that the voices of our local communities are heard and how we can put their experience, knowledge and ideas right into the heart of Government thinking. I mentioned people's panels and the potential for smaller, lower cost, locally focused panels. I

believe that that principle applies just as strongly to community cohesion as it does to child poverty.

If we want stronger communities, we must listen to the people who make up those communities. If we want safer communities, we must listen to those who understand where people feel unsafe and why they feel unsafe. If we want to have more inclusive communities, we need to listen to those who experience exclusion. Our job is to listen, to provide support and to help turn ideas into action.

That brings me to the responsibility of every one of us in the Parliament. Every MSP has a duty to do their utmost to facilitate stronger, safer and more inclusive communities, not only by passing legislation or making speeches in the Parliament, but by going into our communities and bringing people together.

I intend to continue to do exactly that in Glasgow Anniesland. I am going to organise an event that will bring together community groups and organisations from across my constituency and create the opportunity for people to meet one another, to share their experiences and to identify challenges and, therefore, solutions. I really hope that the minister will be happy to receive a report on the outcomes of that event and to consider what lessons might be taken from it.

I urge every MSP to consider doing something similar. Let us imagine for a moment that every member brought together the organisations, groups, young people, community leaders and residents in their constituency. Let us imagine what would happen if we started hundreds of conversations across Scotland about what makes people feel safe, what makes them feel included and what they believe needs to change.

There will always be a small minority—

Jamie Langan: Will the member give way?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I am afraid that the member is concluding.

Colm Merrick: There will always be a small minority who seek to spread hatred, fear and division, whether on our streets or online; they will always be there. We should be absolutely clear that that behaviour has no place in Scotland.

However, the answer to division is not to focus on those who seek to divide us, but to strengthen the vast majority who want to live together peacefully. Let us listen to the people who know their communities best, from people's panels and local conversations, to put lived experience at the heart of our decisions.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): You must come to a conclusion.

Colm Merrick: If we build it together, we can create a Scotland where everyone is treated with dignity—[*Interruption.*—everyone has a voice and everyone can feel that they belong.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Thank you, Mr Kerr. I am in the chair, and I am perfectly capable of keeping things in order.

16:37

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): In thinking about this debate, I kept coming back to one word in the title of the motion—the word “Together”, because what is at stake is the kind of communities that we want to live in, and what we should do when something starts to pull them apart.

I do not want to say that racism is somehow “back”, which I keep hearing. It never went away. What concerns me is that it feels more unmasked, people feel more emboldened, and we are hearing the dog whistles more openly. In the language that I am referring to, race might never be mentioned, but we know who is being described when the word “stranger” is used, and who people are being encouraged to fear. Behind that language are human beings who hear a conversation about whether they belong.

In my constituency, I have seen how quickly misinformation and prejudice can come together. Last summer, 122 young sea cadets arrived at a training centre in Boddam for summer camp, under the command of the royal naval reserve. A photograph of them was posted online, along with claims that immigrants were being secretly brought into the village. They were children. Nobody had asked who they were. They were looked at, labelled and turned into strangers, and, suddenly, there were concerns for their safety and they had to cut short their camp. That is where misinformation and racism meet, because the lie only works if people have already been encouraged to believe that the stranger is someone to fear.

I remember something similar happening when a photograph of young Afghan men who were living locally was shared on one of our community Facebook pages. Some of the comments really stayed with me. Those young men had travelled through countries and refugee camps and crossed here in dangerous conditions. They arrived knowing nobody, thousands of miles from home, only to read people making assumptions about them online. There is a human being at the other end of the dog whistle—the person who is told that they are a stranger in a place where they are trying to make a life.

Those same young men found something very different at Fraserburgh Cricket Club. When Omar was asked what he liked the most, he said:

“It’s our teammates, and just being part of the team.”

I could spend a paragraph defining “community cohesion”, but I think that Omar did it better.

Cohesion is what happens when labels fall away and people meet as neighbours, classmates, workmates and teammates. We saw that spirit, too, in Banff, when a divisive message was taken there and local people came out in greater numbers to peacefully reject it. Cohesion is not passive—it is correcting the false post, recognising the dog whistle and challenging it when it comes from a friend, a colleague or someone around our own family table.

It is easy to oppose racism when it belongs to somebody else. The real test is what we do when it enters our own circle. That is why education matters. The late Sir Geoff Palmer told the Parliament:

“Although we cannot change the past, we can change consequences such as racism for the better, using education.”—[*Official Report*, 21 September 2021; c 2.]

We need to help young people to recognise prejudice and misinformation, support schools and grass-roots organisations, and act firmly when hatred becomes intimidation or violence.

Political leadership matters, too. People have every right to be concerned about housing, public services and the cost of living, and our job is to answer those concerns honestly. However, refugees and migrants did not create those problems.

Jamie Langan: It is also fair to say that ordinary people are allowed to have legitimate concerns around the scale and pace of immigration to the country as well.

Karen Adam: I would like to say that I thank the member for that intervention, but what does he mean by “ordinary people”? That is exactly the kind of language that I am talking about, which we must utterly reject.

Scapegoating refugees and migrants will not build a house—

Jamie Langan: [*Made a request to intervene.*]

Karen Adam: Sit down.

Scapegoating refugees and migrants will not build a house, reduce an energy bill or shorten an NHS waiting list. When politicians take genuine frustration and give it a human target, that is not leadership; it is a cowardly escape from true accountability.

When I talk about unity, I do not mean silence or pretending that we all agree. I mean deciding that, whatever our disagreements, nobody’s humanity should be up for debate. If racism is becoming louder and more emboldened, our answer has to be more than warm words. It has to be truth, education, solidarity and the everyday courage to speak up in our homes, in our communities, online and especially in the Parliament.

Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform): [*Made a request to intervene.*]

Karen Adam: Nobody should be made a stranger in the place that they call home. That is the Scotland that I believe in, and that is the Scotland that I will always stand up for.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I remind members that interventions in the last minute of a speech will not be taken.

16:42

Amanda Lindsay (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): The motion talks of “dignity and respect” and communities where people feel safe. Those are fine words until we look at what this Government has actually done to women. Sexual crime in Scotland is at epidemic levels. Recorded sexual offences are at the highest point since comparable records began in 1971.

Rape and attempted rape offences have risen sharply over the past decade. That is not a recording quirk; that is women and girls being attacked who are being attacked in their homes and on the streets in every local authority area. Glasgow alone recorded 485 rapes and attempted rapes in 12 months—one every 18 hours—which is up 43 per cent in five years.

Yi-pei Chou Turvey: I thank the member for taking the intervention, although I really wanted to make this point to Meghan Gallacher. Does the member recognise that most violent crimes against women and girls are committed by family members, spouses and ex-partners, and not by foreigners?

Amanda Lindsay: I did not say “foreigners”. Indeed, we have enough of our own home-grown rapists and abusers. Therefore, why is the Labour Government in Westminster importing more, and why is the SNP Government in Holyrood incentivising them to come to Glasgow with the offer of a free house—a house that should go to local people?

Simita Kumar: Will the member take an intervention?

Amanda Lindsay: No, I will make progress.

When those women seek help, they find that Scotland's largest rape crisis centre, Glasgow and Clyde, has had its waiting list shut since February. Survivors wait more than 200 days; some cannot even get on the list. Funding stood still while the number of attacks rose. That is the Government's idea of a robust criminal justice response.

Safer communities start with women being able to use a toilet, changing room, refuge or hospital ward that is female only. That is not extremism; it is the Equality Act 2010. As settled by the Supreme Court: sex means biological sex. If inclusive still means males in women's spaces, ministers are not building safety.

Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): Will Amanda Lindsay take an intervention?

Amanda Lindsay: No, I will make progress.

They are asking women to surrender their boundaries so that a slogan can survive. Even in hospital, where a woman is at her weakest, this Government has failed to enforce a Scotland-wide biological-sex definition of a single-sex ward. Women's Rights Network Scotland found that hundreds of sexual assaults and a dozen rapes had taken place at those sites that bothered to keep data. The Patient Safety Commissioner for Scotland has told the Parliament that women in mental health units

"are locking themselves in ... rooms".—[*Official Report, Health, Social Care and Sport Committee*, 3 February 2026; c 8.]

That is not inclusion; it is contempt.

Victims of male violence do not need lectures about cohesion. They need single-sex provision, honest recording of sex and a state that treats their safety as non-negotiable. They need waiting lists that are open, streets that are policed and a Government that will say the word "woman" and mean it. Women who want female-only spaces are not creating fear. Parents who want girls' toilets are not hostile. Campaigners who point at record rape figures are not a small minority damaging community relations; they are describing reality. We need an open debate about the erasure of sex and the collapse of women's safety, without the threat of hate crime prosecution for wrongthink.

The motion for debate asks us to reject those

"who create fear, division and hostility",

but the Government should look in the mirror. It is this Government that put a double-rapist in a women's prison. It is this Government that left Rape Crisis lists shut in Glasgow while sexual crime hit a 50-year high. It is this Government that still does not defend sex-based rights, yet lectures the country about prejudice.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Please conclude.

Amanda Lindsay: Reform will back measures that tell the truth about sex and protect women and girls. We will not clap for a debate with a title that says "inclusive" if the policy still asks women to make themselves smaller while the number of rapes rises in every city. Stronger, safer communities are built on reality and not on the hope that nobody notices who is creating the fear.

18:47

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): Presiding Officer, I apologise for missing a section of the opening speech. I emailed my apology to the Presiding Officer's office, but I now put it on the official record, too.

I am delighted to speak in support of today's motion, and I am very grateful to the minister for lodging it, because some of the scenes that we have seen in recent times have been extremely concerning to many of our communities across Scotland. Many of our most marginalised and vulnerable communities have been bearing the brunt of the challenges that we face because of the dysfunctional and broken Brexit British economy that Scotland remains shackled to.

The blame for the problems that we face is far too often placed on those who have had no hand in creating them. In the Parliament, we have a particular responsibility to ensure that the way in which we debate and conduct ourselves helps to bring our communities together rather than to drive them apart, and we must not demonise the poorest in our society to score cheap political points.

It is worth remembering the four words on the mace at the heart of this building, which should guide everything that we do: wisdom, justice, compassion and integrity. It is far too easy for us to forget the word "compassion". Our words and actions here at the heart of Scotland's society have power and impact far outside these walls.

I had hoped that, in the debate, we could rally around our shared compassion to send a clear signal to those who look to us for leadership that we would not take the easy route out. Sadly, Thomas Kerr's amendment and his recent contributions to public debate have left compassion far behind.

Angela Ross: Will Alex Kerr take an intervention?

Alex Kerr: Not at the moment.

He has attempted time and again to drag into the sewer any discussion of the serious challenges that we face. To reiterate, given the privileged

position that we have been afforded by the electorate in taking our seats here, our words have power. When Thomas Kerr lends his support to roving gangs of masked men in Glasgow, he is implicitly endorsing the outcomes from those groups: attacks on police officers, racist attacks and intimidation.

Reform and its masked goons claim to be standing up for the safety of women. The women to whom I speak are far more concerned about the presence of those gangs on our streets, stirred up by folk such as Thomas Kerr and his boss Malcolm Offord.

Thomas Kerr does not need to take my word for it. A woman who had been the victim of sexual assault in Glasgow spoke in the BBC's recent documentary about Glasgow city centre—a documentary that Thomas Kerr is very keen to promote. Her name—not her real name—is Zoe, and she is in her 20s. She was sexually harassed on a bus as she travelled through the city centre. She spoke of her fears about how often such attacks are happening to women, but is deeply sceptical of what the gangs that are supported by Thomas Kerr and Reform say motivates them to come to the streets. In her words:

"They say it's about protecting women and children, but it's not. It's about being racist. It's about causing public disorder and being aggressive and violent and just going out and causing it, really."

Voices such as hers are swept aside by Mr Offord and Mr Kerr. Is she not the right kind of woman? Is it best to leave things to the men who know what they are talking about, to determine what makes women feel safe? Is that right?

I am sure that Thomas Kerr, who was formerly in the liberal wing of the Tory party under Ruth Davidson, feels that his new political posturing is very intelligent. I hope, however, that he is still capable of reflecting, when he sees how his dog whistles have a real-life impact in normalising abhorrent behaviour such as a set of new affordable homes being burned down due to racist disinformation or a father being hounded for taking his son to the park. I expect that my plea will fall on deaf ears but I say to Thomas Kerr: if there is any compassion left in there, I desperately hope that we will see some of it.

I welcome the fact that, although the vast majority of members may disagree on exactly how we get there, we share a focus on bringing together all the communities that make up our vibrant and welcoming country. I strongly believe that the key to many of the deep-rooted problems that we face as a society is through supporting and empowering our communities. Simita Kumar's powerful personal experience showed the worst of

us but, as she spoke about it, it also highlighted the difference that our communities can make.

The work that is being undertaken by the Government through its public service reform agenda has a key part to play in putting our communities at the heart of how we deliver services in the public sector. Our communities know best who needs support and are able to deliver public services in a sustainable way that, often, cannot be matched by local or national government. The Government's push to see our communities as partners has much potential in many areas.

Building cohesion among our diverse communities is just one of the many benefits that we could gain if parties across the chamber could work together on what is one of the largest and most challenging gauntlets that has been laid down before this building. I am proud to stand in support of the motion, and I pledge to work across party lines to tackle and confront the kind of unacceptable hate that has no place in Scotland.

16:52

Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, in that I am the chair of Kincardine and Mearns Youth Clubs.

I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate, because it addresses a fundamental expectation of any society: that people should be able to live in their communities with dignity, respect and safety, and free from violence, intimidation, hatred and disorder. I support the Scottish Government's ambition to build stronger, safer and more inclusive communities, because people thrive when they feel that they belong, trust one another and have confidence that harmful behaviour will be challenged.

In my first speech in the chamber, I spoke about the communities of Angus North and Mearns. I said then that although our towns, villages and landscapes help to define the places that we call home, it is people who truly make our places special. Building stronger communities therefore means working alongside people and empowering them to shape the places in which they live. By "people", I mean all who have chosen to call Scotland their home, as they are the people of Scotland.

We can see the benefits of that approach throughout my constituency and the rest of Scotland. I am the founder and chair of the Kincardine and Mearns Youth Clubs charity, and there is also MoHUB in Montrose and the Attic in Brechin. All those provide young people with safe and inclusive places to meet, socialise, develop skills and access support. Creating opportunities

and fostering positive relationships helps to prevent youth antisocial behaviour and strengthens community cohesion before problems start to arise.

Connections between neighbours and across communities absolutely matter.

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): Will the member take an intervention?

Dawn Black: No, I do not think I will.

A community cannot be truly safe until it is inclusive. I therefore welcome the Government's commitment to tackling discrimination and inequality, including the discrimination that LGBTQ+ people continue to face.

Everyone should be able to feel safe, valued and respected, regardless of who they are. Likewise, a community cannot be truly safe unless it is safe for women and girls. Sadly, too many women and girls in Angus North and Mearns, and across Scotland, continue to experience gender-based violence and abuse. Police Scotland recorded almost 65,000 incidents of domestic abuse in 2024-25, and we know that many cases still go unreported. I therefore welcome the Scottish Government's recognition of violence against women and girls as a key public protection issue because, if we are serious about ensuring that people can live with dignity, respect and safety, tackling violence against women and girls must remain a national priority.

We must also be clear that there is no place in Scotland for hatred, intimidation or prejudice, for any reason. I say no to racial hatred; no to xenophobia; no to religious hatred; no to misogyny; and no to gender-based hatred, whether it is on our streets, in our communities or online.

Angela Ross: Will the member take an intervention?

Dawn Black: Absolutely not. When you lot start taking interventions, maybe we will.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I remind members to speak through the chair, please.

Dawn Black: Apologies, Deputy Presiding Officer.

A small minority must not be allowed to create fear, division and hostility. We must challenge that behaviour robustly while continuing the longer-term work of building trust, strengthening cohesion and bringing people together. Prevention must be our first line of defence, but it must be matched by effective enforcement when harm does occur. I therefore support the Government's efforts to reduce reoffending and tackle violence and knife

crime through education, intervention and engagement, as helping people move away from offending benefits not only the individual, but their families and communities.

At the same time, people need confidence that criminal and antisocial behaviour will be dealt with effectively. The commitment to strengthen police powers to confiscate and retain e-bikes and e-scooters, for example, that are being used antisocially or criminally are therefore welcome. My constituents, including those using the Stonehaven boardwalk and those in Brechin and Forfar town centres, have raised genuine concerns about safety with me, and Police Scotland should have the powers necessary to respond.

It is good to see that a football banning orders bill is to be introduced in the first year of this session of Parliament to improve the effectiveness and response to football-related antisocial behaviour, so that true fans can feel safe attending their team's matches.

Supporting victims must remain central to our justice system. I have spoken with victims of crime who have raised with me concerns about the victim notification scheme, as, despite asking to be informed of the result of a court hearing to ensure their own safety, they had to chase that information. It is currently an opt-in system; I believe that we should move towards an opt-out system so that victims do not face unnecessary barriers to receiving information about offenders after court hearings. Although I recognise that the Government has not yet reached a position on that, I welcome its commitment to consult on potential changes.

In conclusion, if we are serious about building stronger, safer and more inclusive communities, we must support Police Scotland and the other organisations and volunteers already making a difference; challenge those who seek to create fear and division, and who spread disinformation and dehumanise their targets; and ensure that everyone, regardless of their background, is treated with dignity and respect.

By working together, we can build a Scotland where people feel safe; where communities are united rather than divided; and where everyone can live free of prejudice, hatred and discrimination.

16:58

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD): The debate has indeed been divisive, but I suppose that that was quite predictable. For the record, I am proud to have been a migrant, and welcomed, in India, Ghana and Lithuania, and across the former Yugoslavia. Today, however, I do not want to feed

into a debate that is polarising our algorithms even further. Instead, I want to talk about a community that I hope, or think, we may be able to agree on. The motion calls for

“efforts to build trust, strengthen cohesion and ensure that everyone can live safely free from prejudice, hatred and discrimination.”

That means everyone.

The discriminated-against and oppressed community that I want to focus on, which will be no surprise to many, is the care-experienced community. The care identity that many now claim and celebrate has, for too long, seen them unjustly cast as the problem. That has a life-limiting impact. There are examples of that affecting every aspect of their lives. For most children in care, the experience of being bullied and being told that their mother does not love them carries through to their experiences when they are older and are trying to get a flat with no guarantor or are struggling to get a job.

James, a young lad who spent his teenage years in residential care, is an example of that. He was verbally offered a job at a well-known fast-food restaurant, only to have the offer rescinded when his prospective employer found out that his last address was a children's home. That is not an isolated case. I do not know whether Colin Beattie is in the chamber today, but I remember a fateful evening when he was the member for Midlothian North and Musselburgh and he chaired a community meeting that saw 300-odd people turn out in a church hall to angrily reject a planning application for a new children's home. I will never forget the chilling rhetoric that I heard that evening, with residents asking, “Will the children be locked up at night?”, “Will our elderly be safe?” and, “Will our children be able to walk to school by themselves?” I was there with care-experienced activists, including a student nurse studying at Musselburgh's Queen Margaret University who was too upset to speak as the whole community vociferously shouted down the application. They were rejecting the right of children from that town to be able to live there.

That situation is not historical, as, sadly, this spring, the village of Milton in my South Scotland region fought against a house being repurposed into becoming a children's home. It was not being repurposed into an industrial unit or a data centre; it was a family home becoming a home for children. However, because it would be a place of work, its change of use from a family home to a home for children meant that it went through planning. Even though planning officers in Dumfries and Galloway recommended that it should pass, it was rejected, first by councillors and then by the Scottish Government. Notionally, residents complained that there would be too

much traffic, but underpinning those complaints were concerns that children in care might be more likely to cause problems.

Children are in care because their birth parents cannot provide a stable, loving relationship, through absolutely no fault of theirs, yet they are continually judged, discriminated against and oppressed. That applies not only in relation to homes. A care-experienced mum of any age has to register herself as care experienced when referring to NHS maternity services to start antenatal care, because she is seen as a greater risk. Similarly, even when they are succeeding, care-experienced students feel deflated when they hear casual but corrosive remarks such as, “Wow, it is surprising to see you at university.”

While other minority groups have started to challenge media stereotypes, the care-experienced community is only just beginning to do so. Too often, care-experienced people are unrealistically cast as a superhero who can overcome anything—Superman, Batman, Robin, Harry Potter, Luke Skywalker and even James Bond—but far more disturbing is how often the discriminatory stereotypes make them the psychopaths, from Lord Voldemort to Hannibal Lecter, or the lead murderers in the television series “The Fall”, “You” and “Killing Eve”. When prejudice and discrimination are ever present, it will have a corrosive impact on anyone's sense of self-worth.

When a child grows up without the security of a stable, lifelong, loving relationship, discrimination compounds that loss with devastating consequences for their life chances. If we want to tackle social injustice, we must lead the change, educate Scotland, transform attitudes and drive inclusive actions towards care-experienced people. That will improve their lives and Scotland. I hope that members can remember that these are our people, too.

17:03

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

I do not know how to sum up the debate, to be honest. I am not sure that it was entirely worth the time that was allocated to it. Very predictably, it has ended up being an attempt at some kind of cross-culture war between the SNP and the members on these benches over here. I am not sure that that represents the true nature of Scotland and its communities, frankly.

On the basis of what I think the Government whips have teed up with the speakers—with the notable exception of Dawn Black, who I think gave a really good speech, although my comment will not go down well with her—where is she?

Steven Bonnar (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): She is getting a glass of water.

Stephen Kerr: She addressed some of the fundamental building blocks that sustain public safety and safe communities, while the other speeches were just political point scoring. I am not against political point scoring, before anyone suggests that I have had some kind of road to Damascus experience. I am all for political point scoring, but I think that, on a subject like this, when there is a Trojan horse motion such as the one that has been presented in the way that it has, it is not appropriate.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will Stephen Kerr take an intervention?

Stephen Kerr: I am not trying to speak for members who are not in my party, but I do not think that anyone in the Parliament is talking about migrants in the way that has sometimes been described by other members. *[Interruption.]*

Excuse me—I will give way to Shirley-Anne Somerville. She is a little bit polite.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: That was not condescending at all.

Stephen Kerr: It was.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Thank you very much.

I ask Stephen Kerr to reflect on his comments so far. A few days ago, affordable homes in Glasgow were maliciously put on fire because of misinformation. I think that the Parliament should be debating that and reflecting that that is happening. It would be a shame if the Conservatives could not come together and say that there is no place for that in our society. He has the opportunity to do that today.

Stephen Kerr: That is bogus political point scoring. The Conservatives' position on law and order is pretty clear to everybody. If someone does not know what the Conservatives believe when it comes to law and order, they have not been listening for most of their life. We stand for law and order and with the forces of law and order.

If we narrow the scope of this debate to a single strand of an issue, we do no favours to most of the communities in Scotland, because the rise in violent crime is not limited to any one strand. It is a generic condition that many of our constituents are experiencing, and they would have hoped to have heard their concerns being expressed in a debate such as this, but they have not.

There is nothing wrong with the words of the motion, but words are not enough to build safe communities. Warm words about cohesion are great—ministers can present any number of

versions of justice in Scotland—but they do not match what many victims of crime and many communities in Scotland are experiencing.

The Conservatives—I do not think that we are alone in this; we surely cannot be alone in this—believe in upholding the rule of law and in making the perpetrators of crime face consequences for their actions. Excuses should not be made for them. There should be consequences, and we should put the protection of the public and the interests of victims first.

The Government must start by being honest about what is happening in Scotland. We have heard the statistics about the rise in crime. In the year to June, recorded crime was up by 7 per cent, non-sexual violence was up by 7 per cent and sexual crime was up by 9 per cent. Behind every one of those statistics is a victim—someone who has been burgled, assaulted, abused, threatened or frightened; someone whose confidence in their community and perhaps in the justice system has been damaged. *[Interruption.]* Ministers are joking among themselves on the front bench. They do not take these issues seriously, because what they say does not marry up with what they do.

The Minister for Community Care (Alison Thewliss): Stephen Kerr is talking vociferously about the victims of crime. What does he say to people in my Glasgow Central constituency who found themselves attacked by a mob of people to whom a Reform councillor spoke earlier in the day?

Stephen Kerr: Alison Thewliss wants to talk about one aspect of rising violence in society. I condemn that violence. I am not sure whether she follows me on X—some SNP members are among my superfans—but I can assure her that I have nothing good to say about gangs of people dressed in black, wearing balaclavas and all that nonsense.

I believe in the strong arm of the law, but that involves giving that arm strength. The SNP Government has weakened the forces of law and order, weakened the court system, weakened sentencing, weakened prisons and run down the prison estate. As a result, there is a crisis in the criminal justice system. I make an offer to members across the chamber, especially Government ministers, although Neil Gray is not here.

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Can you wind up, please?

Stephen Kerr: We need to work together to strengthen the criminal justice system of this country. That means making no cuts in the forthcoming budget to the courts, the prosecution

service or the police. They need increased resources—

The Presiding Officer: Can you wind up, please?

Stephen Kerr:—to allow them to properly do the job that we all believe they should be doing and want them to do.

17:10

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Let us remember that this debate is about community cohesion. A community is a bit like a garden in that it does not happen by accident. You have to tend it, make space for things to grow and notice when something is choking the light out of everything around it. If we allow fear, hatred and misinformation to take root, we should not be surprised when they produce something ugly.

However, if we invest in connection, solidarity, belonging and mutual care, something else grows: a community where difference is not to be feared but to be lived with and learned from, and a community that sees our common humanity and faces the challenges—and we will face challenges—together. That is the Scotland that I want us to build. That is why today's debate is so important, and it is why the minister was absolutely right in her opening remarks.

Community cohesion is not achieved by demanding that people simply get along. It is built through safety, solidarity, material security and community power. The Scottish Government's anti-racism delivery plan commits to community co-design, lived experience and stronger community cohesion. Part of that must include asking who is actually unsafe, who is being targeted, whose voices are being heard and who gets to decide what community safety looks like.

We must also recognise that division is not some natural force. As Yi-pei Chou Turvey and others have highlighted, racism is being deliberately organised and weaponised. The far right viciously targets people of colour, migrants, asylum seekers, queer people and other marginalised communities and blames them for the consequences of political decisions that have been made sometimes hundreds of miles away, as Alex Kerr said. The resultant violence leaves physical scars, psychological distress and broken hearts.

All of us, as politicians, have a responsibility not to launder or legitimise those racist narratives by repeating the far right's framing. We have heard several examples of that this afternoon, including the deliberate fire in Possilpark following false claims that a building was going to house asylum seekers. Of course, it is not okay to set fire to a

building if it were to house asylum seekers anyway, but it is clear that what happened was a consequence of what disinformation can do when it meets an organised politics of scapegoating.

As Kate Nevens and Karen Adam so powerfully put it, the harm that is caused by the politics of hate is disproportionately borne by marginalised communities. Those communities must not be passive recipients of Government policy. Instead, community safety strategies should be co-designed with racialised communities, migrant and refugee organisations, women's organisations, queer and disabled people and other groups that experience targeted violence. We should ask them what they need to feel safe, what would make them feel safer and what would make them trust the institutions that are supposed to be there to support them.

We must also understand that community safety is not only about policing, law enforcement or criminal justice. Those are only parts of the picture. Safer communities need trusted local organisations, youth provision, mental health support, housing, good public services, places where people can come together. If the only time the state arrives in a community is when something has gone wrong, we should not be surprised if people do not feel safer.

Investment upstream is vital in prevention, accessible public services, relationships, solidarity and community power. We must therefore support preventative and support services, as Katie Hagmann and Dawn Black said so clearly, and include the community and third sector organisations that do the difficult work of supporting people through trauma, isolation, intimidation and racist abuse. They need long-term sustainable funding, not short-term pots of money that disappear when the political attention moves on.

Community cohesion means supporting community-led safe spaces, culturally appropriate mental health and wellbeing support, crisis support and so much more, so that everyone has somewhere safe to go, someone they trust, support when and where they need it and a meaningful voice in the decisions that affect them.

We cannot ask community organisations to stand on the front line against fascism while leaving them financially precarious and physically vulnerable. As someone who has stood, more times than I care to count, with fellow anti-racists and anti-fascists between anti-immigrant so-called protesters and people living in accommodation for asylum seekers, I want to remind everyone in the chamber that asylum seekers are ordinary people and members of our communities, too. They should not be treated as a problem to be moved

around. They need safety, dignity, access to support and opportunities to build genuine relationships in their communities, just like the rest of us.

I am also clear that such institutional accommodation is not community integration. People seeking asylum should be able to live in safe, appropriate homes within communities where they can put down roots.

There is so much more that I would like to say about disinformation, online extremism, anti-racist and anti-fascist education, and the gift to the far right that is austerity, but I must bring my speech to a close.

Community cohesion cannot mean asking the people who are being targeted simply to endure it. It cannot mean treating racism as an unfortunate disagreement between two sides. It cannot mean reaching for the criminal justice system after the damage has been done. It means building communities where people—all people—have security, where they feel they belong, where nobody is scapegoated for someone else's political gain, where people have the power to shape the decisions that affect them and where solidarity is stronger than hatred. That is how we build safer communities. That is how we defeat fascism and the far right, and that is how we build a Scotland in which everyone can genuinely belong.

17:16

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Parts of the debate have been difficult to listen to. I will try to draw out what we, as a Parliament, can take from it about leadership, what we can do together and, of course, what we can ask the Government to do to resolve some of these issues.

I thank the minister for such a powerful opening speech. She is correct that violence, racism and prejudice have no place in our society. Her story showed us that Scotland is a welcoming and inclusive country that should be proud of its unwavering commitment to ensuring human rights, protecting vulnerable people and promoting a fair and equal society that supports all communities.

For a long time, we have always welcomed anyone who came to Scotland, whether they were fleeing persecution or simply seeking to make Scotland their home. That should always be considered a strength.

My colleague Yi-pei Chou Turvey made a wonderful point about Scots leaving to go to other parts of the world and immigrating to Canada, America and other parts of Europe. That is a good thing for the world. Yet, today, some seek to create racial tension, as Katie Hagmann indicated,

dehumanise vulnerable people and promote anti-immigration sentiment. That is unacceptable.

I make it perfectly clear that Scottish Labour believes that all should be treated with dignity and respect, and we want to work with the Government on all the elements that members have discussed that can pull communities together.

We heard from my colleague Pauline McNeill about community policing, from Kate Nevens about tackling Islamophobia, from Meghan Gallacher about childcare, from Irshad Ahmed on volunteers and ensuring that we have community spaces and from Karen Adam on challenging misinformation. I am clear about the importance of Karen Adam's point. Immigrants and migrants did not create any of the problems that we are discussing today. They did not create the housing crisis or the cost of living crisis. People who are poorer than us and have less than us are not the problem in our society today. I also want to mention Alex Kerr's point about cross-party working, which is incredibly important. I hope that we can work towards that.

The next five years of this parliamentary session will be vital in challenging negative rhetoric. We have a duty to stand up to divisive behaviour, rebuild public trust and lay the foundations for a welcoming and cohesive society. However—I hope that the Government will not mind me saying this—to foster stronger, safer and inclusive communities, we need to go beyond this surface-level debate and beyond frameworks. Community social cohesion lies in day-to-day practical actions that reach across portfolios. I often talk about working across portfolios, and I know that the minister will seek to do that.

I recognise that social cohesion is a hugely complex issue and that it takes time and resources to foster that kind of thing. However, the debate can signal the intent of what Parliament can work towards for the next five years. There is work to be done, as I think we all recognise. Cohesion is fostered across services—schools, libraries and local hubs. It involves investing in places where different people and different groups come together and strengthen their relationships. We have a responsibility to work towards that.

Prosperous and cohesive communities are more resilient, innovative and successful, and strengthening that cohesion must be at the forefront of our delivery during this session. I hope that the Government is considering its next steps—on education, challenging racism, policing and poverty.

People of all backgrounds and beliefs deserve the right to live fair, just and dignified lives. They have the right to live in peace and the right to protection. Those values have been tested in

recent years, and prejudice and racist beliefs have become somewhat normalised. I hope that we will move forward and that those will not be normal.

17:21

Mark Simpson (North East Scotland) (Reform): I hope, in the interest of avoiding the spread of disinformation, that the Scottish Government will not edit any part of my speech today, as it shamefully did to my colleague David Smith yesterday.

Iris Duane (Glasgow) (Green): Will the member give way?

Mark Simpson: I thought that the Greens did not take interventions from Reform, but I am happy to take an intervention from the member.

Iris Duane: Talking about disinformation, does the member accept that what he said was “the Scottish Government” was in fact the personal social media of the First Minister in his capacity as an MSP?

Mark Simpson: I suppose that means that that bit of disinformation is okay, then.

Reform UK will always believe in dealing in the truth, focusing on the facts and not spreading lies to the people of Scotland. *[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the member.

Mark Simpson: Given the subject of the debate—

George Adam: North pier at Blackpool for you, pal.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Adam, let us hear the member.

Mark Simpson: Given the subject of the debate and the issue that my colleague David Smith was raising yesterday, the issues of face coverings and their impact on inclusive communities must at least be considered. My colleague down at Westminster, Sarah Pochin MP, put it plainly this morning:

“Whether it is a balaclava worn by a criminal, a mask used by violent extremists or a religious face covering, the principle is the same: people should be identifiable in public.”

Simita Kumar: I am glad that the member has mentioned men covering their faces with balaclavas. Will he now encourage his party and the people he speaks to, to encourage them not to wear balaclavas and to stop using violence against women and girls as a weapon to legitimise the work of people who are posing a danger to women and girls?

Mark Simpson: I am pleased to reassure Simita Kumar that none of my colleagues wears a balaclava—nor does any Reform member, for that matter.

David Linden (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Mark Simpson: I will keep going.

This is an area where I welcome the chance to speak. Building stronger, safer and inclusive communities should not just be subjected to a press release. It actually has to mean something on the ground in our town centres, on our streets and in the lives of people who elected us to be here and act in their best interests.

I want to focus largely on correspondence that I received from a constituent in Dundee. He is a small business owner who employs hard-working Dundonians, pays his taxes and contributes to our economy, and he has spent years building something that Dundee values. In his letter, he listed the unacceptable behaviour that he faces as a matter of routine. That includes theft, antisocial behaviour, drug-related disorder and abuse of his staff. There was much detail in what he said, but one particular line stood out, and I feel compelled to share it with colleagues and ask them to ponder on it. He said:

“The situation has now reached the point where we have to turn our premises into something resembling a prison to protect our staff, customers and property.”

That should trouble every one of us in this chamber, regardless of our politics. When a business owner feels that he must turn his premises into “something resembling a prison”, we have clearly failed to create any sort of cohesive community. That is not an isolated story. The data tells us that Dundee has the highest recorded crime rate of any local authority in Scotland, with 929 crimes per 10,000 people, against a figure of 569 nationally.

I am aware of the time, so I will begin to wrap up. Crime is a problem across the entirety of the north-east—it is not isolated to Dundee. From Arbroath to Aberdeen, Banff to Broughty Ferry and Forfar to Fraserburgh, the towns and villages of the north-east are feeling the problems of incohesive communities. Town centres are empty after dark because people do not feel safe. That is why I encourage colleagues across the chamber to vote for the Reform amendment, so that we can work together to genuinely build stronger, safer and inclusive communities.

17:26

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): At its heart, this debate

is about who we are, as was powerfully explained by Simita Kumar in her opening speech. Scotland is a welcoming, diverse and inclusive country, and I want to be absolutely clear that we are so much the better for that. The Scottish Government believes that all of us have the right to be treated with dignity and respect and to feel safe in our communities.

The debate has certainly underlined some of the challenges that we face from those who seek to divide, as well as the significant strengths that we have, as a nation that is proud of its diversity. On the former, I put on record my condemnation of the utterly unacceptable violence, intimidation and disorder of recent months. Pauline McNeill correctly pointed out that those issues have been amplified and, as we have heard, the STUC identifies that as a product of right-wing forces whipping up division. Let us call it what it is: it is hatred, pure and simple, and othering of those who do not fit into some predefined box.

That might seem over the top to those who are not affected but, to reflect on the contributions from Simita Kumar and Yi-pei Chou Turvey, for those who are from a minority ethnic background; those who are Muslim or Jewish, or are perceived to be; those who are LGBT or disabled; or those who are women, there is a deeply concerning narrative at play far beyond Scotland, and we are not immune to that. Of course, that is often amplified by deliberate online misinformation and very often also amplified by some people in this chamber whose contributions are clearly designed to divide. As Simita Kumar pointed out, those people use words that are designed to scapegoat and dehumanise.

Thomas Kerr did not want to take any of my interventions, but I want to put on record how horribly offensive, inaccurate and disgraceful I found his use of language. Perhaps I should not be surprised, then, by the outrageous language about immigrants in the Reform amendment. Does Mr Kerr truly have no idea of the incredible contribution of immigrants to this country? We are far better because of those who have made their lives here. On language, I point out to Jamie Langan that immigrants are also ordinary people. That divisiveness damages every one of us in all our communities across Scotland.

Thomas Kerr: *[Made a request to intervene.]*

Members: Oh!

Kirsten Oswald: That is why the Government is working hard, as evidenced in our programme for government, to build a Scotland where everyone is able to live, work, and participate in their communities free from fear, hatred, prejudice, or violence.

I would recommend the programme for government as reading to a number of members in the chamber who may not have looked at it. It has substantial information that is pertinent to the debate, and it is worth looking at. For instance, we could look at the increased investment in the community cohesion fund or the ministerial task force on community cohesion. We could look at the misogyny bill and the increased focus on violence against women and girls; I could go on. The point is that we have a serious programme for government; all that work is part of it and is critical to who we are as a country.

What I have heard in the chamber has demonstrated to me that the overwhelming majority of people embrace respect and solidarity, which is really important. Strong, resilient communities are built through solidarity. It creates opportunity, supports people in need and fosters belonging. Supporting strong and resilient communities also depends on our having a clear expectation that those who harm communities and make others feel unsafe will face the consequences of their actions. The balance of support, responsibility and accountability is how we build safer, stronger communities for everyone. Working directly with communities to develop shared solutions in support of sustainable community safety is part of that. Particularly in times of uncertainty, the Scottish Government is committed to working with local organisations and communities to build bridges across divides and bring people together.

At its heart, community cohesion requires a cross-Government, cross-organisation and cross-Parliament approach. Simita Kumar talked about that being everyone's responsibility. That is true. Actions, as well as words, matter; everyone in the chamber should be mindful of that. I reflect on Katie Hagmann's contribution and her mention of her lovely sister, Nikki. I thought that she had such wise words about the importance of respecting everyone's rights.

We have heard from a number of members about events in Glasgow over the summer and, indeed, in recent days, where a small number of individuals have created unease and fear in our communities. I want to make it clear that violence and intimidation will not be tolerated. I thank the hard-working officers from Police Scotland for their efforts in identifying those responsible for disorder. There have been a number of arrests and follow-up police activity demonstrates clearly that those involved should be in no doubt that they will be held to account for their actions. I note that questions were raised about policing in the debate. The Scottish Government continues to support Police Scotland in its operational priorities. For instance, this year, we increased police funding to

more than £1.7 billion, which was an increase of £81.5 million. There are more police per head of population in Scotland than elsewhere in the UK.

The Scottish Government is committed to upholding people's fundamental rights to march and demonstrate, but peaceful public assembly and expression must be just that: peaceful. It is never acceptable to behave in a hateful, intimidating, or criminal manner. Too often, those who are causing fear and harm to others claim to be protecting their communities or women and girls, but that is simply not true. They are simply preying on anxieties and spreading misinformation to amplify hatred. I absolutely agree with the sentiments that Kate Nevens expressed. Those people are no protectors of women and girls and they are no kind of champions for any community.

My community in Eastwood is vibrant and diverse, with people from many different backgrounds, histories and traditions. We are home to the majority of Scotland's Jewish population, as well as a growing and thriving Muslim population, Hindu, Sikh and Bahá'í communities, and there are significant Christian communities. Scotland is home to us all, whether we adhere to a faith or not and whether our families have always been here or not.

That does not always chime with people's experiences. Jewish communities in Scotland report being anxious, isolated and concerned about personal safety. We need to be explicit that there is never, in any context, any place for antisemitism, which is increasing and of increasing concern. People need to be able to live confidently in their Jewish identity.

Similarly, Muslim communities have been the focus of dangerous Islamophobic narratives and, worse, attacks. People have been demonised and subjected to misinformed nonsense, which creates significant anxiety in those communities.

Worries about being visibly identified are also a concern for both those communities. I assure the Parliament that ministers regularly engage with representatives of our diverse communities to ensure that there is a strong partnership approach in place and absolute clarity that Scotland is home for us all. Likewise, Police Scotland regularly engages with communities and stakeholders to understand and respond to concerns, to take action to reassure those who are affected and to prevent disorder from happening in the first place. I commend all those efforts. When demonstrations take place, the Scottish Government wants to ensure that they are peaceful. We fund the Centre for Good Relations, which is a mediation organisation that we work with to consider how best to engage with communities to promote peaceful behaviour.

We all have to stand together against disorder, intimidation, violence and criminality. I hope that members across the chamber will join me in condemning such behaviour and in calling out all those who seek to sow the seeds of division and misinformation. Alex Kerr and Carol Mochan made strong points on the importance of our taking a cohesive approach to that issue, even if we do not always agree on all the detail.

It is important for us to take from today's debate members' contributions that showed examples of kindness, tolerance and respect. It is a minority of people who want to cause division. Their voices might be amplified online, but they do not in any way represent the vast majority of the people in Scotland who want to live together in peace in our diverse society. Scotland today is far better because of that diversity.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on building stronger, safer and inclusive communities.

Points of Order

Jack Middleton (Aberdeen Central) (SNP):

On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Under section 7 of the MSP code of conduct, I must apologise to members and amend the *Official Report*. In a speech to this Parliament, I said:

"I do not think that those in charge at Westminster have a clue."—[*Official Report*, 28 May 2026; c 41.]

Following confirmation from the Prime Minister that the rules governing the timing of a Scottish referendum will mirror those of an Irish border poll, I must correct the statement as follows—

The Presiding Officer: I do not think that this is a point of order; I think that this is you correcting the record. That is not a point of order, so please sit down.

Max Bannerman (Highlands and Islands) (Reform): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. After the ministerial statement earlier today on the bluetongue virus, Jamie Langan asked the minister a question. Before he could finish that question, the minister bounced up and interrupted it. Is it in order for ministers to behave in that way in the chamber?

The Presiding Officer: Ministers should express the same courtesy to members as members should express to ministers and, indeed, across the chamber. If someone asks a question, it is important that ministers listen to it, especially if it is directed to them.

I should also say that after members have asked a question and the minister is responding to it, the individual who has asked the question should not heckle the minister who is answering it.

Business Motion

17:38

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S7M-01100, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on a business programme. I ask Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees—

(a) the following programme of business—

Tuesday 15 September 2026

2.00 pm	Time for Reflection
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
<i>followed by</i>	General Questions
<i>followed by</i>	First Minister's Questions (Backbench Members)
<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Government Debate: Preventing Violence Against Women for an Equally Safe Scotland
<i>followed by</i>	Committee Announcements
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.30 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business

Wednesday 16 September 2026

2.00 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
2.00 pm	Portfolio Questions: Justice; Health and Care
<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Green Party Debate
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
5.30 pm	Decision Time
<i>followed by</i>	Members' Business

Thursday 17 September 2026

1.30 pm	Parliamentary Bureau Motions
1.30 pm	General Questions
2.00 pm	First Minister's Questions (Party Leaders)
<i>followed by</i>	Scottish Government Debate: Addressing the Harms of Health Misinformation
<i>followed by</i>	Ministerial Statement: Ferguson Marine: Planned Investment and Future Business
<i>followed by</i>	Business Motions
<i>followed by</i>	Parliamentary Bureau Motions

5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business
 Tuesday 22 September 2026
 2.00 pm Time for Reflection
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
followed by General Questions
followed by First Minister's Questions (Backbench Members)
followed by Scottish Government Business
followed by Committee Announcements
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.30 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Wednesday 23 September 2026

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 2.00 pm Portfolio Questions:
 Climate Action and Rural Affairs;
 Education, Culture and Gaelic
followed by Scottish Government Business
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.30 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

Thursday 24 September 2026

1.30 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 1.30 pm General Questions
 2.00 pm First Minister's Questions (Party Leaders)
followed by Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Questions
followed by Scottish Government Business
followed by Business Motions
followed by Parliamentary Bureau Motions
 5.00 pm Decision Time
followed by Members' Business

(b) that, for the purposes of Portfolio Questions in the week beginning 14 September 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.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

17:39

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S7M-01101, on designation of a lead committee. I ask Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, to move the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees that the Economy, Tourism and Energy Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the second supplementary legislative consent memorandum on the Sporting Events Bill.—[*Jamie Hepburn*]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motion will be put at decision time, to which we now turn.

Decision Time

17:40

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson):

There are six questions to be put as a result of today's business. If the amendment in the name of Thomas Kerr is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Meghan Gallacher will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S7M-01084.4, in the name of Pauline McNeill, which seeks to amend motion S7M-01084, in the name of Simita Kumar, on building stronger, safer and inclusive communities together, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

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

17:39

Meeting suspended.

17:41

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on amendment S7M-01084.4, in the name of Pauline McNeill. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. Your vote has been recorded.

Holly Bruce (Glasgow Southside) (Green): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am sorry, but I could not get signed in. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. Your vote has been recorded.

For

Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Green, David (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Lennon, Monica (Glasgow) (Lab)

Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adams, James (North East Scotland) (Con)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
 Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
 Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
 Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
 Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
 Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
 Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
 MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
 Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Massey, Duncan (North East Scotland) (Reform)
 McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
 McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Lorna Slater]
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
 Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
 Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
 Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
 Offord, Malcolm (West Scotland) (Reform)
 Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Schmulian, Kim (Glasgow) (Reform)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
 Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
 Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
 Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S7M-01084.4, in the name of Pauline McNeill, is: For 24, Against 95, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S7M-01084.1, in the name of Thomas Kerr, which seeks to amend motion S7M-01084, in the name of Simita Kumar, on building stronger, safer and inclusive communities together, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Max Bannerman (Highlands and Islands) (Reform): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. Your vote has been recorded.

David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Apologies. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. Your vote has been recorded.

For

Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
 Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
 Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
 Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
 Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
 Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
 Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
 Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
 MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
 Massey, Duncan (North East Scotland) (Reform)
 McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
 Offord, Malcolm (West Scotland) (Reform)
 Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
 Schmulian, Kim (Glasgow) (Reform)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
 Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adams, James (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
 Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
 Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
 Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)

Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
 Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
 Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
 Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
 Green, David (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
 Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
 Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
 Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Lennon, Monica (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
 Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
 MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
 Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Lorna Slater]
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
 Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)

Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
 Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
 Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S7M-01084.1, in the name of Thomas Kerr, is: For 17, Against 102, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S7M-01084.3, in the name of Kate Nevens, on building stronger, safer and inclusive communities together, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
 Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
 Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
 Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
 Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)

Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
 Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
 Green, David (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
 Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
 Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
 Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Lennon, Monica (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
 Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
 MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
 Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Lorna Slater]
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
 Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
 Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
 Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

Against

Adams, James (North East Scotland) (Con)

Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
 Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
 Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
 Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
 Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
 Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
 Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
 MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
 Massey, Duncan (North East Scotland) (Reform)
 McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
 Offord, Malcolm (West Scotland) (Reform)
 Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
 Schmulian, Kim (Glasgow) (Reform)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
 Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S7M-01084.3, in the name of Kate Nevens, is: For 92, Against 27, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S7M-01084.2, in the name of Meghan Gallacher, on building stronger, safer and inclusive communities together, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Apologies. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. Your vote has been recorded—only just.

For

Adams, James (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
 Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
 Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
 Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)

Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
 Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
 Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
 Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
 MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
 Massey, Duncan (North East Scotland) (Reform)
 McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
 Offord, Malcolm (West Scotland) (Reform)
 Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
 Schmulian, Kim (Glasgow) (Reform)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
 Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
 Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
 Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
 Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
 Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
 Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
 Green, David (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
 Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)

Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
 Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
 Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Lennon, Monica (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
 Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
 MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
 Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Lorna Slater]
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
 Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
 Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
 Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S7M-01084.2, in the name of Meghan Gallacher, is: For 27, Against 90, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S7M-01084, in the name of Simita Kumar, on building stronger, safer and inclusive communities together, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
 Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
 Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
 Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Dunlop, Duncan (South Scotland) (LD)
 Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
 Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
 Green, David (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
 Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
 Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
 Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
 Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Lennon, Monica (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
 Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
 MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)

Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maniannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Lorna Slater]
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
 Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
 Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
 Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

Against

Adams, James (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
 Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
 Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
 Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
 Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
 Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
 Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
 MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
 Massey, Duncan (North East Scotland) (Reform)
 McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
 Offord, Malcolm (West Scotland) (Reform)
 Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
 Schmulian, Kim (Glasgow) (Reform)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
 Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
 Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S7M-01084, in the name of Simita Kumar, on building stronger, safer and inclusive communities together, as amended, is: For 92, Against 26, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that all individuals should be treated with dignity and respect and able to feel safe in their communities; supports robust criminal justice responses to violence, intimidation, hatred and disorder that harm individuals, and damage community relations; rejects attempts by the small minority of people who create fear, division and hostility within Scotland's communities in person and online; supports efforts to build trust, strengthen cohesion and ensure that everyone can live safely free from prejudice, hatred and discrimination; recognises the disproportionate harms to marginalised groups, and condemns the far right's deliberate incitement of violence against migrants, asylum-seekers, Muslims and people of colour; further recognises the need to work with community groups to co-design strategies for community safety, ensuring that any response is shaped by those most impacted by violence and discrimination; and calls on the Scottish Government to increase investment in community-led safe spaces, culturally appropriate mental health and wellbeing services, crisis support as well as the safety and security of frontline charities and community organisations that are facing threats and abuse.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S7M-01101, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on designation of a lead committee, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament agrees that the Economy, Tourism and Energy Committee be designated as the lead committee in consideration of the second supplementary legislative consent memorandum on the Sporting Events Bill.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time. I ask members who are not staying for members' business to leave the chamber quietly.

Walking Scotland (30th Anniversary)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark):

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S7M-00762, in the name of Paul McLennan, on Walking Scotland's 30th anniversary. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament congratulates Walking Scotland on its 30th anniversary; notes the charity's significant contribution since its inception to developing and improving Scotland's path network and supporting and promoting walking for all through activities, grants and guidance; welcomes the Scottish Government's continued commitment to walking and wheeling; notes that 86% of people in Scotland already walk or wheel regularly and that many want to do so more often; believes that investment in walking and wheeling delivers exceptional value, returning around £6 for every £1 spent and preventing thousands of serious health conditions; notes the view that walking is one of the easiest and most accessible ways to improve the nation's health and wellbeing, one of the best ways to tackle the climate-nature emergency, increase social interactions and connectedness in communities across Scotland, including in the East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs area, as well as generate economic benefits; notes the call for the Scottish Government to bring forward its proposed national walking framework as soon as practical and launch a path fund, and wishes Walking Scotland continued success over the coming years.

17:52

Paul McLennan (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP): I am delighted to open this members' business debate and to speak to my motion recognising the 30th anniversary of Walking Scotland. I thank colleagues from across the chamber for their support, and I warmly welcome representatives from Walking Scotland, and anyone else who is joining us in the public gallery or is watching online.

Thirty years ago, in 1996, the Paths for All Partnership was established with a clear and ambitious purpose: to encourage more people across Scotland to walk; to improve local paths; and to make our communities healthier, happier and better connected. Last year, the organisation rebranded as Walking Scotland—a clearer, bolder name that reflects both its heritage and its ambitions for the next three decades. Today, we celebrate that journey and the remarkable impact that it continues to have.

Walking Scotland is Scotland's national walking and wheeling charity. Its vision is simple and powerful: everyone, everywhere, every day should have the opportunity to walk and to wheel. That inclusive approach—which explicitly embraces wheeling as well as walking—ensures that people

of all ages and abilities, including those using wheelchairs or mobility aids, or pushing prams, can take part.

The results speak for themselves. Every week, the charity supports 800 health walks across Scotland, enabling more than 9,500 people to join friendly, local groups. Hundreds of volunteers have been trained to lead those walks. I have taken part in some of the walks myself, in East Lothian. Following my health scare last year, I took up the challenge of walking more, and I try to walk 30km a week—most weeks, I manage to achieve that. The workplace step count challenge has also engaged thousands of employees.

Through path improvement grants, millions of pounds have been invested in safer, more accessible routes that link communities to shops, schools, green spaces and public transport. In recent years alone, grants totalling around £4 million have helped to deliver real improvements on the ground. Those are not just statistics: they represent people who have found companionship after loneliness; regained confidence after illness or bereavement; improved their mental health; or simply rediscovered the pleasure of being outdoors.

Walking is free—it requires no special equipment, and is one of the most equalising forms of physical activity that we have. It helps to tackle health inequalities; eases pressure on the national health service; strengthens community bonds; and supports our climate and nature goals by encouraging short everyday journeys to be made on foot rather than by car.

Recent surveys by Walking Scotland show encouraging progress. A total of 57 per cent of adults now walk or wheel every day—up from previous years—and 86 per cent do so several times a week. However, significant barriers remain.

Why does walking and wheeling matter? The first reason is health and prevention. Walking and wheeling are simple ways to increase physical activity, support mental wellbeing and help people to stay healthier for longer, all while reducing demand on our NHS. Figures show that walking and wheeling prevented 3,644 serious long-term health conditions and 1,081 early deaths in 2025.

It also grows our economy. In 2025, the total economic benefit from all trips walked and wheeled in Scottish walking and cycling index cities was £1.2 billion. Walkable communities have increased footfall and revitalised high streets, improved access to local services and helped to create safer, more welcoming town centres and neighbourhoods.

I talked earlier about the barriers to walking. Poor pavement quality, safety concerns, especially after dark, and limited access to good local paths still prevent many people from walking as much as they would like. The majority of Scots say that they would want to walk more for both leisure and routine journeys—our job is to make that easier.

As we mark Walking Scotland's 30th anniversary, it is right that we also look ahead. Walking Scotland, working with partners such as Living Streets Scotland, has set out a clear and practical agenda in its manifesto, "The Power of Walking—A Walking and Wheeling Manifesto for 2026". It calls for walking and wheeling to be placed at the heart of Government policy across health, transport, planning and climate; for sustained long-term investment, including a national path fund to maintain and improve local networks; for inclusive design in our communities; and for improved safety through better infrastructure and enforcement.

Those are sensible, evidence-based asks. Research shows that every £1 that is invested in walking infrastructure can return up to £6 in wider health, economic and environmental benefits. In East Lothian, as in communities across Scotland, we see the difference that good paths and supported walking make. Whether it is on coastal routes or countryside paths, or through simple improvements that make the school run or a trip to the shops safer and more pleasant, the benefits are felt every day.

I am proud that organisations such as Walking Scotland help to make that possible. I place on the record my thanks to Kevin Lafferty, the staff, the board, the many partners and, above all, the volunteers and participants who make Walking Scotland's work a reality. Their dedication over three decades has changed lives and strengthened communities.

This anniversary is both a celebration and a call to action. Let us celebrate Walking Scotland and its 30 years of outstanding achievement, and let us commit, across parties, to supporting the next 30 years so that Scotland truly becomes a walking and wheeling nation: healthier, happier, greener and more connected for everyone. I look forward to hearing contributions from colleagues.

17:58

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Paul McLennan for bringing the debate to the chamber and for his excellent speech, and I support the call—as I am sure that we will hear from every member—to congratulate Walking Scotland on its 30th anniversary.

We all know the benefits of walking and wheeling, which are wide ranging, from the environment to the health and wellbeing of the population. We should place significant focus on encouraging and facilitating that. It is fantastic to read about the work of Walking Scotland's delivery programme alongside communities in schools and workplaces; the improved paths—many of us will have been along to see some of those improvements—which improve the community's ability to use local paths; strengthening networks through members' walking clubs; and promoting the benefits of walking by doing policy work.

Scotland has to be one of the best places in which to walk, with its beautiful scenery and its amazing and interesting cities, and of course its weather, or at least its access to technology and waterproof clothing, which will help with walking in Scotland; I know that many members in the chamber enjoy walking.

I do not often talk about my family in the chamber, but I will share a short story about us. In 2018, my husband, Hammy, and I, and my two children, Amber and Gordon, who were both still at primary school, walked the Bibbulmun track in Australia, which is a walk of more than 600 miles. It took us 51 days, and it was an adventure that I never imagined having. I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that everyone needs to do that in order to take up, and start taking pleasure in, walking. Of course, walking can be 10 minutes, 10 hours or 10 days, and that is perhaps why it can be seen as such an important tool in tackling many issues such as inequalities, social isolation and mental wellbeing.

Walking can be undertaken in rural or urban settings, alone or with friends. We must ensure that walking continues to be enjoyed by many people, and I will mention one or two things that might help with that.

In Scotland, we have the right to roam, which is an enormous privilege, but we must access the land responsibly, under the Scottish outdoor access code. Walking can be enjoyed in the majority of Scotland—in fact, the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2025, which we passed last year, allows for much better use of the land, as it provides that land managers must ensure that they have access programmes.

In Scotland, we can enjoy the hills and mountains, the moorland, the woods and forests and the fields. As I said, the 2025 act ensures that landowners must provide for reasonable access to their land. It is important that that access is retained to ensure that walking in nature is welcoming, and the 2025 act allows us to scrutinise that, which is an important point.

My second point, which is linked to that, is about the underrepresentation of groups in walking, in particular in nature. We know that ethnic minority communities and inner-city families are underrepresented in accessing Scotland's land. It would be great if, over the next 30 years, the Government and the Parliament—including all of us, as parliamentarians—and Walking Scotland could put special emphasis on increasing confidence among those underrepresented groups to allow them to access and enjoy the land. I hope that, as a result of that, we will, in future debates, be able to talk about all the people who continue to walk and wheel and enjoy the land.

I thank Paul McLennan once again, and I look forward to the contributions this evening.

18:02

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands (Green)): I am absolutely delighted to be talking about walking, and I thank Paul McLennan for bringing this important debate to the chamber to celebrate Walking Scotland's 30th anniversary. I thank Walking Scotland for the work that it has done on making Scotland more accessible for more people through running the Ian Findlay path fund on behalf of Transport Scotland. I support Walking Scotland's calls for a multiyear path fund, as that is important. We cannot underestimate the importance of paths, and of the paths network Scotland project.

I align my thoughts with some of what Carol Mochan said about the Scottish outdoor access code. I represent the Highlands and Islands, and an awful lot of people come to Scotland to walk in my region. We have world-leading access rights—our land reform legislation is precious. I have actually met people who have chosen to move from England to Scotland—those are people who really love the outdoors—because we have the ability to access the land and they can roam wherever they feel moved to do so and have a sense of adventure. That is so important.

However, people do not have to go up a mountain to go out walking in Scotland. I am aware of many walking groups that are about walking for health and wellbeing. In my town, there is a walking group that meets every week; people are getting outdoors together and having a bit of social time, as well as looking after their health.

It was interesting to note that, when we were in lockdown during the pandemic, one of the Government's health recommendations was to get out and have a walk. We absolutely need to be walking. However, for many people, especially those who live in urban areas, it is a challenge to get out in nature. Where do you go? That is why paths are important.

I have noticed over the years, when I get up into the mountains, that many more people are going out walking. We are seeing a much greater impact on the landscape, including the erosion of pathways and of nature.

We are getting more aware of precious biodiversity in habitats, where we really do not want to be walking. Therefore, paths are an important way of interpreting the land and making the land more accessible to people, as they help them to know where they can put their feet without damaging the precious landscape.

Communities want paths, and, of course, paths are not just about walking; they are also about wheeling. There is a fantastic all-abilities path in Assynt, in the minister's part of the world, that was set up and is run by the Culag Community Woodlands Trust. It is a super path, because it is wide enough and is laid out in such a way that people can use a wheelchair on it. I would like more such paths to be created. It is fantastic that the community raised the funds to do that. Similarly, the community of Upper Achintore has a path that runs out of their neighbourhood on the hillside above Fort William, so that people in that community can get up on to the hills.

Core paths are important to Scotland, but they are not mapped well. We do not have a proper mapping system. I want to encourage the Government to move forward with that.

I want to underscore the need for multiyear path funding so that we can maintain these paths that are all over the place and support people to have access to the landscape in a way that supports nature. Local authorities that choose to charge a visitor levy have an opportunity to reinvest some of that income in the walking infrastructure, as many people come to walk in their areas.

In closing, I want to underscore the need for that path fund and the need to map our core paths.

18:06

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):

First of all, I congratulate Paul McLennan on his motion. I whole-heartedly join him and other members in congratulating Walking Scotland on its 30th anniversary. I must confess that I am in awe of what Paul McLennan said about how far he is walking. Translating 30km into old money, I see that it is about 20 miles, which is 50,000 steps a week. That is pretty impressive, so I congratulate my colleague on his personal health initiative around walking.

Before I got into politics as an elected member of anything, the company that I worked for had a walkathon competition. We were formed into teams, and we all egged each other on to walk

8,000 or 10,000 steps a day. To do that on a sustained basis is no mean feat. What it brought home to me was just how sedentary my lifestyle is, like the lifestyle of many people, and how detrimental that is to our wellbeing—I use the word wellbeing in its proper context, not in the one that we often bandy about in this chamber. There is no doubt that getting out, walking and being in the countryside in particular is really good for the soul, and there is much to recommend it.

I am happy to endorse the excellent work that is done by volunteers, local walking groups and those who maintain and improve the paths of Scotland. I have nothing ill to say about that at all, but I am going to steer slightly away from that to talk about a broader concern that I have raised before in this Parliament.

The motion is great, but it calls for more public spending. It calls for a new path fund. Once we begin to call for more public money to be spent in a particular way by a particular organisation, we have a duty to ask questions about public money that is already being spent. I need to make it absolutely clear that I am not seeking to undermine the credibility of Walking Scotland and the good work that it undoubtedly does. It is a registered charity and a company that is limited by guarantee. However, in its most recent accounts it recorded an income of more than £5.8 million, and we know that vast sums of that income have come from the taxpayer. In 2024-25 alone, the Scottish Government gave it £2 million through Active Scotland, Transport Scotland provided another £1.53 million for the Ian Findlay path fund, and £220,000 further was connected with the wind-down of the smarter choices, smarter places initiative.

Like I say, all of that activity is very worthy, but we are not talking about a small community charity. This is not an organisation that exists on jumble sales or donations. We are talking about an organisation that has millions of pounds of public money in its care. That means that accountability is important.

As I say, Walking Scotland is a regulated charity that publishes accounts, and I acknowledge that.

Paul McLennan: We all recognise the great work that Walking Scotland does. One of the important points that I mentioned in my speech is the fact that research shows that every pound invested in walking infrastructure can return up to £6 in wider health, economic and environmental benefits. When we talk about public sector reform, one of the key points is the focus on the prevention agenda. This is a real evidence-based approach, in that one pound invested can return up to £6 in wider health, economic and environmental

benefits. That is the real benefit of the work that Walking Scotland does.

Stephen Kerr: I am not going to argue with any of that. I am making a broader point, which comes down to a concern that I have registered before about the direction of public money in Scotland. I am not disputing any of the good work that Paul McLennan is highlighting at all; in fact, I am speaking in praise of walking and of the idea that we should all be less sedentary.

The issue that I am seeking to highlight in this debate—it is, after all, a debate—is that this is not a public body that is directly accountable to Parliament in the way that Transport Scotland or, indeed, the Scottish Government is. That exposes an accountability gap that we in Parliament should not go on ignoring. It is a very real accountability gap, because Walking Scotland is just one example; I am not talking only about it. And, when we add it all up, we arrive at some very substantial sums of public money.

When an organisation is substantially funded by the taxpayer and entrusted with delivering public policy—that is what we are talking about—public accountability should follow public money. That principle is not really controversial, but I am raising it as a point of concern. I see that my time is up, and I do not want to beg further indulgence of the Presiding Officer or the Parliament. I will conclude.

I believe that we should be celebrating the 30th anniversary of Walking Scotland. However, as a Parliament, we should also be very careful about how public money is being spent in Scotland: the directions it goes in and what happens because of it. This is a clear case in which we can say that something really good has happened because of public money. However, is that true in every instance? I think that we should focus a lot more on that accountability gap. Again, I congratulate Paul McLennan not only on his 20 miles a week, but on his motion for debate.

18:12

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I thank Paul McLennan for securing this debate. I am delighted to speak in support of a motion congratulating Walking Scotland on its 30th anniversary.

Walking Scotland has spent three decades championing the idea that walking and wheeling are not only leisure activities, but vital tools that help to improve our health, reduce emissions and connect people to the places where they live. Its work on path development, community programmes, grants, guidance and advocacy has helped to create a culture in which active travel is increasingly seen as a normal part of everyday life.

I will speak about initiatives in Kirkcaldy and the surrounding areas, where we can see the impact of walking and wheeling initiatives in practical ways. When we talk about active travel, infrastructure and funding are obviously hugely important. However, what makes the biggest difference on the ground are local organisations, volunteers and community groups.

In Kirkcaldy, Greener Kirkcaldy is one of the outstanding examples. For many years, it has helped people to make sustainable choices, improving their wellbeing and making them more connected to their communities. Through its active travel hub, it supports walking, wheeling and cycling initiatives that are accessible, practical and genuinely community led.

A hugely successful part of that work is Lang Toun Cycles. What started as a response to local demand has developed into a thriving social enterprise in the heart of Kirkcaldy. Over the past five years alone, almost 4,000 bikes have been repaired or refurbished. Thousands of local people have been supported to travel more sustainably, learn new skills and access affordable cycling opportunities. The project has also generated carbon savings equivalent to removing dozens of cars from the road.

Lang Toun Cycles understands that active travel is about more than providing a bike. It offers maintenance training, confidence-building sessions, led rides, e-bike loans, a children's bike library, volunteering opportunities and practical support for people who may otherwise never consider cycling as an option. In doing that, it removes barriers and creates opportunities.

Active travel is increasingly understood as a key part of tackling health inequalities, reducing congestion and supporting our climate ambitions. As the motion highlights, 86 per cent of people in Scotland already walk or wheel regularly and many would like to do so even more. That encouraging statistic also tells us that people finally understand the benefits.

The challenge now is to ensure that people have the confidence, opportunities and safe, accessible routes that they need to make walking and wheeling part of their everyday life and that is where local organisations can make the biggest difference. In Fife, we have one of Scotland's great outdoor success stories, the Fife coastal path. Stretching for 117 miles and designated as one of Scotland's great trails by NatureScot, it is one of our longest and most celebrated walking routes, passing through some of the country's most spectacular scenery and linking communities, beaches, harbours, nature reserves and historic towns along the Fife coast. Around half a million visits are made to the path each year, encouraging

tourism, supporting hospitality businesses and showcasing some of the very best of Fife.

However, that path is far more than just a tourist attraction. For residents, it is where many of us walk our dogs, get together with friends or spend time with family. The section through Kirkcaldy and Dysart is particularly special, with the harbour master's house in Dysart, which is famous to many as a filming location, serving as a focal point for visitors and showing how walking routes can support heritage as well as the local economy.

We cannot take the Fife coastal path for granted. Parts of the route face increasing challenges from coastal erosion and extreme weather events and the very coastline that makes the path so beautiful also makes it vulnerable. Maintaining and adapting sections of the route will require on-going investment, expertise and long-term planning if future generations are to enjoy it as we do today. That is why I believe that the call in the motion for a dedicated Scottish path fund is so important.

As we celebrate Walking Scotland's milestone anniversary, we also celebrate the volunteers, community groups and local champions who make active travel possible and work to make us a healthier and greener Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I call the minister to respond to the debate on behalf of the Scottish Government.

18:17

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): I sincerely thank all members who have contributed to the debate and thank Paul McLennan for bringing the motion. I especially thank Arianne Burgess for mentioning Assynt. The power of that landscape, which is so close to my heart, is commemorated on the very wall of this Parliament building in the poem "A Man in Assynt" by Norman MacCaig. I often stop to read that snatch of poetry on the wall, I think because I feel such a connection with the land where I grew up. I want everyone to get out, explore Scotland and feel that connection with the land.

This debate has shown that everyone here recognises the important contribution that Walking Scotland has made over the past 30 years by supporting people to walk and wheel more. Walking and wheeling, as Mr McLennan said, are the most accessible ways for people to be more active for their physical and mental health, but also help to tackle our climate and nature emergencies, increase social interactions and improve connectedness in communities.

The Scottish Government funds Walking Scotland to deliver a wide range of initiatives that

help us with all those outcomes, working in schools and communities across the whole country. In particular, I highlight the health walk network, which does so much to help those facing health challenges to be more active, socialise and connect with others.

Walking Scotland also leads the way in promoting the benefits of walking and wheeling to the public. May was national walking month and Walking Scotland delivered a wide-reaching campaign to encourage people to walk and wheel more. Advertising across TV, radio, in supermarkets, on buses and on social media reached almost 4 million people and generated more than 11 million views across all channels.

Walking Scotland also delivers the popular step count challenge programme. This spring's national step count challenge saw nearly two and a half thousand people taking part, with more than 1 million steps walked.

I assure members, including Mr Kerr, that all those initiatives have had an impact. In 2014, 64 per cent of adults reported that they were walking for recreational purposes, and that figure rose steadily to 71 per cent in 2023. Encouragingly, that rise has been particularly marked among older adults, among whom participation increased from 52 per cent in 2014 to 60 per cent in 2023. There has also been a rise in rates of recreational walking among disabled adults, from 41 per cent in 2014 to 50 per cent in 2023.

Walking Scotland played an important role in this year's summer of sport programme, developing a free step count challenge programme over the summer and engaging directly with people attending major sporting events. The work of Walking Scotland and other organisations such as Ramblers Scotland makes a huge difference, but we are very much aware that many people still face barriers. Removing those barriers is not something that the Scottish Government can achieve on its own. As always, effective collaboration, particularly with local authorities, is essential.

There are a number of pots of funding that specifically target people who are marginalised in our community to encourage them to get walking. We recognise the power of walking groups to help people to integrate into our community, to feel like they belong in Scotland and to fall in love with our country, in the way that we have fallen in love with our country—as I described with reference to Assynt.

We know that improving the infrastructure that supports walking and wheeling is vital. By developing and managing attractive, safe, well-designed places and signed routes close to where people live and work, we can encourage people to

use them on a regular basis for health, recreation, sport and active travel. Our national planning framework has been an important tool in embedding that approach in practice at a local level. However, it is not just about urban planning. We are fortunate, in Scotland, to have a unique natural environment, which is a real asset to the health of the nation.

Our access legislation has provided a right of responsible access to most land and inland water since 2003, and we are committed to effectively promoting and supporting our paths, parks and reserves to ensure that more people are encouraged to enjoy the outdoors.

In relation to paths, I note Mr McLennan's reference to a new national paths fund. I can confirm that my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs has asked her officials to undertake scoping work on the establishment of a Scottish paths fund. That work is in its early stages.

There are also clear links to our transport strategies. Our aim is to reduce car usage by 2030, such that walking, wheeling and cycling are the natural choice for shorter everyday trips. We have significantly increased investment in active travel in recent years, providing funding directly to local authorities to deliver infrastructure that supports healthier communities, enhances wellbeing and makes walking, wheeling and cycling more accessible.

We need to continue to support behaviour change. That starts at the earliest age, building the habit of walking into daily life, in particular in schools. Walking Scotland is pursuing some innovative work in schools to promote walking and wheeling. That work is still at an early stage of development, but initial results show an encouraging impact, particularly among teenage girls.

We all know that health and social care professionals can play a key role in supporting people to walk more, building on non-clinical interventions and treatment pathways. Public Health Scotland is redeveloping the national physical activity pathway to support those connections.

At a national level, we are building the benefits of walking into our communications campaigns. For example, our mind to mind campaign features videos of people talking about how they have coped with mental health challenges. A common thread is the importance of walking in helping people with those issues. We link those videos to the resources that are available to provide support, through Walking Scotland and others.

I note Mr McLennan's reference to a new national walking framework. I am aware that Walking Scotland and other partners have provided us with their thoughts on what that should look like. I am happy to consider publishing a new framework, but I want to be absolutely sure that the actions that we commit to are deliverable. Any actions in a new framework will span both local and national delivery across a range of ministerial portfolios. Work is ongoing to ensure that we have a clear and realistic plan that will result in real and meaningful change. I am happy to update Parliament on progress at a future date.

Today is a milestone for Walking Scotland. Its work over the past 30 years has helped us to move towards our ambition to make Scotland a place where walking and wheeling are firmly embedded in all our daily lives. I thank Walking Scotland for that.

Meeting closed at 18:25.

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