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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 15 September 2026

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The first item of business is time for reflection, which will be led by Hafiz Muhammad Imtiaz Ali, who is the imam at Hillview Islamic and education centre.

Hafiz Muhammad Imtiaz Ali (Hillview Islamic and Education Centre): Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem. Good afternoon, Presiding Officer and members of the Scottish Parliament. Today, I will reflect on a simple idea: making room for one another. Our beliefs and traditions may differ, but we can still treat one another with dignity, kindness and respect.

Islam teaches us that living alongside people of different faiths is not simply about tolerating one another; it is about kindness, building relationships and making space for one another. In the life of Prophet Muhammad—peace be upon him—the Christians of Najran came to visit him. What I find meaningful from that is the hospitality and respect that was shown towards people of another faith.

When we opened our Hillview Islamic centre in Glasgow, I met some of our neighbours and offered them something simple. I told them that, if they ever needed a place for their Sunday prayers, our centre would be available to them. That was a practical expression of what my faith teaches, which is that we should not only ask others to respect our beliefs but be willing to respect theirs.

Every Ramadan, we serve Iftar to more than 100 people. Students, asylum seekers, people from minority communities and local residents come together around the same table. We also invite our neighbours to share Iftar with us, see our centre, experience Ramadan and get to know one another better.

Sometimes, understanding does not begin with a big speech. Rather, it begins by simply opening the doors, sharing a meal and sitting together as neighbours. Scotland is home to people of many faiths and of no faith; we may worship differently, but we share the same hopes.

As the Parliament begins its work today, my reflection is simple: let us make room for one another, let us listen before we judge, let us seek to understand before we fear and let us offer kindness before it is requested. If we make room for one another in our communities and places of worship, around our tables and, most importantly, in our hearts, our differences need not divide us.

Instead, they can help us to learn from one another and make Scotland more welcoming for everyone.

May Almighty God bless Scotland and all its people. May he guide us to build communities where differences are respected, neighbours are valued and everyone has a place at the table.
[Applause.]

Cathie Craigie

14:04

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Before we move to general question time, I mark the sad passing of Cathie Craigie. She was a long-serving councillor before being elected to the inaugural session of the devolved Scottish Parliament, in which she represented the Cumbernauld and Kilsyth constituency from 1999 to 2011. A committed public servant, Cathie was a parliamentarian whose determination and dedication earned the respect of colleagues from across the political spectrum. On behalf of the Scottish Parliament, I extend my sincere condolences to her family, friends and former colleagues at this difficult time.

General Question Time

14:04

Sale of Vaping Products (Local Authority Powers)

1. **Colin Beattie (Midlothian North) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what additional powers it considers local authorities require to enforce legislation relating to the sale of vaping products effectively. (S7O-00212)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): The Scottish Government is engaging with the Society of Chief Officers of Trading Standards in Scotland, trading standards and Police Scotland to assess the effectiveness of current enforcement mechanisms for the sale of vaping products. As part of that, a number of areas have been highlighted, including whether trading standards should have access to the closure order mechanisms that are available in England and Wales and whether the current banning order regime could be strengthened.

Colin Beattie: What representations have been made to the United Kingdom Government regarding the introduction of a UK-wide licensing scheme for vape retailers and manufacturers, particularly in the light of any implications under the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: The consideration that was given to powers for a licensing scheme as part of the Tobacco and Vapes Act 2026 included the needs of enforcement authorities alongside the administrative burden and costs of a licensing scheme for local authorities and small businesses. Engagement was undertaken with a range of stakeholders, including trading standards and industry bodies, and there was broad support from stakeholders in Scotland for retaining and developing Scotland's current registration system instead. We will continue to work with the UK Government on the powers to establish a product registration scheme.

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): I call Helen McDade to ask a supplementary question.

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): I ask the First Minister, considering that there is a public inquiry into NHS Tayside's practices that allowed Sam Eljamel to butcher patients over nearly 20 years and another public inquiry into NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde's inability over many years—

The Presiding Officer: Sorry—that is not related to general questions. I think that you are thinking about the question that you submitted for the First Minister. I thought that you had a

supplementary to the question about vaping that Colin Beattie asked.

Helen McDade: I am sorry, Presiding Officer.

The Presiding Officer: No problem. I call Julie MacDougall to ask question 2.

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): Presiding Officer, I want to ask a supplementary to question 1.

The Presiding Officer: Right—we were not sure. We thought that you had pressed your button early to ask question 2. I am happy to take a supplementary to question 1.

Julie MacDougall: Is that okay?

The Presiding Officer: Yes, of course.

Julie MacDougall: Thank you. Last week, the BBC reported that more than 30 vape shops across England and Wales were forced to shut due to having links with the black market. What number of vape shops in Scotland have been forced to close for the same reason? Have those enterprises also been used for wider criminal activity such as money laundering or visa fraud?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: I will have to come back to the member on that specific question, because I do not have the number to hand. The decision was made to retain the current registration system at a local level and to continue to understand how it could be improved. We are also taking a decision on non-domestic rates for vape shops to really understand how we can use that tax for social good and have businesses that act for social good. I will write to the member on the specific question about the number.

United Kingdom Register of Licensed Sponsors

2. Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will assess the potential economic impact on Scotland's labour market of recent updates to the UK register of licensed sponsors. (S7O-00213)

The Minister for Business and Fair Work (Tom Arthur): Scotland's demographic challenges reinforce the need for migration policies that meet our distinct workforce needs, and I have renewed our offer of engagement with the United Kingdom Government on tailored Scottish migration routes. The UK register of licensed sponsors, which is the Home Office list of organisations that are approved to sponsor overseas workers, is updated regularly to reflect changes affecting sponsors or the immigration rules.

We continue to assess the impact of the UK immigration system on Scotland's economy.

Scottish employers that are interested in sponsoring overseas workers to fill gaps can contact Scotland's Migration Service for advice.

Julie MacDougall: Recently, I looked through the Fife entries in the updated list of sponsors. I was shocked that many businesses across Fife are bringing in workers to cover entry-level roles in shops, restaurants and food delivery services. Can the minister clarify whether the Government thinks that it is fair for so many entry level and starter jobs to be taken up by migrant workers when those roles are desperately needed by many young, struggling Scots?

Tom Arthur: As I set out in my original answer, I remind the member that those operational matters are reserved and are within the purview of the Home Office. Therefore, it is not something that I or any other Scottish Government minister has direct authority over. On the general point, I hope that the member has had the opportunity to engage with businesses and would recognise some of the challenges that exist in many parts of Scotland.

We seek to do all that we can to support young people in Scotland into work, and a lot of engagement is taking place between me, the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport, and the new Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education, Alyn Smith, on that particular area. I hear from employers across hospitality, the food sector and social care about the absolutely vital contribution that migrant workers make.

Given that our population growth is entirely dependent on inward migration, it speaks to the need to have an immigration system that is tailored to Scotland's needs. If the UK Government is not willing to devolve those powers to the Scottish Parliament, it should engage with Scottish ministers constructively. The matter is of vital economic interest to us all.

David Barratt (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): The minister has partly answered my question. Does he agree that the UK Government's hostile visa system fails to reflect Scotland's workforce needs and that, due to its fear of Reform UK in England, the Labour Government is openly undermining our efforts to recruit doctors, nurses, care workers and support staff?

Tom Arthur: David Barratt makes an important point. It comes back to the fundamental issue that the UK's migration system is, ultimately, based on UK averages and does not recognise the specific challenges that we face in Scotland. I reiterate that the Scottish Government's position is that all powers should be with this Parliament and that, even in the context of devolution, Scotland should have powers over migration. If the UK Government

is not willing to consider that, it should at least work with us to allow for tailored routes into Scotland. That is not novel in an international context; we see it in other jurisdictions and it would respond to the acute labour shortages that we face.

We will continue to do all that we can, through our education and skills system, to ensure that there is a pipeline of labour to support Scottish industry, but we cannot escape the demographic challenges that we face. That is why it is an economic imperative that we have a migration system that responds to the needs of Scottish businesses.

Vape Retailers (Regulation)

3. Pauline Stafford (Bathgate) (SNP): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a sitting member of West Lothian Council.

To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to strengthen regulations relating to vape retailers and the sale of vaping products. (S7O-00214)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): Under the Tobacco and Vapes Act 2026, it will be an offence to offer vaping and nicotine products for a nominal price or free from 29 October. There will also be a ban on advertising those products from June 2027. We have launched a four-nations consultation on the packaging, appearance and display of tobacco and vapes, which will close on 2 October. Proposals include restricting vape displays in line with tobacco products, introducing plain packaging and limiting flavour descriptions to simple, factual terms.

Pauline Stafford: In my constituency, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of vape shops on high streets in recent years. Given the enforcement measures, advertising restrictions and business rate changes that are planned, how will the Scottish Government evaluate whether those actions are successfully reducing youth vaping and addressing concerns about the concentration of vape retailers? What further action might it consider if those trends persist?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: The tobacco and vaping framework has a range of indicators that allow us to track reductions in youth vaping over time, including through Action on Smoking and Health's smoke-free GB youth survey. As part of the next tobacco and vaping framework implementation plan, we are considering what further restrictions will be needed on where such products are sold. We are also consulting on further actions to tackle youth vaping as part of the four-nations Tobacco and Vapes Act 2026,

including restrictions on the packaging, appearance and display of vapes.

Cap on Essential Food Prices

4. Jamie Langan (South Scotland) (Reform): To ask the Scottish Government whether it recognises that the provision for real-time adaptability in its proposed cap on the price of essential food items could lead retailers to withdraw entire product ranges. (S7O-00215)

The Minister for Business and Fair Work (Tom Arthur): Through our public consultation and events such as the fair food summit that was held last week, we are engaging closely with stakeholders from across the food supply chain to understand potential impacts arising from the proposed cap, including concerns about product availability. Future decisions will be taken following careful consideration of the evidence and stakeholder views that were gathered during the consultation.

Jamie Langan: I thank the minister for his response, but I ask what contingency planning the Scottish Government will be taking for the inevitable empty shelves that its system of price controls will lead to, or will there be positive Scottish National Party spin for headlines in Scotland?

Tom Arthur: I want to provide the member with assurance, because I think that this is the second time that he has raised that issue with me. I am engaging extensively right across the food system. Following First Minister's question time today, I will be away to meet a food producer in East Lothian. Later this week, I will be engaging with members of the wholesale community. That follows on from extensive engagement that I have had over the summer and that I will continue to have.

I want to assure the member, and all members across the chamber, recognising the strong interest in this policy proposal, that we will be engaging thoroughly through the formal consultation and the engagement that I will take forward. I encourage the member to submit a formal response to the consultation. I very much look forward to considering and reflecting on his informed opinions on the matter.

Mark Simpson (North East Scotland) (Reform): In the light of the economic challenges that Scotland's farmers already face, what assurances can the Scottish Government provide that the proposed cap on food prices will not result in additional cost pressures being passed down the supply chain to farmers?

Tom Arthur: The member raises an important point. We have been clear since the inception of that policy proposal that protection for consumers cannot come at the expense of an impact on food

producers. Our farmers, all of whom are involved in our food production system, play a role that is integral to our way of life and our economy in Scotland. We are committed to the close engagement that we are having, through the consultation and the other engagement that will be part of the process, so that we understand fully all potential risks and can identify how they can be mitigated.

Again, I want to reassure the member that no final decisions have been taken. We will consider the outcome of the consultation very carefully. Any proposals that will be brought forward will be consistent with the principles that we have set out—

The Presiding Officer: Thanks, minister—

Tom Arthur: —to protect and support consumers and to ensure that producers are protected as well.

Graham Simpson (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform): Will the minister talk to the Confederation of British Industry about the hare-brained food price cap proposal, including its chief executive, Rain Newton-Smith, who told an event in Glasgow last week that the scheme “won’t work”?

Tom Arthur: I recognise that there is a range of opinions, and it is important that there is an opportunity in the process for people to set out their views. I am absolutely committed to taking forward a robust and consensual approach to policy development. I welcome the opportunity to engage with all members of the wider business community, particularly those who are involved in the food system in this country, so that we can learn from their expertise and insight and develop a response to this issue, on which we share an interest, as there is consensus on the need to protect consumers, particularly those who are feeling the costs of food inflation most acutely.

A96 Fochabers Bridge

5. Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what consideration it has given to compensating businesses in Fochabers and Mosstodloch in light of delays to the completion of works at the A96 Fochabers bridge. (S7O-00216)

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport (Stephen Flynn): I certainly sympathise with those in Fochabers who have learned that the works will continue into November. I understand their frustrations in that regard. Those are essential works.

There is no statutory funding in place, as Mr Eagle is all too well aware. However, I can assure him and people in the local area that every effort is

being made to ensure that the works are completed as quickly as possible.

Tim Eagle: I believe that the delays to those works mean that they will now go into December, and, as the cabinet secretary will know, they are on a critical part of the A96. The problem is that some of the affected local businesses—which are quite small—buy stock months in advance. The works have put huge financial pressure on them over the last few months, and they are now worried about what will happen next year.

If compensation is not possible, will the cabinet secretary look into reviewing guidance to ensure that notification occurs as early as possible when there are such works in the future?

Stephen Flynn: Clear and consistent communication with the public in that respect is essential. I know that Mr Eagle’s comments will be heard by Amey and colleagues in Transport Scotland.

It is important for the chamber to recognise and understand that there are in excess of 2,000 bridges on our trunk road network. Putting in place a compensation mechanism, to which Mr Eagle initially alluded, would not be proportionate or practical. However, I can certainly take away his suggestion on improving communication with local businesses.

Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP): I was pleased to meet the cabinet secretary last week, and he will recall that we discussed the roadworks on the Spey bridge when we met. As he set out, those works are essential, but he recognises the disruption and the impact that the closure is having on businesses and the community around Fochabers and the wider area. Can he assure my constituents that Transport Scotland will work with Amey to explore all options to expedite the works, including weekend and evening works on the bridge?

Stephen Flynn: I first thank Laura Mitchell for her continued efforts to ensure that her community’s voices are heard in respect of the desire to see continuation of the work on the A96 dualling, which is incredibly important.

We discussed the Fochabers bridge last week, and I can offer her the reassurance that, as I understand it, work on alternate weekends is being taken forward. Work is also already taking place overnight.

It is important that that work is concluded as quickly and as swiftly as possible. The work is essential to ensuring the safety of the bridge and road in the long term, but I recognise the impact that it is having on the member’s constituents.

PISA 2026 Statistics

6. Jenny Young (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the 2026 programme for international student assessment statistics. (S7O-00217)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): There are results to welcome in Scotland's PISA 2025 results, notably that Scotland performs significantly above average in four of the five measured domains and that there is very welcome evidence of a weakening between socioeconomic disadvantage and PISA attainment. I welcome those results, alongside strong indicators of wellbeing, belonging and self-directed learning.

However, I am also very clear-eyed about the need for improvement. Reforms that are already under way include the curriculum improvement cycle and our national approach to ending mobile phones in the learning environment, as well as the unique opportunity offered for improvement by the First Minister's public sector reform agenda. They will all be taken forward.

Jenny Young: The facts speak for themselves. Scottish kids remain a year behind their English counterparts in mathematics and science—that is a fact. If the Government spent less time crafting political spin and faced up to the reality that fewer kids can read, maybe we would get somewhere.

The cabinet secretary will be aware that Glasgow City Council has engaged primary school teachers for intensive reading lessons with secondary school pupils who can barely read in their mother tongue. What discussions has the cabinet secretary had with Glasgow City Council about that initiative and with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and other local authorities regarding the possibility of extending that programme to help pupils across the country to read?

Màiri McAllan: There are a number of things that I should like to say to Jenny Young about her hyperbolic contribution to these sensitive matters.

First, as she is a former teacher, I might have thought that she would have thought a little bit harder about how the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development instructs us to understand PISA. It states:

"PISA provides an important source of evidence on educational outcomes and experience, but it should not be viewed in isolation."

I ask Jenny Young to consider what the OECD states in that regard.

In respect of reading, I would also like to point her to the evidence in this year's PISA statistics

that demonstrates that the link between socioeconomic disadvantage and reading attainment against PISA is weaker than it has ever been in any previous cycle. That is evidence that teachers and education professionals across this country, aided by the Government's support for the Scottish attainment challenge, are weakening the link between poverty and poor attainment throughout Scotland.

Steven Bonnar (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): In a year in which a record number of 18-year-olds have secured a place at university, including a record number of acceptances among the most disadvantaged young people, it is important that we recognise our progress.

During freshers week this month, I was speaking to students at the University of Glasgow who were starting the next chapter of their lives. It was a real reminder of the opportunities that education can open up. I did not have the opportunity to attend university.

This year's exam results show a narrowing of the poverty-related attainment gap, as well as improvements in areas within PISA. Will the cabinet secretary outline how efforts will be targeted to go even further?

Màiri McAllan: I strongly welcome that contribution, because it offers the perspective that the OECD instructs us to take when considering PISA: not to allow it to be the one lens through which we judge the entire education system, but to be clear minded about what it tells us about the state of play across Scotland. We are, therefore, absolutely right to highlight the fact that, according to Universities and Colleges Admissions Service data this year, a record number of young Scots are going on to university and a record number of those come from our most disadvantaged backgrounds. That is equity and excellence in practice, and it is what we will continue to pursue in Scotland's education system.

Sewage Spills (Highlands)

7. David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to reduce sewage spills across the Highlands. (S7O-00218)

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs (Gillian Martin): Investment in the public sewer system is an operational matter for Scottish Water, with plans set out in its "Improving Urban Waters—Route Map". Across the Highlands and Scotland as a whole, Scottish Water is using monitoring data and modelling to better understand overflow performance and optimise how its infrastructure operates.

In the past 10 years, £2.7 billion has been invested by Scottish Water in improving and

maintaining Scotland's public sewer system and infrastructure. Overflows are an integral part of Scotland's sewer networks, ensuring that sewers do not back up and flood homes, streets and sewage works during periods of heavy rainfall.

David Green: This summer, young members of the North Shore surf club in Thurso wrote to me to warn that their lessons had stopped because they feared the impact of sewage on their health. Kellan, aged 11, told me that sewage is making them all feel really sick.

Scottish Water data shows that sewage was dumped into our waters more than 100,000 times last year; however, because of a lack of monitoring, the actual figure could be much higher. Will the cabinet secretary therefore listen to my constituents, commit to a clean water act and finally take seriously the monitoring and regulation of our waters?

Gillian Martin: I understand the public's concerns when there are issues where swimming has resulted in sickness. It is important that people understand that, when they take to the waters, whether it be for swimming or surfing, they should take heed of the advice that is given at the time and in much of the signage. It is important that they do not swim after heavy rainfall, for example, because that can mean that water is contaminated by run-off from fields.

However, over 80 per cent of Scotland's water environment is already assessed by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency as being of high or good for water quality, and the majority of bathing waters in the member's constituency are rated as excellent.

Calls for arbitrary spill reductions need to recognise that monitoring is not investment in infrastructure. Scottish Water is prioritising investment in the infrastructure, which means that our water is cleaner as it is discharged. The function of combined sewer overflows is to prevent the flooding of properties after heavy rainfall. Monitoring more of those will mean not that less water is discharged into our watercourses but that we are taking money away from investment in the infrastructure.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): The Kinghorn community in Fife is faced with losing its bathing water designation because of sewage pollution on the beach. That case is to do with not sewage overflow but faulty household connections, which are discharging sewage on the beach. Does the cabinet secretary recognise that as an increasing problem across Scotland, and does she believe that better building standards enforcement is required when new builds are connected to the sewage network?

In addition, I echo David Green: we need a clean water bill in Scotland to deal with that issue and many others that affect our coasts and beaches.

The Presiding Officer: Be brief, cabinet secretary.

Gillian Martin: I was pleased to have a meeting last week with SEPA and Scottish Water, along with the constituency MSP David Torrance, on the Kinghorn situation. A great deal of work is going on to find the sources of the water that is going into the burn.

Those organisations have been able to carry out a number of interventions, but they have not been able to find out some of the sources. Part of the issue has been due to misconnections, and I take the member's point that, when new builds are happening or, indeed, when there is maintenance to existing buildings, we need to make sure that there are standards to be adhered to—as there already are.

“Capercaillie Emergency Plan 2025-2030”

8. Emma Roddick (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its work with partners regarding the delivery of the “Capercaillie Emergency Plan 2025-2030”. (S7O-00219)

The Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands (Jim Fairlie): More than 25 partners continue to work across the Cairngorms national park to improve habitat and reduce predation and disturbance affecting capercaillie. The NatureScot-chaired scientific advisory group brings together scientific expertise from nine organisations to assess the effectiveness of actions delivered through the capercaillie emergency plan. It oversees the research and monitoring and uses emerging evidence to inform adaptive management.

At a meeting last month, the group reviewed the final draft of the research and monitoring plan, which aims to measure the impact of the action plan, and that document will be published shortly.

Emma Roddick: Although some efforts have had a great impact, there are still visitors who are unaware of conservation efforts and may inadvertently put that incredible species at risk. How is the Scottish Government assessing the balance between the outdoor access code and the urgent need to protect biodiversity efforts, including preventing sensitive capercaillie lekking sites from being disturbed?

Jim Fairlie: That is a fair point. Reducing disturbance to the species is a key part of the Cairngorms national park partnership plan. For capercaillie, that is supported by the Lek It Be communication campaign and by the patrolling of

rangers in the national park. There are more than 100 rangers and volunteer rangers in the park, part of whose work is to reduce disturbance.

One of the key principles of the Scottish outdoor access code is caring for the environment. That includes avoiding intentional or reckless disturbance to sensitive conservation species such as capercaillie, their breeding sites and their habitat.

First Minister's Question Time

Back-bench Members

14:31

Sula Sgeir (Guga Harvesting)

Donald MacKinnon (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): Last week, the Public Petitions Committee took the decision to keep open petition PE2202, seeking to end the harvesting of guga from the island of Sula Sgeir in my constituency. Does the First Minister, like me, recognise and value the deep cultural significance of the taking of guga from Sula Sgeir? Can he confirm that the position of his Government remains that it does not intend to amend section 16 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to remove the power to grant licences to take gannets from Sula Sgeir?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Before I come to Mr MacKinnon's question, I associate myself with the comments that the Presiding Officer made at the start of business this afternoon about the sad death of Cathie Craigie, who was a distinguished member of Parliament. I express my sympathy to her family and to her colleagues in the Labour Party and across the political spectrum. She was a generous and kind lady to work with in the Scottish Parliament, and I express my thanks for the work that she contributed to the Parliament.

In relation to Mr MacKinnon's question, the Government has no intention of changing the provisions in the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. The issues that have been wrestled with by NatureScot are the consideration of scientific evidence. I understand and appreciate that there is quite a vigorous debate about that scientific evidence, but NatureScot has fulfilled my expectation that it would be open and transparent about the information that it had considered in coming to its conclusion.

It is important for me to state for the record that, although a decision was taken in relation to the guga hunt in 2026, that does not prohibit any application for subsequent years. I hope that that clarity assists Mr MacKinnon's constituents, many of whom I know are troubled by the issue.

National Health Service Reorganisation (Accountability)

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): Thank you, Presiding Officer, and my apologies for earlier.

Considering that there is a public inquiry into the NHS Tayside practices that allowed Sam Eljamel to butcher patients over nearly 20 years and another public inquiry into NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde's Queen Elizabeth university hospital,

can the First Minister explain how accountability and justice can be delivered despite a major reorganisation of NHS boards that will remove those entities?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The public inquiries will take their course and there is nothing about the reorganisation of the national health service, as proposed by the programme for government, that will interrupt or in any way inhibit the inquiries undertaking their full scrutiny. All issues that are relevant arising out of those inquiries into NHS Tayside or NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde will be handled, dealt with and responded to by the successor NHS institutions that arise from the Government's reforms, if they are supported by Parliament.

Domestic Abuse Advocacy (Glasgow City Council)

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): A constituent who is a specialist domestic abuse advocacy worker with the advocacy, support, safety, information and services together—ASSIST—project, which is Glasgow City Council's domestic abuse court advocacy service, has raised serious concerns with me about proposed changes to pay and grading that could result in her salary being reduced by around 23 per cent from April 2028. Given the Scottish Government's ongoing commitment to tackling violence against women and girls, what discussions will the First Minister have with Glasgow City Council to ensure that changes to the pay and grading of specialist front-line staff do not undermine the provision of vital support to victims of domestic abuse?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I want to separate two issues that Mr MacGregor raises in his question to me. The first relates to the pay and grading changes that have been taken forward by Glasgow City Council. Those are matters for Glasgow City Council to address as the employer of the individuals affected. I am aware of the points that Mr MacGregor raises on the specific implications for the ASSIST organisation, but, fundamentally, that issue is about the grading of staff and the pay that is allocated, which is a matter for the city council.

The other issue is about the sustained funding to advocacy organisations and organisations that have a responsibility to tackle violence against women and girls. As I set out in the programme for government two weeks ago, the Government is committed to ensuring that sustained funding is in place for those organisations. I will say more about that in the debate this afternoon.

Aortic Dissection

Adam Harley (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD): Lord Jim Wallace spent the final years of his life campaigning with the Aortic Dissection Charitable Trust, before sadly dying from the condition earlier this year. Aortic dissection kills more than 2,000 people every year across the UK, and that number is expected to double by 2050.

Greater awareness of the symptoms and a standardised pathway could improve prevention, treatment and aftercare, and it would save lives. Scotland has three specialist centres currently treating the condition, so we have a real opportunity to lead the way.

In memory of Jim Wallace, will the First Minister commit to publishing national guidelines on the prevention, diagnosis, treatment and aftercare of aortic dissection?

The First Minister (John Swinney): There are many ways in which we could pay tribute to the legacy and work of Jim Wallace, but Mr Harley puts an outstanding example on the parliamentary record, and I very much associate myself with his comments. He will know that I had the greatest of respect for Jim Wallace and his tremendous contribution to our public life.

Neil Gray, when he was the health secretary, met the Aortic Dissection Charitable Trust and engaged in dialogue about the issues that Mr Harley raises. He makes a good point that, where conditions require a clear pathway, we must make sure that those pathways exist in Scotland. I am obviously very focused on making sure that, wherever people live in the country—I have rehearsed this point with some of Mr Harley's colleagues in relation to other aspects of the health service—people can have access to that pathway.

We will give active consideration to the point that Mr Harley raises, and I will ask the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care, Angela Constance, to engage further. She would be happy to meet Mr Harley and the trust to take forward those issues.

Urban Exploring (Dumfries Town Centre)

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Over the summer, residents and business owners contacted me about a recent problem of young people clambering on the roofs of buildings in Dumfries town centre. Known as urban exploring, that dangerous trend, which is promoted via social media, is of concern to residents and could cost lives.

Will the First Minister join me and local police in highlighting the dangers and consequences of urban exploring, and will the Scottish Government commit to working with agencies, including Police

Scotland, to tackle that life-threatening and concerning form of antisocial behaviour?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I understand the concern that Mr Hoy raises on behalf of his constituents. It is another example—I will say more about this in the debate this afternoon—of the dangerous practices and behaviours that can be legitimised, or aired, by social media.

I echo the concerns that Mr Hoy expresses, and I commit the Government to working with and supporting Police Scotland. I am certain that there will be good engagement with Police Scotland at a local level, but there will be a necessity for engagement with other public authorities, perhaps including Dumfries and Galloway Council, in relation to the education service in that community. There will be a wider application; I cannot imagine that it is only an issue in Dumfries. Mr Hoy raises a point on which it is important to capture public attention.

Violent Behaviour in Schools (Union Concerns)

Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): Teaching unions warn that school support staff are not being supported to deal with increasing instances of violent behaviour by primary school pupils. Last year, the City of Edinburgh Council paid out more than £250,000 in damages to support staff. It has warned that, given the black hole of £650 million in local government finances left by Government underfunding, it does not have the resources to deal with the problem. What action will the First Minister take to ensure that teaching support staff are not left to face the issue alone?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The answer to those issues is to ensure that behaviour in our schools, whether it is encountered by teaching support staff, teaching staff or pupils, is appropriate and satisfactory. The Government has set out a range of measures over some time to ensure that behaviour issues are confronted in the school system. We are putting in place resources, supporting local authorities and working with professional associations and other trade unions to ensure that members of staff are supported at all times.

Katherine Sangster's point about the importance of maintaining acceptable behaviour in our schools for the safety of everyone is one that I endorse unreservedly.

Kingsway Care Centre (Closure)

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): The First Minister will be aware that NHS Tayside plans to close Kingsway care centre in Dundee in only four months' time, moving

dementia assessment and treatment to Forfar and cutting the number of beds by 36 per cent. Vulnerable adults with psychosis, depression or other conditions will also have their care relocated.

What does the First Minister say to families and carers who might face multiple bus journeys—if suitable services even exist—to support elderly people with dementia simply to access care? Will the First Minister ensure that no changes proceed without proper consultation, a full equality impact assessment and clear evidence that there will be no detriment to patient care?

The First Minister (John Swinney): It is my expectation that, before NHS Tayside embarked on any such move, the implications for individual residents were taken into account in all the steps that were taken. For any patient whose care arrangements are being altered, an individual assessment has to be undertaken to ensure that their needs are properly taken into account. That is my expectation of NHS Tayside, and I will ask the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care to make that point to the health board.

There are occasions when it is necessary to redesign services, which we must all accept. At some stage—I have dealt with this extensively in my constituency experience over the years—we have to face up to the need to modernise and change the way that we deliver services. As we set out in the programme for government, that can only be done in a patient-centred fashion that addresses each individual's needs. That is my expectation in that case.

Energy Infrastructure (Planning Concerns)

Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform): Thursday's high-pressure gas leak at the planned battery storage site in Cockenzie, East Lothian, has reinforced local concerns about major energy and digital infrastructure developments being located in close proximity to homes, schools and public spaces.

Although the incident was not caused by the battery installation itself but by work at the site, does it not highlight the need to review the national planning framework to ensure that such developments are directed to suitable locations and that the impact on existing communities is given greater weight in planning decisions?

The First Minister (John Swinney): In coming to any decision about the location of facilities, there has to be an assessment of all relevant factors in each locality and an open and rigorous assessment of any implications that might be felt by the local community as a consequence. That is an essential requirement in all our planning policies. The national planning framework sets out at a strategic level the approach that is taken in

relation to the delineation of land for particular uses and the specific considerations that have to be borne in mind when progressing any development. All those matters are considered in the planning process.

I reiterate one other point, which is that, whenever work is undertaken at any site, the importance of public safety and the safety of the workforce that is involved is paramount. That requires interaction with the Health and Safety Executive's regulatory powers, which should be applied in all appropriate circumstances.

Cardiff Agreement (Constitutional Future)

Calum Kerr (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Yesterday, First Ministers across these islands met in Cardiff to sign a memorandum of understanding that our nations should have the right to decide our own constitutional future. Last week, the United Kingdom Prime Minister also agreed the principle that Scotland should have a referendum when it is likely that people would vote for independence. Given that, what is the next step in the First Minister's plan to build on the Cardiff agreement?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Yesterday was a welcome opportunity for me to meet the First Ministers of Wales and Northern Ireland on the important point that Mr Kerr raises—that the people of this country should be free to decide their own constitutional future. I welcome the comments that the Prime Minister made in the House of Commons last Wednesday when he recognised the centrality of that principle. It is a fundamental point of self-determination, and I was glad to have the opportunity to reinforce that point yesterday.

As for the next steps that I intend to take, I made it clear yesterday that, during this parliamentary session, I want Scotland to have the opportunity to decide on our constitutional future through a referendum on independence. I will make sure that the efforts of my office—and those of Government—are put into ensuring that that is the case and that the people of Scotland are free to decide their own future by 2031.

Regional Aviation (Highlands and Islands)

Kristopher Leask (Highlands and Islands) (Green): The First Minister has long recognised the importance of flight connections to communities in the Highlands and Islands, and I was glad to see the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport call a regional aviation stakeholder meeting. However, given that the cabinet secretary is not attending the meeting, which he called, to hear directly from stakeholders in the Highlands and Islands, will the First Minister attend in his place?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The cabinet secretary has already intervened on flight issues, and I am very pleased with the outcome that he has managed to secure, in order to sustain a number of services that are being taken forward.

In relation to the forum, the discussion involves representatives of the Government—all the information that is aired will be fed back to ministers, and ministers will take the appropriate decisions in response to those questions.

I take this opportunity to reinforce the importance that I attach to flight connections to our island communities, and I know that that point is reinforced by the work of the cabinet secretary.

Cardiovascular Health (Women)

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Tomorrow, Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland launches its new women's health plan. Given that women are 50 per cent more likely than men to receive an initial misdiagnosis following a heart attack and continue to experience poorer cardiovascular outcomes, what action is the Scottish Government taking, through phase 2 of the Scottish Government's women's health plan, to improve women's cardiovascular health and build on existing commitments to reduce those inequalities?

The First Minister (John Swinney): First, I recognise the important work that Jenni Minto did, in her time as a minister, to advance the women's health plan. As she will be aware, phase 2 of the women's health plan aims to address the inequalities that affect the health of all women and girls in Scotland.

The cardiovascular disease risk factors programme has a dedicated women's health workstream that is focused on reducing lifetime cardiovascular risk in women with hypertensive disorders of pregnancy. Support and resources have been developed with a variety of third sector partners to ensure that they meet the needs of women. Early findings from testing sites suggest that the pathway of care is functioning well. In addition, training has been delivered in the national health service to improve awareness among healthcare professionals of the interaction between women's reproductive health and future cardiovascular risk.

Residential Care Placements (Highlands)

Morven-May MacCallum (Highlands and Islands) (LD): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I am a councillor with Highland Council.

The First Minister will possibly have seen the story of Sophie McNab, a young girl from Inverness who is in need of residential care.

Sophie has been placed in Annan, some 230 miles from her home and her family. Her case is not unique. There are currently 26 Highland children living far from home in Dumfries and Galloway, North Lanarkshire, West Lothian and elsewhere. Why? Because there is not suitable provision for them in Highland. Does the First Minister agree that children being separated from their families in that way is unacceptable? Will his Government bring them home?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I agree with the fundamental point that Morven-May MacCallum made in the conclusion of her question—that it is best for children to be supported in their own family circumstances if doing so would be safe and sustainable and that, if it would not be, they should be supported as close to home as possible. That is an inherent element of the Promise, to which the Government is absolutely committed.

We work closely with local authorities. Morven-May MacCallum made the important point that, although there may be a number of children and young people in the Highlands and Islands who require that support, there may not be such provision in the individual locality. That is one reason why we must look to undertake the necessary regional work to make sure that there is provision that better meets the needs of individual young people.

Siobhian Brown, the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise, would be happy to engage further on the specific problem in the Highlands that the member raises and to discuss it with the representatives of Highland Council who have responsibility in that area.

Genomic Testing (Cancer Treatment)

Miles Briggs (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con): Last Monday, the Scottish Medicines Consortium approved two promising new drugs for metastatic breast cancer, which offer real hope for those who are suffering from the disease before it has progressed. In England, those drugs and the necessary genomic tests have been available for more than a year. However, increasingly, patients in Scotland cannot access the drugs because the genomic tests that establish whether someone is suitable to receive them are not routinely available through NHS Scotland.

That issue affects not only breast cancer treatment. Since 2021, at least 15 other cancer medicines have been restricted because of a lack of availability of testing. Can the First Minister provide an update on what interim solution will be put in place for patients who are looking to access those treatments? Does the First Minister agree that Scotland needs a sustainable, long-term model for genomic testing?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The availability of treatments is actively being explored by the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care in relation to the outcome of the SMC's consideration of the issue.

On the point about genomic testing, I was involved in a discussion last week on a separate issue—not in relation to breast cancer—in which we explored the strengthening of our capability for genomic testing, and I convey encouragement to Mr Briggs that good progress has been made. That conversation involved a briefing from the chief scientist for health, Dame Anna Dominiczak, who is leading significant work to advance in that area.

The specific issue is being explored, and significant progress is being made on the general issue of the testing and assessment arrangements. I will write to Mr Briggs with information, to address his interest and reassure him that progress is being made.

Community Safety (Armadale)

Pauline Stafford (Bathgate) (SNP): The events over the weekend in Armadale, in my constituency—with the death of a 35-year-old man, reportedly following a targeted attack and the suspected use of a firearm—have deeply shocked the community. My thoughts are with the man's family and all those who are affected at this time.

I appreciate that the police investigation is ongoing. However, can the First Minister provide my constituents with reassurance that the Scottish Government and Police Scotland are taking all necessary steps to ensure the safety of the community?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I was sorry to hear about the incident at the weekend and I appreciate the opportunity to comment on the issue. As Pauline Stafford indicates, there is a live police investigation. I am advised that, with the expertise that comes from its being the national police force of Scotland, Police Scotland has available all the necessary resources to explore and examine the case and to enable those issues to be addressed. I reassure Pauline Stafford and her constituents that issues of public safety are uppermost in Police Scotland's consideration and in its reassuring of members of the public.

Men's Health

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): This week, Movember published a comprehensive report that explored the leading causes of premature mortality among men in Scotland. "The Real Face of Men's Health" shows that men born in Scotland currently have the lowest life expectancy of men in any United Kingdom nation—77.4 years—and that socioeconomic factors are contributing to significant disparities in

men's health across the country. Does the First Minister share my alarm at those findings? If so, what action will he take to improve outcomes for men's health across every community in Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am grateful to Mr McArthur for asking that question, because the report provides a timely reminder of some of the challenges that we face relating to men's health and the need to improve outcomes relating to men's health and wellbeing. The Government's programme includes a heavy focus on shifting to early intervention and prevention. That means intervening on issues related to alcohol and drug use, and it means encouraging and supporting men to live healthier lifestyles so that they have the greatest capacity to deal with the risk of heart disease, stroke, lung cancer and poor mental wellbeing. The fundamental shift in our public services to early intervention and prevention is designed to address the important issues that Mr McArthur has raised.

Women Protestors (Glasgow Green)

Amanda Lindsay (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): Will the First Minister stop his Government smearing women who protested at Glasgow Green over the weekend as "far right" and instead tell us what he will do to address the failures on women's safety that took those women there?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I will be leading a debate this afternoon on violence against women and girls, and I want to have an open and candid discussion of those important issues. However, I also say to Amanda Lindsay that I will never ever stop confronting the far right in this country.

Dundee and Angus College (Arbroath Campus)

Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP): Dundee and Angus College has ambitious plans for a new campus at Arbroath, which would be the biggest education and regeneration project in the town's history. The Scottish National Party manifesto committed the Government to supporting Dundee and Angus College to renew its estate. Will the First Minister give an update on the work that is being undertaken with the Scottish Funding Council to drive that project forward?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Dundee and Angus College has ambitious plans, as Mr Melville highlighted, that will affect the city of Dundee and Arbroath. The Government has provided the Funding Council with £2 million for a first-wave group of colleges to develop business cases for transformational capital investment projects. Dundee and Angus College received

£700,000 of additional funding from that money to help it to determine the best option for renewal. Through the work of the Funding Council, the Government will stay close to the project's developments.

Motability Decision Appeals (Delays)

Martyn Day (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP): The First Minister will be aware of the 53 to 54 per cent success rate for Motability appeals, with tribunal cases often taking between 12 and 18 months. What representations will Scottish ministers make to their United Kingdom Government counterparts to try to reduce appeal delays that leave successful claimants without a Motability car for up to 18 months?

The First Minister (John Swinney): We have made representations to the UK Government on that important issue. When Motability cars are required by individuals—in many cases, that is the only way in which individuals are able to move within their communities—we want to ensure that individuals are supported in a timely fashion. Mr Day's question will prompt me to ensure that the relevant minister makes further representations to the UK Government.

Hampden (Community Hub and Football Heritage Site)

Holly Bruce (Glasgow Southside) (Green): The site of Scotland's first national football ground, which is a vital community space, sits in my Glasgow Southside constituency. A group of neighbours known as First Hampden is fighting to keep the site as a community hub and a football heritage site that is open to all. Does the First Minister agree that that space should be protected and run by the community instead of being sold off to the highest bidder?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am sympathetic to the issue that Holly Bruce has raised. I had better ensure that I give her an accurate answer on the relevant issues that are being wrestled with in relation to ownership and use, so I will write to her in due course with details of what the Government can do in that case.

Men's Sheds

David Linden (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP): In his earlier response to Liam McArthur, the First Minister made reference to the importance of men's health and, in particular, to the Movember report. I am sure that the First Minister will be aware that places such as men's sheds are particularly important in shining a subtle, yet bright, light on those issues. I therefore press the First Minister to come to visit Shettleston Men's Shed to see the importance of such community spaces in advocating on issues pertaining to men's health.

The First Minister (John Swinney): I would be happy to visit the Shettleston Men's Shed. I have visited a number of those ventures around the country—most recently, if memory serves me right, in Renfrew, in the constituency of my colleague Michelle Campbell—so I have constituency experience. Men's sheds are very helpful in encouraging men to meet and perhaps to overcome some of the challenges that they face due to personal isolation. It is a tremendous movement that has made a welcome impact on the lives of men in Scotland. I am glad to hear that there is a vibrant organisation in Shettleston and look forward to finding the opportunity to visit with Mr Linden.

Gynaecology Waiting Times (Tayside)

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The First Minister will be aware of the severe issues that women in Tayside face in accessing gynaecology services. NHS Tayside has told the Scottish Government that the number of women who are waiting for more than a year has reduced from 1,348 to 11, but those figures are simply not true and I have many constituents who have been waiting for multiple years. One constituent was told that she would wait for more than three years for a hysterectomy. She took out a loan and went private and she has never made it on to the waiting list as a result. Does the First Minister believe that those terrible waits in Tayside are acceptable?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I basically take the view that waiting times must be reduced wherever they are. Mr Marra raises an important point about gynaecology services in Tayside and I want to see those waiting times reduced. I will go away and look at the statistics that he has raised doubts about, because it is important that all those details are accurate.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care and I look at waiting list levels weekly, doing so by discipline and locality around the country. There is variation: in some parts of the country there is very good performance on waiting times in certain disciplines; in other parts of the country, in the same discipline, that is not the case. That was one of the issues raised by David Green a few weeks ago.

That is one reason why the Government is pursuing its national health service reform programme. We want to remove the obstructions that health board boundaries can sometimes put in the way of ensuring that the type of equity that Mr Marra seeks for his constituents can actually be delivered. I will look at those particular figures, but I assure Mr Marra that there is sustained interrogation, on a weekly basis, by the health secretary and me, of the steps that are being taken to reduce waiting lists and waiting times. He will

understand from what I have said from this podium for some time that I attach the greatest of importance to that issue.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, First Minister. I apologise to the 28 backbench members I was unable to call today.

Violence Against Women (Prevention)

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is a debate on motion S7M-01163, in the name of John Swinney, on preventing violence against women for an equally safe Scotland. Members who wish to speak should press their request-to-speak button now. I call John Swinney to speak to and move the motion. You have 13 minutes, First Minister.

15:03

The First Minister (John Swinney): Throughout my service as a minister in the Scottish Government, I have been involved in, and have supported, many measures to tackle violence against women and girls. However, this summer I felt that increased priority and leadership had to be given to addressing the situation and that has led me to pledge my personal leadership to tackle the epidemic of violence against women and girls in Scotland.

In recent weeks, I met with victims/survivors such as Danielle MacDonald, a survivor of domestic abuse who now campaigns for change, and with Ann Grant, whose daughter Stacy Hunter was tragically murdered by her estranged husband. I was deeply affected by their stories, by the unconscionable things that they went through at the hands of their former partners and by their courage and resilience. I have made it my priority to meet with other victim/survivors and with organisations such as Rape Crisis Scotland, Scottish Women's Aid and Engender. I heard directly from survivors, their families and support groups so that I could better understand their experience and learn what more we can do as a Government and, importantly, as a society, to combat violence against women and girls, which, this summer, I called an epidemic of violence.

Before parliamentary business commenced this afternoon, I had the privilege of engaging with survivors of violence against women and girls and representatives of the *Sunday Post's* It's Time campaign, at the invitation of Russell Findlay. I am grateful for the opportunity to have had that exchange prior to this parliamentary debate.

I want to make clear in today's debate my commitment to acting on this issue and the urgency that I feel to do so, and I invite others to join me. I do this both as First Minister and as a man, because it is men who commit this violence and it is men whose behaviour needs to change.

We can address areas of criminal justice, but we need also to address the fundamental issues that underpin some men's abuse of women, control of

women and atrocities against women. We must change and challenge the attitudes and behaviours that underpin and lead to such violence, including the sexism, misogyny and toxic masculinity that are prevalent in society, especially online.

In online spaces and on social media, views that are unacceptable—even abhorrent—in the mainstream and in our communities are given a platform and an audience. With the help of algorithms, echo chambers and bad-faith actors, and in the utter absence of regulation, those views are amplified. They are made easy to access, forever within reach through computers and the phones in people's pockets, alongside an endless supply of nasty rhetoric, exploitative images and pornographic content. In such an environment, it is easy for men and boys—some of whom are impressionable, isolated, angry, scared or vulnerable in any number of ways—to be saturated by cognitive distortions and misogynistic rhetoric, and not to see a counter or an alternative to that.

In that way, violent, abusive and abhorrent behaviour can feel justified and normalised. However, it is not justifiable, it is not the norm and it never will be. I cannot stress that point enough to Parliament today.

What I say today is not to vilify men or boys. It is to recognise the extent to which certain arenas, such as the manosphere and accessible pornography, have warped views and attitudes in disturbing and profoundly harmful ways. It is to recognise the impact that those attitudes are having on our society and our culture—impacts that lead to violent, exploitative and abusive behaviours, with very real and dangerous consequences for women and girls. It is to recognise the challenge that we, as a society, have in adapting to new threats in a quickly changing, increasingly online world, and to recognise what we are up against.

My Government and I unequivocally and emphatically condemn violence against women and girls in all its forms, and we want to change and challenge the behaviours that underpin it in our society. That is what my motion states. I thank those party leaders who have joined me in signing it to show with one voice that it is up to all of us as a society to challenge the distortions, the warped views, the manosphere and the misogyny that perpetuate violence against women and girls. It is up to all of us to challenge the view held by some that violence against women and girls is somehow inevitable or excusable. It is not inevitable and it is never excusable.

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): I wholeheartedly endorse the First Minister's remarks so far. This can be uncomfortable, because

sometimes it is our friends, our neighbours and our work colleagues who say these things, and it is too easy just to back off, say nothing and let it pass. The issue can be intensely personal, so it is good that political leaders stand up. However, everybody has a responsibility, in those moments, to say, "That's not good enough. Please withdraw what you've said and have a bit more respect." Would the First Minister endorse those comments?

The First Minister: I would endorse those comments, because Mr Rennie accurately highlights the prevalence of those moments and circumstances and the obligation on all of us to address them.

We are at a moment in which there is a realisation that some of the remarks that are made may seem insignificant in a particular moment, but none of us knows what the consequences of them may be at a later stage. Mr Rennie has made a timely intervention and I entirely endorse what he said.

My Government is committed to addressing the root causes—the cultural causes—of gender-based violence, promoting positive attitudes, building people's knowledge and skills, increasing understanding of the impact of violence and supporting people to build better, healthier and more sustainable relationships throughout their lives.

Ultimately, we are committed to and recognise the importance of shifting the cultural context and preventing violence from occurring in the first place. That means taking a public health and preventative approach to the issue. Like all good prevention, early intervention is critical, which is why we will invest in programmes such as equally safe at school and mentors in violence prevention in order to help children and young people to challenge harmful stereotypes and build respectful, consensual relationships.

As we stated in our programme for government, in the coming year we will complement those programmes with a multiyear public health campaign that is aimed at boys and young men to challenge misogyny and harmful behaviours before they escalate.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): What the First Minister has proposed and laid out in the programme for government in that regard is welcome, but providers of such public health support tell us time and time again that they need not only multiyear funding but inflation-matched funding over successive years, otherwise, they will effectively face funding cuts and will not be able to deliver the prevention work that we hope that they will deliver, which is so vital.

The First Minister: I understand the point that Maggie Chapman makes, and those are issues that the Deputy First Minister is wrestling with in relation to the Government's budget. I set out some commitments in relation to long-term funding, but the point about the impact of the erosion of inflation is important, and it is one that the Deputy First Minister is considering in the budget discussions.

To address the urgent dangers and distortions that are created by a culture that is affected by misogyny, we must tackle much of the output that is published online. I openly reinforce the point that we will work constructively with the United Kingdom Government and international partners to strongly push for a much-needed strengthening of the regulation of online platforms in order to prevent violence against women and girls in digital spaces. It is time for online platforms to take responsibility and ensure that their output addresses those concerns. If they will not take responsibility, Governments must make them.

We will also continue to grow our suite of prevention activity, with a particular focus on schools. Right now, we are evaluating where and how that work can be most effective, where it should be tailored to local need and how we can best equip those who work with young people with the right tools and language to make a difference in a swiftly changing environment.

The public health approach to addressing norms and attitudes is the right one, because it will be lasting. It needs sustained focus and drive, and I assure the Parliament of the Government's determination to do that.

As we offer that approach, we must all be aware that physical, psychological and online violence against women and girls goes on around us every day. Recent data shows that there has been an increase in the number of reported violent crimes against women and girls. We recognise that a number of factors lie behind those increases, such as historic reporting, a greater willingness of victims to report crimes and a justice system that will listen and take those cases to court so that perpetrators face the law.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I accept everything that the First Minister has said in good faith. Does he also accept that the leadership that he wishes to give must mean restraining dangerous men? Will he therefore restore the stronger bail protections for repeat violent and sexual offenders?

The First Minister: I understand the sincerity and strength of the opinion that Mr Kerr raises in relation to bail. There was an interesting interview on the radio this morning with Tony Lenehan, the vice-dean of the Faculty of Advocates, which I

thought provided an incredibly thoughtful and considered assessment of some of the dilemmas that are faced by sheriffs in relation to the question of bail. There was much else in the interview that was also very much worth listening to.

In my view, the issues around bail are fundamentally issues for the judiciary to determine independently. However, I assure Parliament that the Government is confident that the measures that we legislated for in the bail legislation provide a comprehensive bail test that the judiciary can apply with the rigour that Mr Kerr seeks.

The Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 is making a difference. Although none of us wants to see increases, it represents, as Marsha Scott of Scottish Women's Aid said in relation to the high number of prosecutions,

“a good use of our law”.

That point was made again by Tony Lenehan on the radio this morning. The Government recognises the importance of the criminal justice system acting as a deterrent where the public health prevention interventions that we have set out have not been effective.

In line with our equally safe approach, we are introducing a multiyear fund to ensure that vital services are sustainable and can support those affected by violence against women and girls. That relates to the point that Maggie Chapman raised with me.

In making our £2 million fund to leave permanent, we are providing practical and financial support to women and children leaving abusive partners.

To ensure that harassment and abuse based on misogyny are outlawed, we will introduce the misogyny bill to recognise misogyny as a distinct form of prejudice.

Over the summer, we consulted on more legal protections for women. That will inform our work on a violence against women and girls protections bill, which we will introduce later in the current session of Parliament.

We will also work within our devolved powers to improve online safety and combat technology-facilitated violence against women and girls.

The Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Act 2025 contains a range of measures to improve the experiences of survivors of sexual offences. A new sexual offences court will support the development of specialist, trauma-informed approaches to the management of sexual offences cases, and it will help to identify and resolve issues that delay cases coming to trial.

Before the October recess, we will lay regulations to enable the piloting of GPS monitoring for individuals who are on bail, including those who are suspected of domestic abuse.

Stephen Kerr: Will the First Minister give way again?

The First Minister: I will complete the point before I give way to Mr Kerr.

I confirm to Parliament today that the pilot will be led by Sheriff Principal Wade in the Tayside, Central and Fife sheriffdom. Subject to robust local arrangements being put in place to ensure public safety, we anticipate the pilot being able to commence next year.

Stephen Kerr: The First Minister mentioned the specialist sexual offences court. Can he confirm that the funding for that court to become operational will be available in the next few months?

The First Minister: The proposals are in place for it to be established in the next financial year, so that is the timescale that we are operating to. I am happy to explore issues in relation to the establishment of the court as part of this debate.

Our aim is to enable women and girls in Scotland to live safe, respected and fulfilling lives that are free from violence. To do so, we must address the attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate that violence and we must build more equal and cohesive communities where everyone—men and women—can build healthy, supportive and equal relationships and challenge those who seek to stoke division and incite violence.

In recent years, as our communities and our economy have faced strain and pressure, we have seen many attempts by some to exploit the violence done to women and girls. Deplorably, we have seen it weaponised to sow fear, mistrust and division in our society. It has been used in disinformation to set one community against another.

Without reservation, my Government rejects that approach. Scotland's diversity is a strength. Our communities are rich and vibrant, tightly knit, incredible places. They are made even more incredible by the different people, faiths, cultures and backgrounds that are found within them. In a modern Scotland, everyone deserves to live free from fear and to have the opportunity to thrive and flourish. I have pledged my personal leadership to that, and my Government will work—across Government and across society—to make that ambition a reality.

We will work to build a Scotland where everyone is safe, accepted and respected; where women and girls live free from all forms of violence, abuse and exploitation; and where all are free of the attitudes and stereotypes that perpetuate inequality.

We will work to do that, but we cannot do it alone. It will take sustained action across all parts of the Government and wider society, with everyone working together. I know that there are many in the Parliament and across Scotland who will join us in that endeavour. I encourage them to add their voices to ours and to offer to give leadership to our country to end violence against women and girls and to work with others to make that happen.

I move,

That the Parliament condemns violence against women and girls in all its forms, noting that this includes physical, psychological and online abuse; acknowledges the significant damage and harm that such violence causes to women, girls and wider society; recognises that eradicating such violence requires a focus on prevention and on challenging the attitudes and behaviours that fundamentally underpin violence against women and girls, and agrees to demonstrate collective leadership in challenging and changing sexist and misogynistic attitudes among boys, men and those who seek to influence and stoke such damaging behaviour.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I call Amanda Lindsay to speak to and move amendment S7M-01163.2.

15:20

Amanda Lindsay (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): The motion has a fine title, "Equally Safe". After two decades of strategies, funds and ministerial photo calls, women in Scotland are entitled to ask, "Equally safe compared with what?" Recorded sexual crime is at its highest level since comparable records began, in 1971, and rape and attempted rape have risen sharply over the past decade. That is the backdrop to a programme for government that offers a misogyny bill, a campaign that is aimed at boys and another funding announcement. Strategy is not safety; outcomes are safety. The Government is failing on outcomes.

We are talking about a Government that could not define a woman until its citizens took it to court. That should have been the starting point for any serious strategy on violence against women, but it was not. You cannot protect women if you will not say who they are. We cannot debate violence against women while pretending that every risk is the same. Men commit the overwhelming majority of those offences. That is not in dispute, but it is in dispute whether the patterns of offending stop at Gretna. Analyses of Ministry of Justice figures for

England and Wales show that some nationalities are overrepresented in the data for sexual offence convictions. Sure, there are caveats, and those are not Scottish statistics, but why will Police Scotland not publish the nationality and immigration status of those who have been charged with rape and sexual assault in Scotland? I put it to the Government—

Yi-pei Chou Turvey (North East Scotland) (LD): Will the member give way?

Amanda Lindsay: I will—in a second.

Does the Government believe that that pattern magically disappears at the border?

Yi-pei Chou Turvey: Does the member know that statistics show that survivors were 12.5 times more likely to know their abuser; that in one fifth, or 20 per cent, of cases the perpetrator was a spouse, partner or former partner; and that, in 50 per cent of cases, the perpetrator was a relative or step-parent, while only six per cent of cases happened outwith the person's home?

Amanda Lindsay: That is why I said that men commit the overwhelming majority of sexual offences. The question is whether some groups offend at higher rates and whether the state is allowed to say so. Per capita figures are not the same as raw totals. However, there is an issue with the recording of rape, because of the number of cases in which the perpetrator is recorded as being known to the victim, even if they only had a minor interaction, such as meeting at a bus stop, a pub or a nightclub.

That is the same trick that the Government tried on grooming gangs. For months, it told Scotland that there was limited evidence that the organised group-based abuse that was seen in England operated here. The absence of data was sold as the absence of a problem. That is not analysis; it is gaslighting the public.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Following the point that has just been made by my colleague, does Amanda Lindsay agree that the most common perpetrators of sexual violence are a person's current partner, at 51 per cent, or ex-partner, at 14 per cent? Surely we should be focusing on some of those statistics in the debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I remind members in the chamber that, if a member wishes to make an intervention, they must press their intervention button.

Amanda Lindsay: I am not disputing that, but it is not the whole picture—it is not all men and not all boys. My point is this: the Government cannot run the equally safe strategy on slogans while refusing to count who is offending, who is being

housed in our towns and who is exploiting women and girls.

Then there is the data black hole that makes the gaslighting possible. Police Scotland does not routinely publish the nationality or immigration status of those who have been accused of rape. Until recently, its systems could not properly mark group-based child sexual exploitation.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Amanda Lindsay: I would like to proceed, thank you.

Ministers cannot accuse the public of misinformation while refusing to give them the information. [*Interruption.*]

Stephen Kerr: Will the member give way?

Amanda Lindsay: No, I would like to make progress. I have taken several interventions.

Parliament should demand a quarterly official statistics release of the ethnicity, nationality and immigration status of every person who is charged with rape, sexual assault or group-based child sexual exploitation. If the pattern is not there, the Government should publish the figures and prove it.

Jackie Dunbar: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Amanda Lindsay: No.

If it will not collect them, it has no right to tell women that they are imagining what they can already see. [*Interruption.*]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member does not have to take an intervention.

Amanda Lindsay: The courts have already recorded what ministers will not tabulate. [*Interruption.*] I would like you to listen—buckle up.

Members: Oh!

Amanda Lindsay: A man who had been granted leave to remain raped a student after following her through Glasgow city centre. Another was convicted of raping a 15-year-old near Hampden. In Falkirk in my constituency, an asylum seeker who was housed in a hotel was jailed for raping a 15-year-old in the town centre. Another man who was staying at the Cladhan hotel was convicted of sexually assaulting two women after they left nightclubs. Individual cases are not a census. They are a warning that a system that will not count cannot protect.

The equally safe strategy also talks about commercial sexual exploitation. On that, the Government has achieved almost nothing useful. Our advice is practical. The Government should go

after the people who profit from selling other people—the pimps, the traffickers, the brothel managers and the websites that take a cut. If it focuses its enforcement there, it will start to protect women and girls from exploitation. That approach would at least be a step in the right direction. However, we should also ask ourselves what message we are sending to young men if buying sex is treated as just another transaction.

The same data black hole sits behind grooming gangs. The First Minister was not persuaded of the need for an inquiry. The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs voted one down and cited Professor Alexis Jay as saying that she agreed that Scotland needed none; Professor Jay had to correct the record, because she had said no such thing. Police operations in Glasgow have identified well over 100 potential victims and dozens of suspects. A Romanian gang was jailed for raping and exploiting women in Dundee, including trafficking into prostitution. Care-experienced girls in Glasgow have described being plied with drink and drugs by groups of men. Inspectors now say that there is no reliable picture, because police and councils did not collect the data, including data on ethnicity.

Ministers used the absence of statistics as proof that the problem was small and announced an inquiry only after survivors spoke out and an election came into view. A strategy that cannot say “grooming gang” until the votes are counted is not equally safe—it is damage control.

The equally safe strategy names honour-based abuse, female genital mutilation and forced marriage, yet delivery related to those is thin. How many cases were recorded last year? How many prosecutions were there? How many protection orders were granted and how many were breached? Those harms are not generic misogyny. They are specific crimes, which are often hidden inside families and communities, and they require specialist policing, trained prosecutors and the courage to name cultural practice where that is the driver. Why is progress so poor? The reason for that is that a strategy that talks about “all men” will not do the unfashionable work—mapping risk, recording ethnicity where it is relevant, backing women who report their own relatives and measuring outcomes instead of publishing another action plan.

We say to the Government: publish the data that ministers find inconvenient; stop telling Scotland that patterns vanish at the border; target pimps, traffickers and the platforms that profit from them; let the grooming gangs inquiry name ethnicity, nationality and institutional failure; resource single-sex services and specialist work on honour-based abuse, FGM and forced marriage; and report the cases, the charges and the convictions. Until those

things happen, “Equally safe” will remain a slogan and women and girls will go on paying the price.

I move amendment S7M-01163.2, to leave out from “recognises” to end and insert:

“regrets that private citizens were required to take legal action against the Scottish Government before it was able to define what a woman is; recognises that policy to tackle violence against women and girls has to combine multiple angles, however, believes that tarring all men and boys with the same brush as the few who hold such attitudes and commit violent acts risks creating further division and unfairly attributes harm to those who are not responsible for it; believes that the views that some male immigrants have are incompatible with the Scottish Government’s previously expressed desire to tackle misogyny; highlights statistics which, it believes, indicate a connection between immigrants from certain countries and a marked increase in violent crimes, and calls on the Scottish Government to publish statistics on violent crime by immigration status and nationality, in order to ensure that all relevant evidence is available to inform action to bring an end to violence against women and girls.”

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I call Jackie Baillie to speak to and move amendment S7M-01163.1.

15:30

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): It is, of course, right to hold the Government to account. However, the level of misinformation that we have just heard is about creating division rather than actually tackling violence against women and girls.

Violence against women and girls is a scourge on our society. It is on all of us, particularly lawmakers, to do everything that we can to root it out, confront it and eradicate it. That begins by doing what we can to keep women and girls safe in Scotland now.

I thank the First Minister for bringing this important debate to Parliament and for his support for the It’s Time campaign led by *The Sunday Post*. He said much in his speech that I can agree with, and I welcome his words on accelerating measures to protect women and girls, particularly through the introduction of GPS monitoring for those convicted of violent or threatening action towards women. That is an important intervention.

At First Minister’s question time just two weeks ago, I pressed the First Minister to act on that very issue, and I am glad that he has reacted positively to our debate. However, although his words are welcome, we need a clear timeline for implementation. I am happy to give way if he will provide us with that timeline.

The First Minister: I am grateful to Jackie Baillie for giving way and also for the approach that she is taking.

Jackie Baillie has made the important point that the Labour Party has pressed us to take further

action and that we have responded to that in the outline that I have shared. All things being equal, I expect that we can start the pilot on the GPS arrangements by the new year.

The purpose of my intervention, however, is also to say to Jackie Baillie that I recognise the importance of the Opposition challenging the Government to ensure that we take the necessary and appropriate action. I hope that our response on GPS indicates our willingness to accept that challenge.

Jackie Baillie: The First Minister will, of course, expect me to continue to hold the Government’s feet to the fire. It is one thing for the pilot to start by the new year, but when will it be rolled out across Scotland? Community Justice Scotland first called for GPS tracking a decade ago. The rollout of GPS tracking in England and Wales took place way back in 2018. We have promises in place in Scotland, but the issue is delivery.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Jackie Baillie: Let me make some progress.

We all remember the horrific murder of Stacy Hunter earlier this year. She was killed by her abusive partner, who was not being properly tracked while on bail. Her family have bravely led the calls for the implementation of GPS monitoring and I am glad that John Swinney has listened to them. However, it should already have been in place in Scotland. If we are being honest, the Government has been slow to act. Stacy and the other women who have been killed by abusive men should be here today. That is why my amendment calls for a clear date for implementation—not to shame the Government for inaction, but to encourage it to act quickly in the interests of Scotland’s women and girls.

The Government is right to call for action to tackle the pervasive influence of misogyny and sexism among men and boys. Behavioural and cultural changes are important. However, we cannot ignore the need for clear and practical action. It is time to move beyond the rhetoric and focus on action.

The Women’s Rights Network Scotland has issued two reports on sexual assaults in our national health service, and there has been no change. We now also have a new report on sexual assaults in our leisure centres. The record of the Government is not good enough and, clearly, more needs to be done.

Since 2022, sexual crimes are up by 11 per cent, reports of rape and attempted rape are up by 32 per cent and domestic abuse crimes have rocketed by 81 per cent, and all while rape victims must wait for an average of nearly three years

between reporting an incident to the police and a verdict being given. Now, rape crisis centres report that they have insufficient resources to meet increasing demand, so much so that they have had to close their waiting lists.

Stephen Kerr: Jackie Baillie has just mentioned the scarcity of resources. The GPS system is a technology, not necessarily a solution. Without investment in community-based resources, how on earth does it make any difference whether someone wears a tag or not?

Jackie Baillie: I absolutely agree that the system needs to be resourced. Funding had previously been frozen. Extra money has been announced by the First Minister, but it is not getting to the front line, and that is what we need to scrutinise.

I do not doubt for a moment the First Minister's sincere commitment to protecting women and girls across Scotland, but we will never get anywhere near to fixing the issue if we do not appreciate the scale of the problem. That is why work to tackle cultural attitudes among men and boys is necessary, but also why it is only one part of what must be a multifaceted approach to tackling the issue.

Scottish Labour has outlined several policies that we believe would go some way to tackling the crisis that is before us. Beyond the swift implementation of GPS tracking, we would like a misogyny reduction unit; a public health approach to the crisis; the boosting of the early uptake of the equally safe at school programme, to tackle sexual harassment and gendered violence in schools, with a focus on positive male role models; the modernisation of the victim notification scheme, so that no woman who has been the victim of male violence will be left in the dark; police being back on the beat, keeping women and girls safe in all our communities; more police; the better education of men and boys; zero tolerance for gendered violence; and a clear campaign to tackle misogyny head-on.

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): Will the member give way?

Jackie Baillie: No—I am in my final minute.

That is how we can tackle violence against women and girls, and we are ready to work with the Scottish Government to do just that.

I thank the First Minister for his leadership on the issue. He is right to recognise the need for action, but that is exactly why we must move beyond warm words and, instead, act now, before it is too late for other women.

I move amendment S7M-01163.1, to insert at end:

“; welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to introduce a pilot of GPS monitoring for suspected domestic abusers released on bail, and calls on the Scottish Government to outline urgently a timetable for its implementation and wider roll-out.”

15:37

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): I thank John Swinney for today's debate on violence against women and girls and for attending my round table with victims and their families—some of whom are in the chamber today. I am sure that he will have been as moved as I was by not only their horrific accounts but their extraordinary bravery.

I also thank Marion Scott for her campaigning journalism and for leading the It's Time campaign on behalf of *The Sunday Post*. A few weeks ago, John Swinney told *The Sunday Post* that he had seen headlines about four horrific cases, which, he said,

“stopped me in my tracks. That day, I made tackling violence against women and girls one of my highest priorities as First Minister.”

We have all become used to similar lurid headlines—not just four or dozens but hundreds, and not over just one summer but for years and decades. I have been raising some of those cases in the Parliament for six years—accounts of depraved, cruel and sickening violence. Inadequate, cowardly men are responsible but, far too often, the justice system fails victims.

I have spoken about the horrific case of the murder of Esther Brown—a kind and decent soul, who was raped and murdered in her own home. Esther's murder was wholly preventable, but a review of her case said that it was not. That was a whitewash, which is typical of a culture in which no one is held to account.

My focus today is on the continued failings of Scotland's justice system and how it must be improved. In the past, I have spoken about secretive plea deals, through which criminals benefit from watered-down or deleted charges—often, in defiance of clear, hard evidence. Working with Liz Shanks, a firefighter, we have tried to bring some transparency to that practice.

I have also spoken about the broken bail system. Twenty-eight-year-old Claire Inglis was murdered by her partner. The authorities knew that he was a risk to her and her child, but he was bailed repeatedly. Claire's parents, Fiona and Ian, came to First Minister's question time on three occasions when I raised their ordeal. We then met John Swinney. All they want is answers to basic questions. Almost five years since their daughter's murder, they are still being kept in the dark. Fiona

asked me this week, “Are they waiting for us to die?”

The Government weakened bail laws in 2023 by removing a specific presumption against bail for domestic and sexual violence. It did so despite Victim Support Scotland, Scottish Women’s Aid and others warning that doing so presents a serious risk to the safety of female victims. This summer, two women—Stacy Hunter, aged 35, and Samantha Lee, aged 54—were murdered by male partners who had already attacked them, only to be given bail. Dangerous men, freed to kill.

The First Minister: I do not want to affect in any way Mr Findlay’s points about individual cases, but, on his point about bail provisions, it is important that I put on the record that the bail reforms that were introduced by the Government created a single, all-encompassing bail test. The bail test was designed to put public and victim safety at the heart of bail decision making. I know that Mr Findlay and I disagree on that issue, but it is important to put that on the record so that victims and the public appreciate that judgments about bail are made in a comprehensive way by the judiciary, which is free to make the judgment that it considers appropriate in any individual case.

Russell Findlay: I understand the subtleties of the change in the legislation, which we opposed and which the Government introduced and indeed passed. However, those dangerous men were freed to kill. In the case of Claire Inglis, the perpetrator was freed to kill. There was an abundance of evidence that those men were highly dangerous and that their offending was escalating. I would like to take a moment to thank Stacy’s brother, Sean Hunter, for being here today, just seven weeks after his sister’s murder.

One other common theme is not so much the granting or refusing of bail, but the flagrant breach of bail laws. Often, nothing happens when conditions are breached. According to a recent report by HM Inspectorate of Prosecution in Scotland, victims explained that

“breaches of bail are not taken seriously by the justice system.”

They described a culture of “no consequences”. The perpetrators know that, so let us fix bail laws and enforce them.

The police are not to blame. They are run ragged, and the creation of Police Scotland has removed hundreds of millions of pounds from policing budgets. The Scottish Police Federation blames that for a lack of training for officers.

The Scottish Prison Service is not to blame, either. It is the Government’s responsibility to build sufficient prison capacity. It is outrageous that the SNP’s delayed new net zero prison in Glasgow will

cost at least a billion pounds. For 20 years, the Scottish National Party Government has failed to modernise the justice system. It has failed to ensure that judges have a genuine alternative to custody. It has failed to use new technology that is being used elsewhere in Britain and to provide meaningful rehabilitation to stop reoffending, and now it is planning to free all long-term prisoners early after they serve just two thirds of their sentence. The Government knows what the consequences of that will be. Judges have criticised the early release plan, raising public safety concerns and warning about further harming fragile trust in the justice system. I say to John Swinney: take the dangerous automatic early release plan off the table.

My party has also campaigned to scrap guidelines not to jail criminals aged under 25. The justification for those guidelines is that such criminals are not fully responsible for their actions. Rhys Bennett raped and battered Jill Barclay, aged 47. He set fire to her while she was still alive. The judge described her murder as medieval but, because her killer was 23 years old, he was given a reduced sentence. That is sickening and obscene.

Like Jackie Baillie, I do not question John Swinney’s sincerity. On this issue, there is much that we agree on. However, I question his Government’s policies and its past record.

Let us address the behaviour of young men. If we cannot drain the social media swamp, let us protect children from it. Let us warn children about the toxic attitudes of dangerous online clowns such as the Tate brothers, but also, or rather especially, let us fix Scotland’s criminal justice system. Bold, effective and immediate action is needed now. The tragic headlines might never stop, but they can be reduced.

I move amendment S7M-01163.3, to insert at end:

As an amendment to motion S7M-01163 in the name of John Swinney (Preventing Violence Against Women for an Equally Safe Scotland), insert at end “; recognises with concern that crimes of a sexual nature and domestic abuse are increasing in Scotland but that many victims still do not report them to the police; notes that Scottish Government legislation passed in 2023 removed a presumption against bail for those accused of sexual or domestic abuse offences despite warnings from female crime victims and groups representing them that this would cause further harm to women; further notes with concern a 2024 report by HM Inspectorate of Prosecutions in Scotland, which found that bail breaches are not always taken seriously by the justice system; believes that delays in the justice system and a lack of transparency around plea deals between prosecutors and accused criminals continue to cause trauma to victims; further believes that proposals in a recent Scottish Government consultation risk further weakening sentencing by damaging judicial independence and failing to properly punish perpetrators; considers that these proposals are

partly as a result of the government's failure to build sufficient prison capacity in order to keep the public safe; further considers that sentencing guidelines, which recommend non-custodial sentences for criminals aged under 25, are unjust and detrimental to women who have suffered violence or sexual violence by adult males aged under 25, and calls on the Scottish Government to ensure that women and girls are protected by the justice system by reinstating safeguards for bail and remand, treating bail breaches seriously, abandoning its plans for automatic early release for all long-term prisoners and scrapping the under 25 sentencing guidelines."

15:45

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I am glad to speak in this debate. Like the First Minister, I agree that men need to show leadership in the Parliament and across Scotland. Violence against women and girls infects every corner of our society, and the fault lies with adults—with men. Tackling violence against women and girls in our schools means changing the attitudes of boys and young men. That is what I will focus on first.

I have mentioned before in parliamentary debates the report that Zero Tolerance produced in 2023. It was shocking but not really surprising, because it found that almost seven in 10 pupils in our schools had experienced sexual harassment in the three months before that survey was conducted. They were overwhelmingly but not exclusively girls and young women. A third had experienced unwanted sexual touching. That means that a third of young people in our schools had been sexually assaulted in the three months immediately prior to that survey, and, in over 70 per of those cases, the pupils did not report that sexual harassment even when it was severe, even when it included unwanted sexual touching.

We are not just talking about a few bad apples. We need to accept the huge scale of the problem. According to the large-scale survey that the University of Glasgow did not long ago, a significant minority of boys and young men in our country hold views about women that can only be described as outright dangerous. This is a pandemic of violence against women and girls, and there is no silver bullet. There is no one solution, but there are obvious changes that we can make, and there are obvious changes that we have been making.

I think back to when I was first elected here, in 2016. The Education and Skills Committee conducted an inquiry into the state of personal and social education in our schools. At that point, Jenny Gilruth and Gillian Martin were also on that committee. We found that the guidance that teachers were being provided with to teach about sex and relationships, which at that point was basically brand new—it was from 2014—had no section on consent. We were teaching boys and

young men about sex and not teaching them about the importance of consent.

That parliamentary inquiry led to a report, and the Government accepted its recommendations. That led to an Education Scotland review and a report whose recommendations the Government accepted, and then there were around half a dozen other steps. It is only now, earlier this year, that we finally finished the revision to that guidance that teachers are provided with.

I pay credit to Jenny Gilruth and, before her, Shirley-Anne Somerville in their roles as education secretary for making sure that that work was done, but we should reflect on the fact that it took us 10 years to change a single document to make sure that young men in our schools learn about the importance of consent when they are being taught about sex and relationships.

Earlier this month, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was outside our Parliament, continuing to campaign on the issue, because it is one thing to produce a new document that is better than the one that came before it but it is another thing entirely to make sure that it is being implemented in our schools. There is a role there not just for national Government but for local government.

We now have teaching resources on relationships, sexual health and parenthood education that start with that substantial section on the importance of consent and respect in relationships. We need to make sure that every school and every classroom in our country is using that resource, because even the inadequate resource from 2014 that we revised was not being consistently used by teachers in our schools. If we want to change these attitudes, we need to make sure that that education is consistently of a high quality.

To go back to the other part of the Zero Tolerance report, the low level of reporting also needs to concern us, because there are young people across our country who are not confident that, if they report to their school, they will be taken seriously. Schools need to give their pupils confidence. They need to find out why pupils are not confident reporting in the first place.

Young men need positive role models. As the First Minister and Russell Findlay said, the algorithms on all our social media platforms reward toxic misogyny. If only this Parliament had more powers to regulate social media. However, although this Parliament's powers are limited, there are things that we can do. Men in public life in Scotland need to contest the online space—we cannot cede it. Any void that we leave online is being filled by toxic and violent misogyny. We need to contest that space and provide positive role

models, not only to change the attitude of boys but to change the attitudes of men of all ages, backgrounds and positions in our society.

We have men in positions of power not believing women, which directly puts their lives at risk. We have men who let their mates away with jokes about violence against women and girls, putting their lives at risk, exactly as Willie Rennie described. One in four teenage boys in Scotland believe that it is not sexual harassment if it is meant as a joke, and one in three believe that girls wearing revealing clothing are asking for trouble. That is all learned behaviour; it is not naturally occurring. It is a result of the environment in which they have been brought up and something that we can change. To normalise that behaviour and to fail to challenge it convinces abusers that they have impunity. We have a responsibility to challenge misogyny, including when it happens in the Parliament.

There is so much more that Parliament and Government can do. We can change attitudes, but we can also change the law. We all know that it is easier for us to change the law than it is to change attitudes in our society. We have systems, which have been built up over decades and centuries, that make violence against women possible and perpetuate it.

I will give one brief example, which is that of council tax arrears in this country. Right now, in Scotland, there are women who are paying off the council tax debts of the abusers they have escaped. Other women are unable to escape violent households because of such situations. I pay tribute to Shirley-Anne Somerville for the work that she did with me, which will be published next month, on the Housing (Scotland) Bill. It will chart a way forward for us to resolve that particular scandal and to ensure that no women who have survived and escaped domestic abuse are forced to pay off the perpetrators' debts. However, we could do so much more, such as dropping means testing for legal aid for survivors of domestic abuse and tackling the wider problem of legal aid deserts.

I welcome the Government's announcement that it will introduce a misogyny bill, because this Parliament, especially the men, need to do more. We need to challenge behaviours and attitudes, lead by example and take seriously the legislative and policy issues that have allowed this pandemic of violence to continue.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Mr Greer, please begin to wind up.

Ross Greer: Indeed—I am on my final line.

We have the power and duty to act, and I expect that we will do so in this parliamentary session. I

am glad to have had the opportunity to contribute to the debate this afternoon.

15:52

Yi-pei Chou Turvey (North East Scotland)

(LD): I stand here again to talk about the changes that I wish to see and how we are still far from that vision. Violence against women and girls can be loud and visible. It can be rape. It can be punches, being thrown against a wall and bruises. It can be a threat to your life and your very physical safety. However, it can also be quiet. It can also be present in much more silent ways that are just as damaging: mental abuse, coercive control, financial control or weaponising police or the justice system. Until we tackle that pandemic of violence head-on, one in three women will continue to face such violence over their lifetime.

There are many debates at the moment about artificial intelligence and texting. As technology progresses at a rapid pace, girls and young women today face abuse that was previously unknown. Online sexual violence, abuse, the creation of AI-generated deepfakes, cyberflashing and misogynistic abuse are widespread. A recent study showed that 71 per cent of girls and young women aged seven to 21 reported experiencing harmful content online in the past year. Without strong and forceful guidance that includes real consequences, boys and men will continue to create sexually explicit imagery of women and girls by using the AI tools that are so easily available to them and so easy to use.

This is a new wave of sexual violence that we cannot ignore. Just last week, the Criminal Justice Committee listened to evidence from Tony Lenehan KC from the Faculty of Advocates. He warned us of the prolific nature of sexual violence and the need to speak to our young people about what violent sexual acts look like. He stated that sexual violence was “worryingly widespread” and that, by not addressing violence against women and girls within the framework that they experienced it, we risk increasing further violent offences and coercion later on.

We have heard about studies from the University of Glasgow that show that one in three boys think that girls who wear revealing clothing are asking for trouble and that a quarter of boys believe that behaviour is not sexual harassment if it is intended as a joke. However, violence against women and girls is an act and, as Willie Rennie said, we really should stop people when they behave like that.

Recent figures continue to stagger: nearly 65,000 incidents of domestic abuse were recorded in Scotland in 2024-25, which was an increase of 2 per cent from the previous year. In the same

period, there was an increase of 11 per cent in recorded incidents of rape and attempted rape.

The worst and most damaging physical violence often happens to women who are trapped because they want to ensure their children's safety. Rape crisis services report that 20 per cent of recorded rapes were perpetrated by a spouse, partner or former partner. As we have seen time and again, even when they are brave enough to leave, women are still not safe from violent men, because those women are trapped financially. The women do all that they can to protect their children's wellbeing. They are trapped by coercive control, and they bite their lips and hold back their tears in order to protect their kids and put a brave face on for the world, the community and their work.

Sadly, we also have a system that too often underfunds and undersupports those who seek to offer that critical support to women in danger. The Scottish Liberal Democrats are here to work with the Scottish Government on its pledges to the people of Scotland, because those women and mothers are waiting for us to do so. Measures including full use of domestic abuse protection orders and the sexual offences court need to be rolled out without hesitation, because the wait has been too long.

The most recent data shows a 22 per cent increase in the number of rape survivors being forced to spend time on a waiting list before accessing support. That figure does not even take into account the fact that waiting lists have already been temporarily closed, leaving some with no support at all. It also often depends on where people live. The waiting time is long for survivors who are brave enough to face their attacker in court—from primary hearing to trial, the wait is now upwards of 135 weeks.

Today makes for sobering listening. It really is time for all of us to call out violence against women and girls—it is time to stop it.

I support the motion.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark):
We move to the open debate.

15:58

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I initially wanted to speak in this debate because, like many women, unfortunately, I have experienced male violence. However, over the past week, as I reflected on my contribution, my thoughts kept returning not to my experience but to my children—my daughter and five sons. I kept thinking, “Five boys—it’s a lot. It’s a big responsibility.” So I thought, “Why don’t I speak to them?”

Therefore, the following speech is inspired by the conversations that I had with my sons. I have watched them grow up in a world that has changed profoundly during my 35 years as a mother. My youngest son is now a teenager who is growing up in a completely different environment from the one that my daughter entered in 1991 when there was no TikTok, no algorithm deciding what a young person would see next, and no manosphere influencer who could speak directly to a device in the palm of my son's hand. How do we exert our influence in a world where competing influence has become big business?

If we are serious about prevention, we cannot just give a boy a list of things that he must never do and hope that that list survives whatever the world throws at him next. We must go much deeper than that. We must nurture a moral instinct so that empathy, respect, equality and self-control become a part of who that young boy is and so that, whichever voices try to pull him in another direction, they cannot compete against the strength of his own integrated values.

We can be unequivocal that male violence against women is a male problem without telling every boy that he is a problem. That distinction matters. If what boys hear from society is simply, “You’re dangerous,” “You’re a suspect,” and “You need to be controlled,” I do not believe that that will build empathy or healthy masculinity. For a boy who is already angry, isolated or looking for somewhere to belong, it could actually drive them towards the online voices that we are trying to guide them away from.

We need to show them what good, healthy masculinity looks like. Strength is not controlling somebody else; it is being able to control yourself. Confidence is not entitlement; it is being secure enough in yourself to respect somebody else's choices. Courage is not going along with your friends when they cross a line; it is being the one who challenges them. And being emotional or vulnerable is not weakness; it is being brave enough to be honest about how you feel.

I do not want us to approach boys as though somewhere inside every one of them there is a dangerous man waiting to emerge if we fail him. The deeper form of prevention is not a young man thinking, “I shouldn’t do that because I might get in trouble”; it is something in his core that says, “I couldn’t do that, because it would violate who I am.” That is where we should be aiming to be.

We need all men—fathers, brothers, youth workers, First Ministers, footballers, musicians, actors, men who have status in the eyes of our boys, and men whom boys admire—to make respect something aspirational. Men, know that, for better or worse, you are the examples.

There needs to be full accountability. A man who abuses, controls, assaults or terrorises a woman is responsible for what he does—full stop. Anger does not excuse it and no experience in a man's life gives him the right to make a woman terrified for hers. If we are serious about prevention, our ambition cannot begin when a woman has already been assaulted or killed; there must be a social cost to misogyny long before there is a criminal justice cost.

For far too long, women have been expected to adapt ourselves around male violence. We think about how we get home, how we reject a man, whether we should answer back, whether we might make him angry, whether it is safe to leave and whether it is safe to stay. Women cannot simply be handed another safety strategy and told to manage the risk better. Society has to do the work further upstream. That is why I welcome the motion's focus on prevention, challenging attitudes and collective leadership.

Men must carry much more of the responsibility for changing that culture, because men have enormous power to shape what boys learn about women, relationships and what it means to be a man. We have spent generations teaching girls how to navigate that danger; surely, now, our ambition must be to change what creates the danger in the first place.

Do not make boys afraid of what they might become; show them something that is worth becoming. Let us raise our girls to know that their safety, freedom and equality are theirs by right, and let us raise our boys with respect for women that is so deeply embedded in who they are that no influencer, algorithm or culture of misogyny can persuade them otherwise. Our daughters should not have to grow up learning how to survive male violence, and our sons can be a part of the generation that ends it.

16:04

David Linden (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP): Karen Adam's speech was incredibly eloquent and it will be very difficult to follow it. I know that everyone will appreciate her words.

I acknowledge and commend the personal leadership that the First Minister has shown on the issue of violence against women. Any serious politician will understand and accept that the First Minister's plate is not particularly big, so the fact that he has decided to invest a huge amount of his personal time and attention into tackling violence against women speaks to the type of individual he is. We should be incredibly proud of the fact that he is leading our country in that way.

I also commend the *Glasgow Times* for its action not words campaign. When I was reading that newspaper on the way home on Wednesday night, I noticed powerful commentary from Ms McNeill and Ms Bruce. The *Glasgow Times* is led by an outstanding young female editor, Stacey Mullen, who has put her shoulder to the wheel on the action not words campaign. That is what I want to speak about today—ensuring that we get the action that we desperately need.

At the weekend, we witnessed the embarrassing spectacle of men dressed in black, wearing ski masks, parading around Glasgow Green. I think that most Glaswegians are clear that women do not need to be protected by men dressed in black, wearing ski masks, going around intimidating people. Those individuals need to get a grip of themselves.

I also want to look at the issue of violence against women through a racial lens. I have a female Muslim friend who, unfortunately, had her hijab pulled off her when she was going through Glasgow Central station recently.

Violence against women manifests itself in a number of different ways. However, most importantly, the increase in the number of annual domestic abuse cases in Glasgow to 5,000 shows the need for the action that the First Minister is leading.

I want to say two things to the Government as we tackle the issue. First, we need resources, including monetary resources, and the Government will set that out. All arms of the state must work together, and I have no doubt that there is a crucial role for education when it comes to tackling the issues that have been referenced, particularly in relation to young men and boys.

My second point relates to legislation. I will speak about the proposed misogyny bill in a second, but we also need to enforce legislation that is already on the statute books. I am probably in a minority here in believing that the repeal of—

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con): Will David Linden take an intervention on that point?

David Linden: I am happy to give way to Ms Gallacher.

Meghan Gallacher: Does David Linden agree that we must revisit some of the justice legislation that has been passed in recent times to ensure that we truly stand up for victims and survivors of violence against women and girls?

David Linden: I am grateful to Ms Gallacher, because that was the point that I was about to make. I remain to be convinced that it was right for the Bail and Release from Custody (Scotland) Act

2023 to repeal section 23D of the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995. That view has been expressed by police officers and by organisations such as Scottish Women's Aid and Victim Support Scotland, that have given evidence to the Criminal Justice Committee. I suggest to the Government that we need to look at that through post-legislative scrutiny.

As I said, we need to enforce legislation that already exists on the statute books. Part 1 of the Domestic Abuse (Protection) (Scotland) Act 2021, which relates to domestic abuse protection notices and domestic abuse protection orders, has not yet been implemented, so I ask the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing, in her summing-up speech, to provide an update on when that will happen.

I want to turn my attention to the proposed misogyny criminal law bill, which the Scottish Government will introduce in year 1 of its programme for government. My committee expects to scrutinise three pieces of legislation, but, in reality, it will probably be four, once legislation emanates from the penal reform consultation. It would be helpful for members of the committee to have a better understanding of the position, particularly as we plan our work programme, given that we will be dealing with a very heavy amount of legislation. That said, I would warmly welcome provision in the misogyny bill to make pregnancy an additional aggravating factor. That would be important in providing transparency regarding sentencing decisions.

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prosecution in Scotland produced a report in 2024 on how we treat victims and survivors of domestic abuse. It is very telling that, only two years on from that powerful report, the inspectorate is conducting a review specifically on recommendation 12, which is about how we support victims.

I turn briefly to the part of the amendment in the name of Dame Jackie Baillie on electronic monitoring. I welcome and will support her amendment, but I want to ensure that members are aware that this is not a panacea.

My committee recently had pretty significant evidence from Dr Hannah Graham, who said that

"tech on its own will not stop things such as domestic abuse or reoffending in other forms. Our victim support organisations and advocates have made it clear in a really articulate way that they have different views on the subject ... We do not want to see the technology used if it could appear to provide a false sense of security, as considerable victim support and safeguarding efforts will still need to be made."—[*Official Report, Criminal Justice Committee*, 2 September 2026; c 63.]

It is important to recognise that technology will not be a panacea.

Many other members have referred to social media and all members who have spoken have been absolutely solid on that issue. I am fed up of reporting to Facebook comments that are clearly inappropriate but getting responses saying, "That does not violate our community rules."

I realise that I am running out of time, but the *Glasgow Times's* plea for action, not just words, stays with me. Everyone in the chamber has a part to play—the First Minister has rolled the pitch and has made clear his direction of travel as leader of our country, but the obligation is on all of us. I look forward to playing my part in the course of convening the Criminal Justice Committee, because we all have a role to play.

16:11

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): I am heartened by the First Minister's leadership in this regard. He has conducted himself with deep sincerity and I give a personal commitment to work with the Scottish Government on this societal issue.

We have passed many laws here to try to protect women and have all fought for societal change, yet we are still here and violence against women and girls is rising. We must ask ourselves why that is happening, and, in my opinion, the stunning speech from Karen Adam made a big contribution towards answering that.

The problem is not refugees, class or ethnicity. The problem is men. That is the problem. The latest figures from the Crown Office show a substantial increase in domestic abuse charges over the past two years, with the most serious domestic abuse crimes such as murder and culpable homicide almost doubling. An increasing number of shocking cases have come to light.

Helen McDade: Will the member take an intervention?

Pauline McNeill: I have some sensitive stuff to deal with. I might take an intervention later, but I want to say this.

Members may have followed the case of Gisèle Pelicot. A story on the news last night was an unfortunate replica of that case. A man in Stockport is accused of drugging and raping his wife without her knowledge over a 20-year period. He has so far admitted 60 offences against her, including rape, and 12 other men are also accused of multiple serious sexual offences against his wife.

Those are not isolated cases. Zoe Watts from Devon was in a relationship with her husband for 18 years, during which time he crushed sleeping pills into her tea at night so that he could rape,

photograph and film her. Amanda Stanhope from Manchester was repeatedly raped by her partner while she was unconscious on prescription medication and woke up disoriented, in different clothes and with bruises on her body. They started a campaign called “EndEyeCheck” with the name referring to a practice in which perpetrators pull back a sedated victim’s eyelids to check that they are unconscious before committing an assault, often recording those acts and sharing them online. Hundreds of women that we know of have experienced that, in at least 22 countries around the world, so it is a global problem. We need leadership here, in Scotland, but we know that we are part of a global problem. How on earth did we get to this point? That is what Parliament must address in the next four to five years.

The depth and extent of male violence against women is only just emerging. We must hold men criminally accountable for those horrendous cases, and there can be no doubt that if we are serious about getting to the root causes—something that the First Minister has talked about—we must start talking to boys at an early age. The “Lost Boys” report from the Centre for Social Justice tells us that young men’s behaviour is increasingly being shaped by violent and degrading pornography. Professor Clare McGlynn from Durham University has also argued that mainstream internet pornography has grown extreme and is changing young men’s perception of safe and consensual sex, normalising extreme behaviour such as choking. That is why I have come to believe that the online sphere is a new frontier.

Others have spoken about the proliferation of sexually explicit deepfake pornographic images, which has grown at an alarming rate and caused devastating harm to victims, who are almost always women and girls. Ross Greer’s point about the statistics on sexual harassment is true. Teenage girls have found that their classmates are using apps to transform their social media posts into nude images before sharing them. Currently, the distribution and sharing of such images is a criminal offence but their creation is not. I have had an exchange with the First Minister about the need to criminalise that behaviour, and I am aware that a consultation is ongoing. I am glad that that is happening, but I would like us to make progress on the issue as soon as possible.

Government policies are not effectively tackling the problem because they perhaps do not get to its root. Rape Crisis Scotland has pointed out that more resources need to be put into preventative work. I would like to have that discussion with the Government over the next few years.

Boys and young men need to be educated in order to help prevent sexism and misogyny from

developing. Males badly need role models. Another discussion needs to be had about that. Gareth Southgate gave a lecture on the issue fairly recently. He is not the only man considering the matter, but it is worth listening to those who have given it serious thought. Without such role models, we will struggle to address the fundamental issue.

We have seen an increasing number of young women and girls reporting sexual harassment and assault in schools. It is a longer-term problem, that is for sure.

Tony Lenehan has been quoted a few times. He is an experienced advocate who has represented many of those young men and seen many of those cases, so he is worth listening to. He said:

“I see distressingly many 17, 18 and 19-year-olds with an entrenched pattern of abusive, including sexually abusive, behaviour. Talking about choking and the like, or violent pornography, is a squeamish conversation to have with 15, 16 and 17-year-olds, but there needs to be more of that”—[*Official Report, Criminal Justice Committee*, 9 September 2026; c 15.]

if we are to make any progress.

16:17

Pauline Stafford (Bathgate) (SNP): I am pleased to have the chance to speak in this debate and to support the many women and girls in my constituency and across Scotland whose lives have been blighted by gender-based violence.

Last November, I joined a march for the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence. We set off from the courtyard of West Lothian College, where there was an exhibition to mark the campaign. It was called “The Empty Chairs”. There was a chair for every woman who had been killed by a man in the UK over the previous year—that is, one woman every three days. There was a picture of each woman and a small part of her story: those were teenage girls right up to women in their 80s, women of colour, disabled women and women of every class, the majority of whom were killed by partners, ex-partners or family members. There were no typical victims and no typical perpetrators.

Violence against women and girls can seem intractable, all-pervasive and a huge challenge to eradicate, but we all know that, for those whom it affects, the negative implications can be profound and lifelong. It is a credit to this Government that we are focused on addressing it as a priority in this Parliament.

As the mother of a 12-year-old boy and a nine-year-old girl, I am acutely aware of the need for action. I want my daughter to grow up without the threat of violence and with no areas of society off limits to her. I want my son and his peers to respect women and girls as equals and to resist the torrent

of online misogyny that attempts to influence boys and men.

Online violence and the threat of AI were prominent issues that were raised with me in Parliament on Saturday, when I had the chance to meet some of those leading the young women demand campaign. As we have heard today, a whole new frontier of abuse against women and girls has opened up—the online world—and we need the tools to fight it.

I wanted to highlight some of the tools that are already working, which can be seen in two West Lothian-based initiatives. The first is the work of PC Scott McCulloch, which is making a difference to thousands of young people in my constituency.

This year, PC McCulloch was named police officer of the year, recognising his work in developing and delivering a powerful domestic abuse lesson pack for young people across West Lothian. He worked with the domestic abuse investigation unit to develop a programme that challenges behaviours within relationship settings to encourage all people, especially young men, to develop healthy relationships and understand what is acceptable within the boundaries of one. His programme has now been delivered to more than 4,500 secondary school pupils between S4 and S6 in West Lothian, and he is now training officers in neighbouring divisions to allow them to bring the initiative to other parts of Scotland.

West Lothian ranks third worst for reporting domestic abuse among Scotland's local authority areas, so such leadership and approach to early intervention are absolutely critical.

A second example of pioneering work that took place in West Lothian is the financial abuse and coerced debt advice project pilot. That nine-month project was funded by the Scottish Government's financial wellbeing unit and delivered by West Lothian Women's Aid in partnership with West Lothian citizens advice bureau, with a final report published this March.

The pilot trialled embedding specialist debt advisers in the West Lothian Women's Aid office. It found that domestic abuse that involves coerced debt is often intertwined with multiple layers of harm, including rent and council tax arrears, utility debt, disrupted benefits, damaged credit histories and lack of banking access, all of which can lead to housing insecurity, poverty and post-separation abuse. The pilot found that addressing those complex and interconnected harms requires co-ordinated, trauma-informed support rather than debt advice alone.

The pilot also highlighted systemic barriers in our institutions, including local authorities, the Department for Work and Pensions, creditors,

housing providers and banks. Women were often required to repeatedly recount traumatic experiences, provide evidence that was difficult to obtain and navigate complex processes, despite debts frequently arising directly from economic abuse and coercive control, as we heard earlier.

The project's structure demonstrated how improving communication and reducing stigma through partnership working enabled faster and more joined-up support. If we are serious about eradicating violence against women and girls, and changing the culture in our institutions, multi-agency co-operation such as in that pilot must be embedded across all areas of policy and public service as we pursue public sector reform over the course of this parliamentary session.

Those who were involved in the pilot indicated to me that there remains a high demand for the service. Alongside the fund to leave scheme, the pilot has served to highlight the need for financial assistance to leave and, more importantly, to be able to stay away from an abusive partner.

Although legislation is undoubtably essential, until we change the culture in our society and institutions, violence against women will remain endemic. However, there is a lot to be hopeful about. I see hope in the adults who coach my son's football club, in the young people who take part in the mentors in violence prevention programme in our high schools, in the work of PC Scott McCulloch and in the priority that the First Minister and this Scottish Government have given to making the issue central to our work in this parliamentary session.

The women and girls in those empty chairs matter, and we will have succeeded only when there are no more empty chairs.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I advise members that there is some time in hand for interventions if members want to take them.

16:22

Katie Hagmann (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): In 2023, the World Health Organization estimated that one in three, or 31.6 per cent, of women worldwide—that is, 840 million women and girls—had been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetimes. As other members have said, this is a pervasive, worldwide issue. Although we cannot change the whole world, we can start by getting it right here, in Scotland. Positioning violence against women so prominently in the programme for government has rightly elevated the issue, and I thank the First Minister for ensuring that it is, and will remain, front and centre.

Last week, I spoke in the Parliament about the age-old issue of misogyny, which is the wielding of power and control over women. I also spoke about how some conversations today are encapsulated in the shiny new phenomenon of the manosphere. For those who missed that, I will once again be clear that the manosphere is not new but is the same old pernicious attempt to gain power and control over women, now amplified online.

I recently had the pleasure of welcoming to the Parliament Jennifer Snell and Dr Mar Sánchez Fernández, who are the chief executive and the research and policy lead of the Young Women's Movement. Their concern was clear: digital violence is having a huge impact on young women in Scotland. Although that was concerning to hear, I welcome the fact that the organisation is not shying away from the issue but facing it directly by focusing its flagship research project, status of young women in Scotland 2026, on digital violence. That research will help us to understand the real-life impacts of digital violence on young women in Scotland today and, once it is published, it must inform our national approach. I ask the First Minister directly to ensure that he and his Government acknowledge and respond to the findings as part of the wider commitment that he has made today.

We must also recognise that women do not experience violence as a single, uniform group. That means that we must recognise the intersecting experiences of women across Scotland. The Young Women's Movement survey that I spoke of is open to all those aged 16 to 30 who identify as a young woman, trans woman or non-binary person. When I met Disability Equality Scotland this summer, it, too, reiterated the threat of digital violence as a major concern, which of course includes disabled women. I therefore make a second ask of the First Minister: to ensure that disabled women are not left out of our national plans or our commitment to prevent violence against women and girls.

For those who may not know, I note that Tarana Burke founded the me too movement in 2006 to support survivors of sexual violence, and particularly young women of colour. The movement went viral on social media only in 2017, with the hashtag #MeToo flooding online platforms following the revelations around the Harvey Weinstein scandal. Women around the globe, including here, in Scotland, joined in and spoke out, and I was one of those women. In October 2017, I posted #MeToo, and while I knew my own experience, seeing just how many friends were posting was absolutely shocking.

That moment showed the power of women speaking out, but awareness alone is not enough. It must lead to action. In 10 weeks' time, it will be

25 November, which will be the start of the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence—an international event in which, each year, women take to the streets in reclaim the night marches. Events are planned and workplaces will be focused on training and support, with incredible organisations such as White Ribbon Scotland sharing their knowledge and doing what they can to ensure that men are included in the solution.

The 16 days of activism will conclude on 10 December—international human rights day, which marks the anniversary of the United Nations General Assembly's adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Its first article is clear and simple:

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

Preventing violence against women and girls and building an equally safe Scotland is fundamentally a human rights issue. We all have a responsibility to be part of the solution and to do everything that we can to eradicate this deep-rooted and unacceptable violence from our society for good.

16:28

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I remind members of my declaration of interests. Prior to my election in 2021, I worked for a rape crisis centre.

Presiding Officer,

“I'd love to f-ing slit her throat.”

“You deserve to be punched. And then some.”

“Nurse, that's escaped again—get it locked up.”

Those are direct quotes from men that were directed towards me. The first was in Aberdeen, from a man who was apparently protecting women and girls as he yelled abuse at me and others because we were standing between him and a hotel used to accommodate asylum seekers. The other two came from men on social media in response to posts about bus travel and university job cuts. That is totally normal behaviour, apparently.

I am a survivor of gender-based violence, like many women in the chamber, but, as a cis white woman, I am less likely to face violence than women of colour, disabled women or trans women. Those women are routinely targeted by the far right and others, including by members in the chamber. The far right has cynically exploited the serious issue of violence against women. Again and again, activists and politicians claim that migrants perpetrate most of the violence against women—we have heard that view during the debate—when the evidence contradicts that and points to high domestic abuse rates in their ranks.

They say that our trans siblings are a danger to women despite the fact that trans people are no more likely than cisgender people to be sex offenders. In fact, trans people are much more likely to be the victims of certain crimes, including sexual offences. Worst of all, the far-right framing obscures the true causes of violence against women. If we do not understand that, we have no hope of eradicating it.

All forms of gender-based violence have the same root cause: the patriarchy. Gender inequality, shaped by patriarchy, reinforced by toxic masculinity, gender stereotypes, poverty and inequality, and exploited by far-right extremists and their acolytes, drives violence against women. In her final statement in the trial of the men who drugged and raped her, Gisèle Pelicot called for an end to the “macho, patriarchal society”. I echo that call. The patriarchy creates many forms of gender-based violence, but I will focus briefly on coercive control.

Coercive control was finally criminalised in 2019. Prosecution and convictions have improved, but only about 8 per cent of domestic abuse charges are made under the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018’s definition of abusive behaviour. The University of Glasgow’s Professor Michele Burman found that front-line police officers do not have the skills or resources to adequately identify and investigate coercive control. I know from casework that front-line healthcare workers also miss the abuse, which is a factor in the shocking number of domestic abuse victims who take their own lives. Estimates suggest that there are twice as many domestic abuse-related suicides as there are domestic homicides.

We must do better to understand, investigate and prosecute coercive control, and we must remove the enablers that exist in state support. Abusers should never be able to use social security payments to perpetrate their abuse. As well as improving our understanding and recognition of domestic abuse, we must do more to provide sustainable funding for the life-saving services that support survivors. Too many survivors wait too long for help. Some never get on to waiting lists. We must inflation proof all funding for such services, and I believe that we should ensure that there is a legal right to a set of core minimum service standards for women and children who are affected by violence.

Without that, we risk continuing to underfund vital services and to tolerate a postcode lottery of support. If we mean any of the fine words that we have spoken in the debate, we must honour survivors with action: fierce, unapologetically feminist action. We must take action that dismantles the patriarchal systems that harm women and gender-diverse people. That action

must liberate, because ending violence against women is not about tackling individual instances of violence, however numerous. It is about transforming society; it is about liberation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I remind members that profanity or shortening profane words is not allowed in the chamber. Although I appreciate that the words were being quoted, rather than a direct contribution from the member, I ask that everyone respect the Presiding Officer’s ruling in that respect.

16:33

Paul McLennan (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP): I welcome the debate and the Scottish Government’s determination, under the First Minister’s leadership, to prevent violence against women and girls and to build an equally safe Scotland. Violence against women and girls has no place in our society. It is a violation of human rights and a barrier to genuine equality. I can walk around at night without a thought, but my daughter and my wife cannot.

Equally safe gives us a clear vision of a Scotland where women and girls live free from violence, abuse, coercive control and exploitation, and free from the attitudes that sustain them. That vision must be delivered in every community, including in East Lothian, where, as it does in every other part of Scotland, the challenge remains real.

Nationally, statistics show that around 16,000 women and 4,500 children are likely to be experiencing domestic abuse. In 2023-24, police recorded nearly 1,300 incidents against women. That figure has stayed stubbornly consistent. Domestic abuse continues to be the most common reason that women and children present as homeless. Behind every number is a woman, a child and a family whose safety and future have been damaged.

My commitment to tackling violence against women is long standing. In December 2021, early in the previous parliamentary session, I secured a members’ business debate to mark the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence. In that debate, I spoke about meeting staff of Women’s Aid East and Midlothian and survivors who were supported by them. Every male MSP, whether new or returning, should go and visit Women’s Aid to see and experience its work and hear from people about the impact of such violence at first hand. I heard about the courage that it takes to leave an abusive relationship, the trauma that it causes children and the practical barriers—especially to housing—that survivors face after they flee. Those conversations shaped my approach then and continue to guide me now.

In 2022, I signed the ambassador pledge for White Ribbon Scotland, committing never to commit, condone or remain silent about violence against women and to use my role as an MSP to challenge men's attitudes. As a male MSP, I believe that that is essential. As we have heard a number of times, this is not only a women's issue—it is a men's issue, too. To all male MSPs, I say: we need to lead. Do not walk by. We need to do more than just have this debate.

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): Given the comments that the member has just made, would he agree that it is very important that a report is published that shows all data across the board?

Paul McLennan: The First Minister touched on that point. I will come to the issue of data later in my speech.

As Minister for Housing, I saw the direct link between safety and a secure home. I visited projects that provided safe housing for women who were fleeing domestic abuse and I supported measures to strengthen social landlords' responsibilities, including domestic abuse policies and options that prioritised keeping survivors in their homes while removing perpetrators, where appropriate.

East Lothian Council has developed partnership approaches with Women's Aid East and Midlothian, including housing first for women and an equally safe housing policy. Those efforts matter, and East Lothian continues to make progress in that regard. The council and its partners are developing a local equally safe strategy that embeds prevention across community planning, housing, education, justice, social work and, of course, the police. It requires a multi-agency approach.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP): In relation to the barriers to leaving an abusive relationship, I draw the member's attention to the report of the inquiry into the subject by the Social Justice and Social Security Committee in the previous session of Parliament. In that inquiry, we found that the UK benefits system needs to be more flexible and that there must be a single point of contact to which women can turn to find out about the financial realities that they face and learn about the support that is there for them. The provider of that point of contact should work collegiately with the Scottish benefits system to give women an effective pathway for leaving an abusive relationship. Does the member think that that would be a positive way to support and empower women to take the realistic steps that they need to take in order to leave an abusive relationship?

Paul McLennan: Yes. In my time as housing minister, we talked about the fund to leave, which I am thankful has been extended. That issue was discussed with Women's Aid and with victims. That is a very important point.

I come back to my point about multi-agency work. Multi-agency risk assessment conferences, or MARACs, as well as the Caledonian system, help to protect high-risk victims and to hold perpetrators to account. As we have heard, school-based prevention programmes are challenging harmful attitudes. We have heard from Ross Greer about some of the attitudes that are out there, and there is much work to be done on that.

Nationally, the refreshed equally safe strategy and delivery plan correctly prioritise primary prevention, gender equality, early intervention and robust responses to perpetrators. The delivering equally safe fund has supported tens of thousands of people. Multiyear funding, as we have heard, is certainly required, especially for specialist services, so that organisations can plan, retain skilled staff and focus on delivery.

Of course, education remains central. Programmes such as equally safe at school and mentors in violence protection, alongside campaigns that challenge misogynistic online content, help to shift attitudes among young people. Boys and young men must be equipped to reject misogyny and become active allies.

We have heard about the importance of the justice system, which must give survivors confidence that it will protect them and hold perpetrators accountable. Progress on protection orders and on training and legislation that cover misogynistic harassment are also welcome and necessary.

In November 2021, I challenged every male MSP to stand up a year later and say that they had played their part—not only during the 16 days, but every day. That challenge still stands. As male MSPs, we need to look beyond this debate. It is fine to have this debate, but we need to take part in and lead the process every single day. As we have heard, we have the 60 days of activism coming up, and male MSPs need to lead.

The equally safe Scotland strategy requires sustained leadership, stable funding for front-line services, education that challenges harmful norms from the earliest years and a justice system that puts survivors first. In East Lothian and across Scotland, women and girls deserve to live free from fear. Children deserve to grow up knowing that violence is never acceptable. That is the Scotland that we are all working for. I remain committed to playing my part in delivering that.

16:40

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I begin by declaring an interest as chair of North Ayrshire Women's Aid, which is an independent organisation in its own right.

I am glad that we are having this debate, because women are regularly killed by men—often, men who had previously been reported to authorities for their abuse. However, those women still pay with their lives, because, too often, the systems in place fail to protect them.

Any statistics from any country show that the number of women who experience violence and even death at the hands of men is, in reality, higher than is reported. In the UK, one woman is killed by her partner or former partner every three days or so. In Scotland, around 65,000 cases of domestic abuse were reported in 2024-25. I welcome today's announcement of a special sexual offences court pilot. However, unfortunately, many cases never get to court. Many women are too afraid of their abusers to follow through with a court process, which means that their abuser is not held to account and they are not protected from further abuse.

What do those women do? The abuse continues and they think that their only option is to manage their abuser. The problem of intimate homicides is borne mainly by women and perpetrated by men. There are allegedly no crimes more difficult to prosecute than rape, coercive control and domestic abuse. Conviction rates remain very low. The reality right now is that, in Scotland and in many other jurisdictions, just because someone is arrested, charged or even convicted of a crime, that does not mean that the victim is protected.

I am keen for the Scottish Government to engage on the issue of pay cuts to ASSIST workers in Glasgow, who provide court advocacy services to vulnerable women who are facing down their abusers in court. That service is used by women across 13 local authorities, and we need to ensure the stability of the workforce that provides that vital service.

When women press charges against their abuser, they know that they are taking a risk. They need to know that they will be protected. They need to trust the system more than they fear the consequences of leaving.

Russell Findlay: I have written to Glasgow City Council on the matter of cuts to ASSIST staff funding. Will Patricia Gibson share with me whether she has had any feedback from either the council or the Government?

Patricia Gibson: I have written to the Minister for Victims and Community Safety, whom I will not put on the spot at the moment, and to the chief

executive of Glasgow City Council. The service is shared by 13 local authorities, and those 13 local authorities whose women benefit from the service have a duty to step up and work together. I hope that the Scottish Government might be able to broker that kind of co-operation.

Nobody can guarantee what will happen in our courts, and many women withdraw complaints and go back to trying to simply manage their own safety. We must work to ensure that domestic abuse offences and crimes of sexual violence come before our courts more promptly. Delays in the court process and in trials can severely retraumatise victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence. They are left in prolonged psychological and emotional limbo. Court backlogs and repeated trial adjournments take a heavy human toll on survivors.

Too often, those who are charged with domestic abuse crimes are given the opportunity of bail. I find myself in the strange position of agreeing with Russell Findlay that, too often, bail conditions are broken without consequence. That is the lived experience of too many women. In my view, breaching bail conditions should mean that bail is automatically rescinded. Maybe that is simplistic; I just think that women's safety demands that. Otherwise, what is the point of bail conditions? In recent high-profile cases, women have been killed by violent former partners who were bailed. I have no legal training, but that suggests to me that judicial risk assessments for bail are not rigorous enough. That needs to change.

The tagging of offenders pilot is a very good step, but it is one tool in what must be an armoury for the defence of women from dangerous men. GPS tagging is no guarantor of safety for women who are fleeing abusive men. Let us be clear: GPS tracking is a tracking tool, not a physical barrier that will prevent abuse, and it cannot deliver instant personal safety. The safety benefit depends entirely on an immediate and efficient emergency response when a breach alert is triggered, but it can take up to 24 hours for the police to respond to a breach alert. The time gap between breaching an exclusion zone for protecting the victim and the victim being murdered by her former partner is very real. It may take only a few moments for a former partner to slay a vulnerable woman.

We also know that one third of perpetrators at the scene of such a crime go on to take their own life. Those are not people who are particularly concerned about what the response of the emergency services might be.

Justice and police services must have the capacity to monitor signals and act instantly for the technology to provide real-world protection. I am

afraid that I am not convinced that that is even possible. GPS trackers are a useful tool, but let us not build false hope on them to protect women who face real danger.

The Scottish Government's proposals for a misogyny bill are, of course, very welcome, but they set a long-term goal to challenge and change deep-seated cultural attitudes that must be challenged and must be changed. However, that will not help women in my constituency of Cunninghame South, or women across Scotland, who are having to manage their own safety right now, day after day, living in a hypervigilant state to avoid physical, sexual and emotional abuse that, if they fail to avoid it, will lead to their death.

The press in western countries often reports violence against women as isolated spectacle rather than systematic issue. Frequently, crucial context is lacking. The press looks for sensationalism and the victim's voice is often dimmed, if heard at all, in the face of prurient detail.

I am reminded of the song "Delilah", which is seen as a good old raucous tune that people can join in with when they have friends round at Christmas, but that belies the fact that we treat as something light-hearted a song about a violent man who kills his partner because he "couldn't take anymore", using the old trope that women are responsible for the violence of men.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I ask the member to conclude, please.

Patricia Gibson: I will come to an end in a moment, Presiding Officer.

Women are most frequently killed by someone they know. Current data claims that nearly 47 per cent of female homicide victims die at the hands of a current or former intimate partner. Research into violence against women highlights that, over multiyear periods, roughly 89 per cent of female murder victims, in cases in which a suspect is identified, are killed by men—often within a domestic context. This is an epidemic that is sweeping across Scotland.

We need to do better. We need to do more to halt the appalling abuse and murder of women, and we need to protect women who live every day of their lives with the threat of violence. We need to do that for our daughters, our mothers and our sisters.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): We move to closing speeches.

16:49

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): There have been some outstanding contributions this afternoon, and Patricia Gibson's impassioned plea

was one of the best. I feel privileged in this job. I feel particularly privileged in the context of this debate, because I have been honoured to have private conversations with Stacy Hunter's family—her mother, Ann, her brother, Sean, and her aunt, Julie. I witnessed deep, entrenched grief and great dignity, because Stacy's family are determined to make changes—not for Stacy, because it is too late, after she was murdered by her estranged husband, Jim Mair, but for the other women and girls who are under threat every day of the week. I feel privileged to have spoken to Stacy's family and to be able to relay some of the issues that they want to have addressed. They have many questions, many of which remain unanswered. That is my first point, and it is a point that Russell Findlay made very well.

The process of reviewing cases in such circumstances is inadequate. Internal investigations by the Crown and the police can take months or even longer. How can we retain confidence in the system when it inspects itself and when it can be so slow to answer questions that families are asking? If there is a fatal accident inquiry—as there may be in some cases—that process can take many years. The process moves on and people forget the circumstances. The timing of the process needs to be investigated.

Stacy's family want to know why Jim Mair, the estranged husband, was released after he attempted to murder Stacy. It was not just domestic violence—it was attempted murder. Why was she not told that he had been released? She found out when she received a phone call from a friend of his, who was in the same car, that he wanted access to her home to get some of his goods out of it. Why did the system not tell Stacy that he had been released? Why was he not tagged? We have debated some of that this afternoon. Reportedly, he was not monitored for a whole six days. Why was that? The system did not know where he was and nobody asked. He was ordered to stay away from Stacy, but nobody had checked whether he was complying with that order. We know that, subsequently, he managed to wangle his way back into her life and get access to her children.

All those questions must be answered, and I would like them to be answered now. Those questions were relayed to the First Minister. I was very pleased that he met Ann, because it meant a lot to her. We need those answers—not in a year, and certainly not within three years. We need them much more swiftly. Stacy's family deserve answers, but we need answers here, too, because the big question is whether section 23D of the 1995 act should have been in place. How on earth can we make a judgment about suitability for bail if we do not have the facts about critical cases such

as this? How do we know whether the GPS system would be effective if we do not understand the judgments that are being made in courts about the suitability of individuals to be released? How do we know whether we have sufficient capacity in criminal justice social work to monitor individuals if we do not know the answers to those questions?

I hope that we reflect on how we investigate such cases. I am not looking for big, judge-led, independent inquiries, but for speed and trust, and for the families to be put at the centre. As Russell Findlay set out, that often does not happen.

I would like to make another point about the support on the ground. We have heard repeatedly from various speakers that the budgets for organisations such as Women's Aid have been reduced. If we do not have trusted individuals on the ground to work with women who are abused to make sure that they are safe and are getting the right support, including from the police, and the right housing, their confidence in the system will be shattered even further. I plead that we look again at the funding for those organisations.

It has been a tremendous debate. If the men will forgive me for saying so, some of the women's speeches this afternoon have been outstanding. Some have spoken on behalf of their children. Pauline Stafford's and Karen Adam's speeches were excellent. We need more of that, but we actually need more than words—we need to get this stuff sorted.

16:56

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow Willie Rennie, who made an excellent contribution.

The most dangerous place in Scotland to be a woman is her own home, and I think that we should all reflect on that for just a moment. More than 200 women have been killed by men in Scotland over the past 16 years, and we have remembered some of them today—Stacy Hunter, Samantha Lee, Esther Brown, Claire Inglis, Demi Hannaway, Jill Barclay and other women who have been subjected to a torrent of domestic abuse and violence at the hands of men.

This year alone, it is likely that 14 women will be killed. Sexual violence is on the rise, and one in five women will experience some form of domestic abuse in their lifetime. However, women still do not have the confidence to approach the police to report sexual violence or domestic abuse. That should shame each and every one of us into action, and it should drive everything that we do in the Parliament, because this simply cannot go on.

Our ambition should be not simply to tackle violence against women and girls but to deliver

justice for them. Women deserve to be believed, and perpetrators should be held accountable. Women and girls must feel safe in our society.

Justice means that when our courts impose a sentence, it means something. This afternoon, I joined the First Minister, Russell Findlay and Stephen Kerr for a round-table discussion on how we deliver justice. We listened to survivors of domestic abuse, women's rights campaigners and family members who are working to raise awareness of the behaviours that women are subjected to in our society.

However, we need to be honest about some of the choices that we have already made in this Parliament, because, when we look at issues in relation to bail, we have to ask a very simple question: whose side is the justice system on? The Scottish Government has changed the bail system, removing the presumption against bail for sex-related crimes. That matters to survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence. Of course, everyone who is accused of a crime is entitled to a fair process, and a fair process should just be that, but justice must also recognise the very real vulnerability of victims.

We cannot have secretive plea deals only for bail conditions to be breached time and time again. Why are bail conditions not taken seriously? Victims cannot be an afterthought in our bail system, and we must be exceptionally careful about any changes that could undermine victims' confidence in coming forward and putting across their concerns about the behaviours that have been inflicted on them.

The same principle applies to sentencing and release. The Scottish Government should abandon its plan to move towards automatic early release for long-term prisoners. If a court imposes a lengthy custodial sentence, victims and the public quite reasonably expect that sentence to carry meaning. When we are talking about serious violence and sexual offending, public protection must be our number 1 priority.

We should also scrap the under-25s sentencing guideline, because if someone is old enough to commit a serious violent crime, they must be held properly accountable for the consequences of their actions. We cannot allow a victim's suffering to be diminished because of the age of the person who commits the offence.

We have had a really good debate. The issue should not be about party politics. Willie Rennie, Karen Adam and others gave outstanding speeches. However, we have to be prepared to do what is necessary to protect women and girls. The *Sunday Post* has launched the It's Time campaign to tackle domestic abuse and sexual violence. This afternoon, Thomas Hawkins summarised it

perfectly during the round table. He said that, when he was putting Marion Scott's piece together and editing the front cover, he looked at the faces of survivors who all died, usually by someone who loved them: grandmothers, mothers and in some circumstances, those who were going to be mothers. He concluded that we need cultural and societal change. I agree.

The *Sunday Post's* decision to confront the issue, not ignore it, is the only way forward for each and every one of us. However, campaigns work only if we listen. Listening means more than holding a debate in this Parliament. We need to change aspects of the law and current policies that are not working. That is what our amendment sets out today. We hope that the Government will act in good faith and work with us on that. It's time to act; it's time to put victims first; and it's time to deliver justice for women and girls.

17:01

Holly Bruce (Glasgow Southside) (Green): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests, which states that I am a sitting member of Glasgow City Council.

I am sick of the context in which we talk about women's safety. Why is it that something high profile must happen in order for us to get to the root of the problem? I agree with Russell Findlay's earlier point. The murder of a woman validates our fears. A new TV show strikes a chord. New statistics on harm against us come to light and, for a moment, we suddenly realise that the issue really is that serious. However, violence against women and girls is not something for us to think about only whenever the media feels like it or whenever we want to use it as the latest political football; it is a national emergency and it is taking lives.

It is in our everyday reality. It is the fearful walk home at night when there is no reliable or affordable public transport. It is the promotion that you did not get at work because you are pregnant. It is that feeling when the football is on and you know that domestic violence spikes when the perpetrator's team loses. I have campaigned on issues around violence against women and girls for more than six years. I have worked with young women, older women, disabled women, women of colour and all who work on the front line of violence against women and girls. I have spent 32 years on this earth as a girl and a woman, and that is all that it takes to be at your wits' end.

As the previous chair of the Glasgow violence against women and girls partnership, I know that the sector is also deeply frustrated, and we cannot forget that it is mainly women who work in the sector. I am heartened by the announcement of

multiyear funding for VAWG organisations, which have been calling for that for years. It needs to be on a statutory footing for it to be truly transformative and, as my colleague Maggie Chapman mentioned earlier, it must be inflation proofed.

To be clear, the First Minister truly has my respect and support. Vocal leadership on violence against women and girls from a male leader is a welcome and rare reassurance. The united front against such violence, which the First Minister hopes to achieve, sends a strong message of hope for many. However, for just a moment, please allow me to share the anger and frustration that many women feel. How many more of us must be murdered, raped, abused, violated, stalked, upskirted, spat at, verbally harassed or catcalled? How much longer will men continue to spin it that they are the ones who are hard done by? They might say, "It was only a joke. Can't you take a joke?" No, we cannot, because it is not a joke. Not a single thing about the situation is funny.

I am not saying this for sympathy or for attention—this is what women go through day after day. However, since being elected as an MSP, my eyes have been opened once again. Every day now, I receive an onslaught of abuse from men on social media. That is my daily reality and, sadly, it is the cost of standing up for women and girls in the public eye. I am sure that other members in the chamber have the same experience, as my colleague Maggie Chapman mentioned earlier. That abuse includes comments such as, "A vile witch," "She'd get raped," and, "I hope someone follows you down a dark alley."

We are here to debate violence against women and girls out there in the world, but we need to look at our own house—this one—and get it in order. I was pleased with the point that Paul McLennan made earlier, when he was speaking to the leaders in this chamber. We are meant to make the lives of our constituents safer and better, and politicians are meant to be leaders. Every instance of violence that could have been prevented must live on our conscience.

Can we really say that we are taking this seriously enough? Are we doing the deep work, as Karen Adam mentioned earlier? Or are we making it about us? I am concerned to see that violence against women and girls is being treated by some in this Parliament as the latest tactic to divide us and turn us against each other. Right now, we have men deflecting acts of real violence against women and girls, minimising our experiences, insisting, "It's the migrants," and denying us our truth. We know that the violence is committed by partners, ex-partners and family members. We have heard from basically every party in this room

that that is the evidence. That is the cold, hard truth that we are working with.

Ultimately, we must change the behaviour of young boys and men, and I was pleased to hear my colleague Ross Greer's contribution about consistent sex education in schools. I am also pleased to hear that the First Minister is talking about investment in the equally safe at school programme. However, we also need to move from education into our workplaces, communities and public spaces, and I am pleased to see the misogyny bill finally making some progress. That, in my view, will tackle cultural change.

Over my past four years as a councillor, I have pioneered work on feminist town planning at Glasgow City Council, alongside planners, architects, academics, students, artists and politicians from across the globe. That is why Glasgow has now declared its ambition to be the UK's first feminist city. What does that look like? It looks like lighting our streets and parks, frequent night-time public transport, more public toilets, pedestrianisation, spaces for children to play in, and housing built for the needs of intergenerational families. We need to open up space, not close it down. It is not always about closed-circuit television.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): You must conclude.

Holly Bruce: I will finish by mentioning some organisations that are doing the everyday graft, some of which have been mentioned already: the Young Women's Movement, Engender, Amina, the Scottish Women's Budget Group, Together We Survive, SAY Women, Financially Included and ASSIST.

I would also like to thank the journalists who, as David Linden pointed out, are properly scrutinising this issue and reporting on violence against women and girls. Stewart Paterson at the *Glasgow Times* is doing great work with the action not words campaign.

To everyone who is dedicating their time to making life a place for women and girls to thrive in, I say we owe you a great deal.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): We have no time in hand, so any interventions will have to be absorbed in the allotted time that business managers have agreed with members who are speaking.

17:08

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): It is a great privilege to follow Holly Bruce's excellent speech. As other members have said, there have been many excellent contributions, and I am

grateful for the opportunity to close the debate on behalf of Scottish Labour. I really welcome the First Minister's motion today. His leadership on this issue is very necessary, and I thank him for bringing this debate to Parliament today.

I welcome the leadership of others across the chamber, including my colleague Jackie Baillie, who spoke about the importance of calling out misinformation straight away.

I also welcome the points that Willie Rennie made about the fact that all of us, particularly our male colleagues, are responsible for calling out misogyny.

Karen Adam's speech was excellent and her points were well made. Let us show our boys what is possible in this world.

A few people have mentioned the It's Time campaign in the *Sunday Post*, and it is also very important that other people speak about that.

Violence against women and girls is one of the most widespread human rights violations in the world. We have heard that misogyny, gender inequality and violence remain rampant in our society. Challenging those behaviours, which we must all condemn, and tackling their root causes require action from every one of us.

The creation of a Scotland that is fairer, safer and more dignified for women must underpin all the actions throughout this new parliamentary session. I often talk about the cross-portfolio nature of the work that we need to do, and there is no area in which that is more important than this one. Violence against women and girls remains endemic in Scotland. However, it is clear that we, in the Parliament, are deeply concerned about the escalating male violence and that we want to tackle it.

I thank Ross Greer for the points that he made about our young boys and education—it stood out that there is a trend and that we need to get on top of it. Of course, in his usual way, Ross Greer has solutions. It is important that those must be agreed across the parties. Ross Greer also raised the link between national and local government in our communities with regard to tackling the issue.

Many people mentioned the digital world, which often amplifies the negative behaviours that we have been seeing. My colleague Pauline McNeill understands that, and the nature of the problem that we face across the world and must address. The growth in artificial intelligence is creating new forms of abuse and amplifying existing ones. The fast-paced nature of the technology makes it difficult to legislate in that area. However, Pauline Stafford and Katie Hagmann gave examples of where people are working on the ground with communities and are making a difference. We can

learn from that and, I hope, keep up with the required legislation.

As others have said, we need to listen to women's voices. I hope that the Government will take that in the way that it is meant: it is meant to help to move things forward. Research gathered by the Scottish Women's Convention found that women felt that, in the previous session, the Parliament had failed women. For those of us who were here, it is hard to hear that. If we want to change things, we need to listen to those voices and hear what they are saying. There were some commitments and pledges in the previous session that are undelivered on the ground. We need to work out why that is and what we can do to deliver on those promises. That is why the Labour amendment is about an action that we can take, although I take on board the point made by David Linden and Patricia Gibson that we must have more than that in our armoury.

There is so much to say, but I am aware of the time.

I want to be clear that this is not a race issue. People of every race and nationality commit acts of sexual violence and domestic abuse. It is clear that some contributors who are trying to make it a race issue are less concerned with women's safety and more concerned with divisive rhetoric.

Yi-pei Chou Turvey reminded us that the home is often the most unsafe place for women and girls and that, overwhelmingly, perpetrators of sexual assault are known to the victim. That is an important point.

I pay tribute to the women and families who have been mentioned in the debate. Many members have raised the voices of women and families—in particular, I mention Russell Findlay, who has done that time and time again.

I have run out of time, but I appreciate having been able to contribute to the debate.

17:14

Senga Beresford (South Scotland) (Reform):

I begin by speaking not as a politician but as a mother. I have four children, two of whom are daughters—one in her early 30s and the other in her early teens. When we talk about violence against women and girls, I think about my girls—I think about them walking home, going out with friends and getting in taxis. I think about the people that they might meet and the situations that they might find themselves in, and I ask myself a simple question: is the Government doing enough to keep them safe?

There is no excuse for any form of violence against women, girls, men or boys. In my home

town of Dumfries, we once had a much more visible police presence. Today, our police stations are open from 8 am to 4 pm, Monday to Friday, and are closed at weekends. We very rarely see a police officer on the beat. With the number of sexual offences increasing, we need to do better. If a woman is frightened or if a girl believes that she is being followed or is in danger, where should she go? Where is somewhere safe and visible that she can seek help? Safety does not stop at 4 o'clock on a Friday afternoon, and neither should access to our police.

This is not a hypothetical situation for families in my town. Before members get on their bandwagon, I point out that there have been widely reported concerns in Dumfries about the safety of schoolchildren. There have been reports of schoolchildren in public areas, including outside schools, being approached by migrants from the local hotel and asked for sex. *[Interruption.]* I know that members do not believe that that could be possible, but it is. It is important to be precise. Allegations must be investigated properly, and nobody should be judged without evidence. Families are entitled to express their concerns.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Does Senga Beresford agree that all parties should set an example? If so, did the Reform conference set an example, given that a woman was manhandled—

Senga Beresford: That woman should never have been there. She was there to cause trouble.

Members: Oh!

Senga Beresford: Members should take a look at themselves.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I ask members to focus on the debate, please.

Senga Beresford: What is the response to those schoolgirls being approached? Personal safety alarms have been given to children. We are not talking about grown women; we are talking about schoolgirls.

Kate Campbell (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Senga Beresford: No, thank you.

Children should be able to walk through their own town, meet their friends and go shopping without fear. A personal alarm is not the answer to making our girls feel safe. The Labour Party has produced a leaflet telling asylum seekers not to rape women or children. We should be dealing with the cause of that fear by investigating allegations properly, preventing harassment and

ensuring that anyone who poses a risk is dealt with efficiently.

Kate Campbell: Will the member take an intervention?

Senga Beresford: No, she will not.

That is why, in speaking about the issue today, I am angry. Women and girls need a justice system that is capable of protecting them, not a political class that is focused on soundbites rather than facts.

What are we doing about the situation? We hear about strategies, reviews, working groups and proposed legislation. Meanwhile, victims face long waits for justice and our prisons remain under enormous pressure. In summer 2024, 477 prisoners were released early as an emergency measure. In February 2025, the automatic release point for eligible short-term prisoners was reduced from 50 per cent of their sentence to 40 per cent, and hundreds more were subsequently released. That was all because of the underlying problem that Scotland does not have nearly enough prison capacity.

I think that a sentence has to mean something. The public must believe that, if someone commits a serious crime, the state will punish them. Victims have to believe that, and offenders have to fear it. When the chances of being caught appear low, justice takes too long and prisons cannot accommodate the sentences of inmates, confidence in the entire system collapses.

This summer, I spoke to a rape crisis centre about cases in which protective measures are used instead of prosecution. Let me be clear: protection is not a substitute for justice. A protection order might help to safeguard a victim, but protection should accompany justice, not replace it.

I also want to address our immigration crisis, because we cannot have an honest debate about capacity while being frightened to discuss that issue. Before anybody jumps up to tell me that immigration policy is reserved, I point out that I know that it is. However, when our First Minister wears a T-shirt that reads "Refugees welcome here", the issue becomes up for debate. Before members press their intervention buttons, I want to acknowledge that the majority of people in Scottish prisons are British nationals. I know that—we have enough bad people of our own. However, when our prisons are so full that Governments repeatedly resort to early release, when our courts are struggling with serious backlogs and when victims are waiting years for their cases to reach trial, it is clear that we simply do not have the capacity to safely manage any population increase.

There is another issue that we should not be frightened to discuss, and that is shared values. Women in this country fought extraordinarily hard for freedoms that we now regard as fundamental: the rights to work and to vote; the rights to live independently and to choose whom to marry; the rights to say no and to have bodily autonomy; and the right to walk down a street without being harassed, threatened or treated as someone else's property. Those principles are not negotiable, but the SNP itself has acknowledged that misogyny remains a serious problem.

If you campaign to import individuals from countries that do not hold any of the same values and if you choose to import misogyny, you cannot be surprised when the issue that we are debating today is worse in 10 years' time. If we really want to save Scotland for women and girls, we must reintroduce local connection and use every voice in the chamber to force the UK Labour Government to remove Glasgow's status as a dispersal city. That not hatred; it is responsible government.

Pauline Stafford: Will the member take an intervention?

Senga Beresford: No, she will not.

Now, the SNP Government has said that it wants to bring forward a misogyny bill, suspend realism and say that the legislation is great, but legislation alone will not make a frightened woman less fearful. Enforcement and visible policing will; police stations that are actually open will; courts that deliver justice promptly and increased prison capacity will; sentences that actually mean something will.

My message to the Government is simple: open our police stations 24 hours a day, seven days a week; put police officers back on the streets; deal with the court backlog; build the prison capacity that Scotland needs and make sure that the punishment reflects the seriousness of the crime. Women and girls do not need another slogan; we need a functioning justice system.

I appeal to everyone in the chamber to forget their party politics, think about the women in their own lives—their daughters, sisters, mothers and friends—and ask themselves, after almost two decades of SNP Government, whether Scotland's women and girls are genuinely safer. I say no. Then they should ask themselves another question: how much longer are they prepared to defend a failing system? Women are failed when they are assaulted and they are failed when they report an offence and justice takes too long. They are failed when the state lacks the capacity to enforce the sentences that its own courts impose, and our children are failed when the answer to

their fears is to hand them a personal safety alarm and expect them to get on with it.

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Wind up, please.

Senga Beresford: I am angry because my daughters deserve better—everyone's daughters deserve better—and every woman and girl in Scotland deserves better. That is not about men versus women; it is the difference between a state that protects its people and a state that makes excuses for failing to do so.

It is a shame that members did not mention Ann Widdecombe when they were shouting about violence against women.

The Presiding Officer: I call the cabinet secretary to wind up the debate.

17:23

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Today's debate has provided a really important opportunity to recognise that we all have a part to play in challenging the attitudes and behaviour that sustain violence against women and girls. I welcome the contributions from members who attempted to do just that.

As the First Minister has said, and as the programme for government strongly articulates, we cannot tackle violence against women without addressing its root cause, which is women's unequal place in our society. That is why our work on anti-poverty measures, on the cost of living crisis and on increasing economic opportunities is so important.

I thank Jackie Baillie for her speech and, in particular, for the way that she began her remarks. I commend her for tackling the misinformation that we have heard in the chamber today. I agree with many of the points that she made, as I do with many of Pauline McNeill's and, in particular, those about Rape Crisis centres and other services. I point out that, in 2026-27, there was a 5 per cent increase in the funding for Rape Crisis services and that there is now multiyear funding, albeit for just two years.

We have made a commitment to go further, particularly in recognising where there are gaps in services. I would be happy to sit down with Jackie Baillie, Pauline McNeill or Carol Mochan to discuss the areas where we share an understanding that the Government needs to go further. I would welcome the opportunity to do so.

I also pay tribute to Russell Findlay, Willie Rennie and others who brought the experiences of victims/survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence to the chamber and recognised their

extraordinary bravery. Many members' speeches, including those by Mr Findlay and Mr Rennie, rightly challenged the Government to go further. Although I believe that our programme for government will take us further, we can never be complacent. We must recognise that people will continue to question and to point to areas where they believe there still to be room for improvement or change, and we need to be open to that. Families and, indeed, survivors deserve no less. Across Government, we will continue to have those discussions with members.

Willie Rennie: Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I will give way to the member, but I ask that he be brief.

Willie Rennie: Will the cabinet secretary address the point that Russell Findlay and I made about the system investigating itself following murders such as Stacy Hunter's? Surely the system that we have is too long and too inward looking.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Willie Rennie made a powerful point on that issue earlier. I know that the First Minister heard that point directly and reflected on it, as has the Cabinet Secretary for Justice. That is an important example of how we continue to challenge ourselves to ensure that we have the right systems in place.

Katie Hagmann pointed out, quite correctly, that the manosphere is not new; it simply has a different face. It has been there in perpetuity.

I pay tribute to Yi-pei Chou Turvey. For the second week in a row. I find myself in complete agreement with many of her points. Tackling online and technologically facilitated violence against women and girls is exceptionally important, because we must ensure that our law keeps up with the threats that women face, and that is a particular challenge. We have seen the Government rise to that challenge in the past, in moving from looking at domestic abuse solely in terms of physical abuse to recognising coercive control and financial abuse, as Pauline Stafford mentioned. We need to continue to challenge ourselves, and we are doing that through consultation at the moment and by looking at our work in the online safety task force.

I pay particular tribute to my colleague Karen Adam, who gave an exceptional speech today. She spoke about prevention, respect and the values that we need to teach, and about showing our young people what healthy masculinity looks like. I was particularly struck by her point that we need to show them something that is worth becoming. I will check the *Official Report* to ensure that I have got her words absolutely right. That is

such an important part of the work that we need to continue to do.

Ross Greer also spoke about prevention and the fact that violence against women and girls infects every corner of our society. It is exceptionally important that we are aware of the impact on pupils and, indeed, on teachers in schools, and that we then act on that.

The proportion of boys who hold deeply disturbing views and think that such things are normal now is, quite frankly, beyond my comprehension. It is also beyond my comprehension that a large proportion of young girls think likewise, because they are now in a society in which they are being taught what is normal and what is right in a relationship. That is why Time for Inclusive Education's digital discourse initiative, and the other preventative work that is being taken forward in schools, is exceptionally important.

Prevention is a key part of the programme for government. Our commitment is to ensure that we consider which measures will be the most effective and impactful. I know that Ross Greer will have views on that and many other issues, and I would be very pleased to work with him as I did on the council tax example that he cited.

I also note the points that Holly Bruce raised. It is important to recognise that this is not just about boys and young men but about all men and all of society. I have very much enjoyed the conversations that we started to have on tackling this issue, and I look forward to working on that with her.

In his opening remarks, the First Minister also reflected on the fact that there are attempts to exploit the violence that is done to women and girls, particularly when our communities and economies are under pressure, and we saw that again in the Parliament today.

Pauline McNeill was absolutely spot on when she said the problem that we need to tackle is abusive, predatory men. Any man who commits such abuse must face the full consequences of the law; that is the response that we should demand, not just of the Government or of our Parliament but of society as a whole. As I said earlier in the debate in an intervention and as many other members have said, we need to bear in mind that sexual violence is overwhelmingly committed by someone who is known to the victim.

Pauline McNeill: Thinking ahead to the changes that we can make to programmes in order to make a difference, could role models for young men perhaps be incorporated into them?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Pauline McNeill raises an important issue. I have this point in my

notes and will come back to it if I have time, but it is important that we consider the positive role models that exist for boys and young men.

I return to the point that I was making about what helps women. What do women not need and not want? They do not want balaclava-wearing men dressed in black roaming the streets of our cities, pretending to defend women. We do not want men turning up at a march, supposedly to protect women, and then threatening female journalists—that is not what women need. We do not want women to be criticised and called out for having views. After reading the reports of what happened at the weekend, I was going to mention the names of public figures who spoke at an alternative march. However, I am worried about speaking their names in the Parliament because of the backlash that would happen, which would be egged on by other members of the Parliament and by members of their party. We need to call that out at every opportunity.

None of the men who are supposedly worried about women are there when we want to protect women's reproductive health services, nor do they challenge their mates in the pub when they make misogynistic jokes; that is not what they are there to do. It is almost as if the faux angst has nothing to do with protecting women and everything to do with creating division and targeting marginalised communities in Scotland, and we will have absolutely none of it.

Something else that we should have none of is victim blaming: a woman should not be blamed for apparently being in the wrong place. There is no excuse for violence against women and girls, and it is a sorry state of affairs that we have heard about such incidents as part of this debate.

This debate is an opportunity for those of us who have a genuine interest in helping to prevent violence against women and girls to say that such violence is unacceptable and it is not inevitable. The message from this debate can be clear if we want it to be so: preventing violence against women and girls is everyone's responsibility. We all have a role to play in challenging the attitudes and behaviours that allow such abuse to persist, and I hope that the Parliament takes that opportunity today.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on preventing violence against women for an equally safe Scotland.

Business Motion

17:33

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S7M-01186, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on a revision to the business programme.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Thursday 17 September 2026—

after

2.00 pm First Minister's Questions (Party Leaders)

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2025

delete

5.00 pm Decision Time

and insert

5.30 pm Decision Time—[*Jamie Hepburn.*]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

17:34

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first question is, that amendment S7M-01163.2, in the name of Amanda Lindsay, which seeks to amend motion S7M-01163, in the name of John Swinney, on preventing violence against women for an equally safe Scotland, 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.

17:34

Meeting suspended.

17:37

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We come to the vote on amendment S7M-01163.2, in the name of Amanda Lindsay. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Joe Long (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted no.

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

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am not sure whether my vote was registered. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: 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)
 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)
 Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
 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, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (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)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
 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)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Flynn, Stephen (Aberdeen Deeside and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 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)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
 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)
 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)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (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)
 [Proxy vote cast by Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill]
 Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
 Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 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-01163.2, in the name of Amanda Lindsay, is: For 17, Against 102, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S7M-01163.1, in the name of Jackie Baillie, which seeks to amend motion S7M-01163, in the name of John Swinney, on preventing violence against women for an equally safe Scotland, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S7M-01163, in the name of John

Swinney, on preventing violence against women for an equally safe Scotland, as amended, be agreed to.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I do not think that a question was put on my amendment. Perhaps people did not realise because the microphone was off.

The Presiding Officer: I thought that it was passed unanimously.

Russell Findlay: No.

The Presiding Officer: Okay. You are such a sport. [*Laughter.*] I will go back.

The next question is, that amendment S7M-01163.3, in the name of Russell Findlay, which seeks to amend motion S7M-01163, in the name of John Swinney, on preventing violence against women for an equally safe Scotland, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: Apparently, we are not agreed. Please vote now. You had your chance, Mr Findlay. [*Laughter.*]

The vote is closed.

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. My app did not refresh. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Your vote has been recorded.

Gary Bouse (Falkirk West) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Your vote has been recorded.

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

The Presiding Officer: Your vote has been recorded.

Jamie Langan (South Scotland) (Reform): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Your vote has been recorded.

Graham Simpson (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I, too, would have voted yes.

The Presiding Officer: Your vote has been recorded.

Any more for any more? Going once.

For

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)
 Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (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)
 Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
 Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
 Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
 Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
 Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Campbell, Kate (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
 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)
 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)

Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
 Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 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)
 Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
 MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
 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)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (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)
 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)
 [Proxy vote cast by Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill]
 Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
 Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
 Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

Abstentions

Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 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)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S7M-01163.3, in the name of Russell Findlay, is: For 26, Against 78, Abstentions 15.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that motion S7M-01163, in the name of John Swinney, on preventing violence against women for an equally safe Scotland, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament condemns violence against women and girls in all its forms, noting that this includes physical, psychological and online abuse; acknowledges the significant damage and harm that such violence causes to women, girls and wider society; recognises that eradicating such violence requires a focus on prevention and on challenging the attitudes and behaviours that fundamentally underpin violence against women and girls; agrees to demonstrate collective leadership in challenging and changing sexist and misogynistic attitudes among boys, men and those who seek to influence and stoke such damaging behaviour; welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to introduce a pilot of GPS monitoring for suspected domestic abusers released on bail, and calls on the Scottish Government to outline urgently a timetable for its implementation and wider roll-out.

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

Angus Berries and Scotland's Soft Fruit Sector

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark):

The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S7M-00788, in the name of Lloyd Melville, on celebrating Angus berries and Scotland's soft fruit sector. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament celebrates Scotland's soft fruit sector and its important contribution to the rural economy, food and drink industry and the country's reputation for high-quality produce; recognises Angus as one of Scotland's leading berry-growing areas and applauds the growers, seasonal workers, packers, processors and retailers who bring Scottish strawberries, raspberries, blackberries and blueberries to consumers; notes that almost 2,000 hectares of land in Scotland are devoted to soft fruit production, including around 1,000 hectares for strawberries; welcomes the contribution of Angus Growers, the Arbroath-based grower-owned producer organisation, and its members; commends the family-run Balhungle Berry Farm, near Monifieth, which Lloyd Melville MSP recently visited, for growing and selling fresh local berries and connecting people with Angus agriculture; welcomes initiatives such as the Angus Berry Trail, which link berry production with farm shops, hospitality and tourism; acknowledges what it sees as the challenges facing growers, including rising costs, unpredictable weather and access to seasonal labour; notes the belief that more should be done to promote the quality, provenance and nutritional benefits of Scottish berries; further notes the calls for governments, tourism bodies, retailers and public sector caterers to work with growers to promote Scottish berries at home and abroad, including through greater use of seasonal berries in public sector menus, and wishes everyone involved in Scotland's berry sector continued success.

17:44

Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP): I thank colleagues across the chamber who have supported the motion, giving us the opportunity to celebrate one of Scotland's great food industries. I also thank the stakeholders who have come along tonight and who met with me and the Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands prior to the debate.

There are some arguments in Parliament that it takes a fair bit of work to make, but the case for a freshly picked Angus raspberry is not one of them. It is one of those rare arguments where the evidence itself can be eaten. Growing up in and around berry country means that you develop quite the appreciation for a good berry and a low tolerance for a bad one. When you visit a place like Balhungle berry farm near Monifieth, what strikes you most is just how much detail, work and love sits behind something that many of us simply pick up from a supermarket shelf or a farm shop.

NFU Scotland estimates that Scotland's berry industry contributes more than £188 million to our economy. The sector uses only around 1 per cent of our agricultural land but punches way above its weight, delivering up to 16 per cent of our agricultural output. That is a remarkable contribution for the humble berry to make, and Angus sits right at the heart of it. We have many family businesses, and we have Angus Growers and Appetite for Angus, which bring producers together and help them to reach new markets and promote the local berry story. Places such as the farm shop at Balhungle help to connect local people directly with the farms and the farmers producing their food. That really matters.

Berry growing is not just important to the Angus economy; it is integral to the character of Angus, woven into our identity and heritage.

Kirsten Oswald (Eastwood) (SNP): As someone who grew up in Angus and spent my childhood summers picking those berries, I recognise that the member's point about berry growing being integral to who we are, as people from Angus, is absolutely vital. Would he agree that it has a huge value not only to the economy and to Scotland's food and drink sector, but to our heritage and the character of our communities?

Lloyd Melville: Absolutely, and there is a huge amount of work to be done to promote the heritage aspect of the berries. I was, unfortunately, too young to be picking berries and was not sent—

Members: Oh!

Lloyd Melville: I am sorry to put that on the record, but the debate is as much about the future as it is about heritage—[Laughter.] Oh, goodness me. I will move swiftly on.

The industry is changing and innovating as well. Growers are using new technology, including robots travelling through crops at night using ultraviolet light to help control powdery mildew. At the James Hutton Institute, decades of research and breeding continue to improve fruit quality, disease resistance and productivity. Champion varieties are growing in Angus, such as the Monet raspberry and the Magnum strawberry, which I had the privilege of trying right off the crop at Balhungle—I can tell you they were something else.

However, being good at growing something does not automatically translate into big profits. It is easy to see full supermarket shelves and assume that the industry is doing just fine, but strong sales do not necessarily mean strong margins, especially when you pick up a punnet only to find that those berries have travelled thousands of miles to sit on the supermarket shelf. Indeed, growers are making decisions about

plants, tunnels, machinery and labour months before they know what the weather will do, what the harvest will look like or what price they will receive. They are doing that while dealing with rising costs and increasingly unpredictable weather, from flooding and drought to late frosts.

Of course, they are doing it with uncertainty about who will actually pick the berries that they grow. Access to seasonal labour remains important for businesses in my constituency and across Scotland. Brexit ended the free movement on which many of those businesses had relied, and Scottish growers have had to adapt to the consequences. Although immigration policy is reserved to the United Kingdom Government, the system that is now in place has to recognise the reality of businesses whose workforce requirements are highly seasonal. Those growers need certainty before the season begins. We should also take a moment to recognise the people who come to Scotland to do that work. Quite simply, these berries could not be harvested without them, and they should be welcome, valued and treated fairly. If we want Scottish berries on our shelves, we should never lose sight of the people whose work puts them there.

Of course, producing the fruit is only half the job—growers need markets for it and a fair return when they sell it. NFU Scotland again gives us an interesting picture of what is happening on supermarket shelves. Across surveys in May, June and August, an average of 56 per cent of berries were domestically sourced, which shows that, even across the summer growing season, almost half of the berries on our shelves were imported. Nobody is suggesting that Scotland can supply every berry on the shelf all year round, but, at the height of our growing season, we should surely expect Scottish fruit to take pride of place. People who want to buy local should be able to see clearly what it is that they are buying, which means proper labelling for county and country of origin and clear in-store branding. Growers need confidence that, once they have spent the money and grown the crop, supermarkets will take it at a reasonable price.

Government has a key role to play, too. Our good food nation ambitions should be visible on our plates. When Scottish berries are in season, we should be looking for every practical opportunity to ensure that more of them are served in our schools, hospitals and care settings. That means planning procurement around seasonal availability and making opportunities genuinely accessible to Scottish growers and producer organisations. There would be something quite odd about celebrating Scotland as a great food-producing nation while our public kitchens cannot buy food that is being grown just next door.

I hope, therefore, that the minister might address a few points in responding to the debate. We now have a public sector food procurement task force. What more can it be doing to help schools, hospitals and care settings source Scottish produce when that is in season? How can the Scottish Government continue to support the investment, research and innovation that have made the industry so successful to date? How is the Government working with growers now on the pressures that they are telling us about, from labour availability and rising costs to securing fair and reliable markets for their produce?

I began with the humble Angus raspberry, which—to make a bold claim—is simply the best in the world, but that success does not happen by chance. Behind every punnet is a grower who is making investment decisions months before knowing what the season will bring; workers who are there when the crop is ready; and scientists and researchers who are developing better ways to grow it and new varieties for us to eat. There are businesses and communities across Angus and Scotland whose prosperity is connected to what comes out of those fields.

I do not think that there will be much disagreement tonight, although members may disagree on which region produces the best berries. Nevertheless, I hope that we can find consensus on the importance of this vital industry to our economy, our heritage and our future. We should decide tonight what we can do to support the industry by backing growers, opening up markets and eating and shopping local.

That is how we will make sure that Angus berries remain one of Scotland's great food success stories for many years to come. I look forward to hearing the rest of the debate.

17:53

Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): I thank my neighbouring Angus constituency colleague, Lloyd Melville, for bringing the debate to the chamber—yes, the Angus mafia are here. When people think of Scottish agriculture, they often picture barley, beef, lamb or dairy, but today, as he has said, we are celebrating another extraordinary part of Scotland's rural economy: our soft fruit sector.

Across my constituency of Angus North and Mearns, which covers both the north of Angus and the south of Aberdeenshire, growers are producing some of the finest soft fruits and berries to be found anywhere. Scotland's long summer daylight, cooler days and slower-ripening fruit give our berries their distinctive sweetness, flavour and quality. That success is visible in businesses in my constituency such as Castleton farm at Fordoun;

Charleton farm near Montrose; and North Mains of Dun and Southesk farms near Brechin. Those are employers, innovators, visitor destinations and educators, and they are anchors of rural community life.

Castleton farm at Fordoun is a striking example. Its northerly location allows fruit to ripen slowly and develop exceptional sweetness. Harvesting fruit for much of the year, it grows strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, blueberries and cherries, and it has built a strong farm shop, cafe and product range around fruit that is all grown, picked and processed in situ.

Likewise, Charleton farm on the edge of Montrose shows how soft fruit connects people with food, place and nature. Through pick-your-own fruit, a farm shop, food, events and educational experiences, it helps families and young people understand where food comes from, which is important and why food security and environmental care matter.

The sector is built on science and innovation. Polytunnels, table-top growing systems, precision irrigation and fertigation have extended the season and improved quality. As Mr Melville mentioned, that matters because Scotland's berry industry contributes around £188 million to the Scottish economy and supports rural jobs in packing, haulage, hospitality, tourism, food manufacturing and research. When we buy Scottish berries, we support a whole network of rural livelihoods, but we must be honest about the pressures that growers are facing. Soft fruit is labour intensive and requires skilled seasonal workers, careful hand picking, fast grading, rapid chilling and demanding quality control. Labour, energy, packaging, fertiliser and transport costs have all recently risen, while late frosts, heat, flooding and water scarcity can disrupt harvests and damage yields.

There is also the challenge of market power, which has been exacerbated since Brexit. Major supermarkets provide vital routes to market, but they have enormous influence over prices, specifications and contracts. Fixed pricing can leave growers absorbing rising costs, while strict cosmetic standards mean that perfectly good berries can be rejected or downgraded simply because they are the wrong shape, size or colour. That is why alternative routes to market are so important. Market gardens, produce-box schemes, farm shops, cafes, pick-your-own experiences, independent greengrocers, hospitality, processors, distilleries, brewers and food manufacturers can help growers to capture more value and reduce food waste. Secondary-grade fruit can become jams, juices, purees, spirits, beers, desserts and other high-value ingredients.

Today, therefore, I make a simple point: Scotland's soft fruit sector is a success story, but it is not one that we can take for granted. It needs fair contracts, visible Scottish labelling, genuine retailer partnership, continued investment in research and infrastructure, and public support for local produce. Above all, it needs us to recognise the skill, risk and commitment behind every berry that is grown here.

The next time we see Scottish strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, blackberries or cherries on a shelf, in a farm shop, in a school meal, in a restaurant dessert or in a family kitchen, let us remember what they represent: innovation, resilience, rural employment, environmental stewardship and the very best of Scotland's natural larder. It is a sector worth celebrating, worth supporting and worth protecting.

17:58

Jamie Langan (South Scotland) (Reform): I thank the member for Angus South for lodging the motion and bringing the debate to the chamber. The soft fruit industry is both an essential part of Scotland's world-class horticultural sector and an important component of Scotland's, and Britain's, domestic food production.

As the motion alludes, our largest-scale commercial soft fruit industry is constituted primarily in Angus as well as in Perthshire and Fife. However, there are examples of soft fruit production across other parts of the country, including in my region of South Scotland. That is particularly the case in the Scottish Borders, where there is a long-standing tradition, with McGregor Farms of Berwickshire having farmed strawberries in the 1970s and 1980s, and onward into the new century. It is mostly keenly felt and seen with the notable family-run Border Berries company at Rutherford farm, between Kelso and St Boswells, which has been an active soft fruit producer since the 1960s. I know that the member for Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale knows how good Border Berries is. It is good to have a bit of cross-party consensus in the chamber once in a while. To this day, Borders Berries continues to produce fantastic strawberries, raspberries, blackcurrants, redcurrants, gooseberries and tayberries, which constitute some of the finest seasonal produce that we all love and enjoy in rural Scotland.

It is incredibly important that we continue to highlight the fantastic produce of Scotland's soft fruit sector, as well as the potential for added value to the rural visitor economy through efforts such as the Angus berry trail, which the motion mentions. Indeed, the success of the pick-your-own fruit model can be seen at the aforementioned Border Berries, which is South Scotland's largest such

business. That model is not only a great business venture but a very educational place to enable younger people to understand where their food comes from and that it does not simply materialise on our supermarket shelves.

The motion also highlights the ongoing challenges that the sector faces. I note with concern that the area of the industry has fallen from roughly 2,200 hectares in 2020 to a figure that now, by some estimates, is approaching 1,900 hectares in 2026. Given the soft fruit industry's important role in Scottish food production, those challenges raise a broader and important point around support for our nation's long-term food production strategy. In these weeks after central Government told the general public to consider stockpiling tinned food due to threats to our sources of food supply, it is clear that we are living in an era when the end of the just-in-time supply chain increasingly applies to food as well. Thus, it is increasingly important that we address food production as a matter of national strategic resilience—our soft fruit sector has an important role to play in that—and that Government policy focuses on food production when addressing rural affairs and the broader agricultural and horticultural sectors.

The issue of the declining industry area size for the Scottish soft fruit sector corresponds with a need for us to have an honest conversation around Scotland's land use and to recognise that Scotland's land cannot be all things to all people. In my mind, that means having food production at the front and centre of the conversation and, importantly, ensuring that Scottish farmers and producers are not incentivised to take any land out of food production for other policy agendas and priorities.

The member touched on changing weather patterns, and I think that there is a recognition that that is happening and is affecting the agricultural and horticultural sector. However, it is important that we take a pragmatic and realistic approach to what that entails. In moving away from climate mitigation policies such as herd reduction to sustained climate adaptation, we need to realise the limits of our own agency. Scottish agriculture and horticulture will not be able to challenge the global issue that is climate change, but they can and should be able to adapt to those challenges.

A vital but often under-discussed part of our ability to feed the nation is the bottleneck around production, with particular issues around meat processing sites having been particularly felt in the ongoing pork crisis that I know, as a member for the North East region, is pertinent to members on other benches.

Of course, the wider debate around Scotland's ability to feed itself and the matter of national strategic resilience goes far beyond the scope of this debate, but it is important that we recognise the role that the soft fruit sector plays in that and touch on the commonality of issues faced by the sector and the broader food production sector.

To conclude, the motion raises important points, and I agree that it is vital that we continue to celebrate and promote the fantastic work and produce of the soft fruit sector. I, for one, look forward to continuing to enjoy our fantastic seasonal produce.

18:02

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank Lloyd Melville for bringing the motion to the chamber. I want to spend my time talking about the workers who pick the fruit that we celebrate—those on whom the soft fruit industry depends but who do not get much mention. For example, there is no mention in the motion of the low wages that are paid for their physically exhausting work; of the restrictive visa conditions that make it difficult for them to move to another farm and another employer if the conditions and pay there are better; of what the Worker Support Centre calls a “culture of fear” on some Scottish farms, with workers being referred to by a number—not their name—being shouted at for speaking their native language and being harassed for taking toilet breaks or being unable to meet targets; or of the outrageously poor accommodation conditions that they endure.

Lloyd Melville promoted his motion today with a beautifully and slickly produced social media video, complete with drone footage of a very sunny fruit farm in Angus, in my region. The conditions, as far as we could see from what the video showed us, seemed good. It was a really good piece of promotion. However, that is not the reality for many agricultural workers in the sector. Last year, the BBC exposed shocking conditions at a soft fruit farm in Angus. Workers reported freezing conditions in their accommodation.

The Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands (Jim Fairlie): Would the member accept that denigrating the entire sector because of a particular case is not helpful to the sector? Does she accept that, in reality, the sector is one of the better-paying parts of the agriculture sector and provides a hell of a lot of work for people who cannot get it in the areas that they come from?

Maggie Chapman: I am highlighting the concerns, exposed by the BBC last year, about shocking conditions that exist in Scotland, which we could be taking action on. *[Interruption.]*

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Minister, you must not heckle.

Maggie Chapman: Workers report freezing conditions in their accommodation, with one worker reporting that they needed to sleep fully clothed due to the cold. A video shows carpets so damp that water seeps out when the workers walk on them. There are gaps in roofs and floors, exposing the workers to the open air.

To add insult to injury, that accommodation is not part of the job but must be paid for. On the minimum guaranteed 32 hours per week, at the national minimum wage of £11.44 per hour, the £9.99 a day accommodation charges represent 19 per cent of a worker's net pay. High additional charges reported by workers for electricity, fuel and services such as laundry and travel mean that wages fall below the legal minimum. Many of the 61 workers that the Worker Support Centre supported with dismissal cases in 2024 also faced very short notice of eviction from accommodation, with some of them becoming homeless.

The basic problem is that the increase in renters' rights around quality, rent control and eviction largely do not apply to seasonal agricultural accommodation. Only one UK local authority has requested powers to inspect caravan accommodation for agricultural workers and, even then, the Angus inspection scheme does not apply to the inside of the accommodation. The minimum tolerable repair standards that apply to other housing apply to agricultural accommodation in caravans only if local authorities enact byelaws to make that the case, and the Worker Support Centre has not found any local authority that has made such byelaws. Local authorities, the fair work agency, the Health and Safety Executive, the Scottish Government, the agricultural wages enforcement team and the UK visas and immigration compliance unit are all involved. However, workers are slipping through the gaps, with nobody taking proper responsibility for standards.

I am proud that my colleague Ariane Burgess worked so hard in the previous session to raise the issue. Her parliamentary questions prompted the Government to announce new statutory accommodation standards for all seasonal workers. However, that was in November 2025. This year's programme for government has been and gone, and calls for it to include the new standards went unheeded. I therefore ask the minister to tell us when the Government will follow through on that promise. When will we respect seasonal workers' human rights to warm and safe homes? When will we adequately house the workers without whom the soft fruits industry that we celebrate this evening would be nothing?

I want to be able to celebrate the whole of the industry. However, when workers face the situation that they do, we cannot.

18:08

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I very much regret that Maggie Chapman has decided to use this debate to characterise this brilliant sector of Scotland's economy in such derisory terms. I can tell the chamber that, having visited many berry farms over the years, that is simply not an accurate depiction of the workers who work in those places.

Jamie Langan: Does Stephen Kerr agree that our fantastic agriculture and horticulture industries face enough challenges without people running their name through the mud? Maggie Chapman was without a positive word to say about an important employer in her region.

Stephen Kerr: It was incredibly disappointing not to hear very much of a positive nature in that speech, although Maggie Chapman will forgive me if I say that I often feel that way about her contributions in the chamber.

I am proud to number myself among the Angus mafia, which, truth be told, is a sizeable group in this Parliament. Angus is always punching above its weight. In my political experience, it is interesting to discover who was born in Angus, where they now are and what they are doing.

I was very pleased to support Lloyd Meville's motion, because Angus berries are, indeed, one of the great success stories of Scottish agriculture. They are renowned for their quality and there is a huge demand for them. They are produced by growers who have shown incredible ingenuity over many years.

For me, this is personal. I agree with Kirsten Oswald, who, until tonight, I did not know was a daughter of Angus. As a boy—Lloyd Melville needs to listen to this—I also went to the berries. To be frank, I cannot pretend that I always went to the berries with enormous enthusiasm, but my dad had a very firm view that I needed to learn how to work, and my mum strongly supported his position. In the summer, off I went to pick the raspberries and, earlier in the season, the strawberries. Then, when it came time for the tattie holidays—that is what we called them in Angus in those days—I was again packed off to the fields.

I well remember filling baskets, punnets and buckets in the long rows and lines of raspberries. I do not know what they were going to do with the raspberries—maybe they were using them for dye. I had a little transistor radio that I tied around my waist, so I spent the whole day listening to it, moving it between the radio stations as we did in

those distant days when Lloyd Melville was not even a glint in his parents' eyes. I remember the power of the incentive, because the money was mine at the end of the day. I could spend it on anything I chose. I can tell you now that I thank heaven that I was able to learn those valuable lessons in the berry fields of Angus. Sometimes, work is not exactly what you would choose it to be, but there is a nobility in work, and the reward is the reward. I learned to turn up, keep going and finish the job.

I introduce this as a side note to the debate, but I think that it is relevant. I regret that many young people today—including Lloyd Melville, apparently—have fewer opportunities to get that first experience of work through things such as Saturday jobs and holiday jobs, including going to the berries. I am sure that other members to my left will not agree with this, but I believe that, in many cases, we have made it too difficult for employers to give teenagers those first few hours of responsibility and independence that that kind of work gives.

I am a bit confused, because the clock is not showing how long I have been speaking. I think that that means that I can speak for as long as I like.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): That is not correct, Mr Kerr, and you have already had four minutes.

Stephen Kerr: Surely not.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I understand that the clock was not set.

Stephen Kerr: In that case, I will conclude by asking the Minister some questions. I did not know what the time was, so I hope that you will allow me some leeway, Presiding Officer. I would not have rambled on if I had known what time I had left, although rambling on is my speaking style.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Mr Kerr, you have four minutes, like everybody else.

Stephen Kerr: I want to ask the minister directly about the support that the sector needs, particularly around capital support, to help growers expand and improve productivity, including through polytunnels, irrigation and cold storage. Lloyd Melville mentioned automation, along with new robotics technology, which I think is important.

If I had had more time, I would have talked about this issue, but I will just ask whether the minister will join me in doing what I did in my previous elected role and press the United Kingdom Government for a flexible seasonal workers system, with growers being able to recruit through a wider range of Government-approved scheme

operators. There is a very narrow choice at the minute.

Will the Minister work with retailers to encourage—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Mr Kerr, you have had five and a half minutes now, because you started at eight minutes past. If you could bring your remarks to a conclusion, that would be helpful.

Stephen Kerr: I will.

Will the minister work with retailers to encourage longer-term purchasing agreements, so that growers can have confidence to invest? Further—this is important, so I hope that the minister is listening—will the Government reconsider its position on precision breeding? The James Hutton Institute was mentioned, and we have world-leading science happening there. The Scottish Government needs to stop denying the science and understand the difference between gene editing and gene modification, because this is a sector that will benefit enormously from the outstanding research that is being conducted at the James Hutton Institute.

Thank you for your forbearance, Presiding Officer. I am sorry that I mentioned the clock at all.

18:15

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): I was immediately impressed by Lloyd Melville when he joined the Parliament, and I was even more impressed when he joined me as deputy convener of the Transport Committee. However, this evening, everything he said was utter tosh. His suggestion that Angus berries are better than Fife berries just means that he is going to have to leave the committee, as I have no confidence in him any more.

A few years ago, as an MSP, I was fortunate enough to be able to do a day's work experience at Easter Grangemuir farm, outside Pittenweem. I joined the Romanians, Ukrainians and people from other parts of eastern Europe and beyond to pick berries for the day—it was on the raised beds, so I did not have to bend my back. I was proud that, after my two-hour session, I had collected four big trays. Then I went to speak to the Ukrainians and Romanians, and they said that they had done 25 times as much. Those people had a ferocious work rate and were keen, because the more they picked, the more they earned. They were working incredibly hard and they were delighted to be here.

I want to address Maggie Chapman's point. I think that any allegations of poor accommodation and mistreatment should be investigated. That should, of course, be the case. However, just as

Maggie Chapman urges us not to generalise in other areas of political debate, I think that we should do the same in this sector, because the fruit farms that I visit are outstanding. They provide good accommodation for their workers and good-quality goods for the supermarkets.

There is no doubt that the sector is under stress. A number of fruit farms have closed in recent years or have shrunk their production.

The sector has changed dramatically from when I was a boy. My dad was a grocer, so I never got the opportunity to work in the fields, picking berries or doing the foraging. At that point, there was a shorter season—maybe about six weeks—whereas it now goes on for months, because farmers have invested massively in tunnels that are heated and in the installation of raised beds. All of that is expensive and, if farmers cannot get the workers to pick the berries, all of that investment goes to waste. However, farmers' confidence that they will be able to do so had a hole knocked in it by the previous UK Government's seasonal agricultural workers scheme restrictions, particularly in the post-Brexit and post-pandemic period, when some people went home and did not come back. Many fruit farms have shrunk their production as a result. We should find ways of getting more workers to come and pick the good-quality produce from Fife—Fife, in particular, has good quality produce; that is less the case in Angus.

I say this with a certain amount of trepidation, but the Agricultural Wages Board adds some extra complications and red tape to a system in which we already have good-quality standards.

Jim Fairlie: The point that Willie Rennie has just made touches on the point that Maggie Chapman made. I have had this debate about the Agricultural Wages Board with members of the soft fruit sector. When I was a shepherd, that was the thing that protected me, because there was nobody else doing it on my behalf. As an employer, I know that the standards that it sets must be adhered to. I get the difficulty that can be caused in terms of people working time and a half or time and a quarter, but those issues can be worked around. However, under no circumstances should we be taking away the guarantee that those workers will be properly paid and respected for what they do.

Willie Rennie: If I can say this delicately, when Jim Fairlie was a shepherd we did not have the standards that we have now, with minimum wages and other protections for workers. My only suggestion is that we should consider that we have perhaps moved on from those times. I am digging a hole here, so I will not go any further.

My final point is that I would like the minister to look into the work that Fife farmers are doing on

regionally integrated food economics. They have applied for some funding to do research work as part of a number of pilots across the UK to get more integrated economies in the area of agricultural produce. That work has been led by Toby Anstruther, who is a landowner in my constituency. I think that that work goes together with the points that I made earlier about getting good-quality local food into our local schools, which I know is something that the minister has been working on, so I hope that he will get behind that initiative.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark):

Due to the number of members who wish to speak in the debate, I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3 of standing orders, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 8.14.3, the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes.—[*Lloyd Melville*]

Motion agreed to.

18:20

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): I am delighted to speak in the debate and to support the motion lodged by Lloyd Melville, which highlights Scotland's soft fruit sector. The motion highlights that 2,000 hectares of land in Scotland are devoted to soft fruit production and that soft fruits are a major contribution to Scotland's agricultural economy.

The motion quite rightly shines a deserving spotlight on Angus. I readily congratulate our neighbours across the Tay for their world-renowned berry production. Angus is certainly the big boy of Scotland's east coast for soft fruit—its soft fruit belt—but, when it comes to berries, the smaller ones are sometimes the sweetest. While Fife may not have the acres and the tonnage of Angus, being a little bit closer to the sun makes Fife's berries a little bit sweeter, in my opinion.

The soft fruit sector has a special place in my heart. Unlike Mr Melville, but like many kingdom of Fife residents, one of my first jobs was as a summer berry picker, picking strawberries and raspberries. I am sure that Mr Melville will forgive me if I use some of his time to remind members that, in the kingdom of Fife, including my own Kirkcaldy constituency, we boast a soft fruit sector that is every bit as vibrant, innovative and essential to Scotland's agricultural story. The kingdom has around 225 hectares of soft fruit, of which 125 hectares—just over half—is dedicated to strawberries, with blueberries and raspberries accounting for 15 per cent each; the remainder is made up of blackberries, blackcurrants and hybrid berries.

The kingdom's soft fruit growers are spread right across Fife; they include farms such as Easter Grangemuir farm in the east neuk and Fife Fruits in Cooper. What folk do not realise is that several Fife farms are members of Angus Growers. The motion specifically commends Angus Growers, the outstanding producer organisation based in Arbroath, and I whole-heartedly agree with that commendation, especially given the contribution of Fife soft-fruit farmers such as Tom Stockwell of Barnsmuir Farm. That cross-regional collaboration demonstrates that the success of Angus Growers is deeply rooted in Fife soil, showing how interconnected our regional food economies truly are.

For other soft fruit farms, such as Woodbank farm on Standing Stane Road, in my own constituency of Kirkcaldy, selling soft fruit direct at the farm gates is a vital part of the farm economy and provides a vital link to the local community. Local bakeries, cafes and hospitality businesses across Kirkcaldy and Fife take immense pride in sourcing Fife berries for their summer menus, proving that rural production directly feeds urban high street prosperity.

Beyond our local fields, I wish to highlight Scotland's research and development role, which underpins not just Scotland's soft fruit industry but the global soft fruit industry. Many commercial imported soft fruit varieties were developed in Scotland, including the Glen series of raspberries, the Loch Ness blackberry and the Ben series of blackcurrants, which dominate global production. We cannot forget the hybrids such as the tayberry and the loganberry. All those soft fruit varieties were developed and grown here, in Scotland, and they are examples of Scotland's scientific soft power.

It is crucial that Scotland continues to be at the forefront of agriculture research and development. However, as the motion rightly notes, we must not romanticise the sector to the point of ignoring the steep challenges that our growers face. First and foremost, there is the issue of seasonal labour. Berry picking is a skilled, labour-intensive job that demands a reliable workforce during an intense harvest window. Woodbank farm, just outside Kirkcaldy, employs 100 workers at its peak production time. Many of them come from eastern Europe—from countries such as Romania, Bulgaria and Lithuania—and they live on site. However, post-Brexit immigration restrictions and bureaucratic hurdles with seasonal worker visa schemes continue to place immense stress on producers.

Secondly, growers are grappling with severe cost inflation affecting energy, fertiliser, packaging and logistics, alongside increasingly unpredictable climate patterns that bring unexpected frost,

heatwaves and torrential summer rain. At the same time, farm-gate prices often fail to reflect those skyrocketing input costs. We must call for major supermarket retailers to treat primary producers fairly, ensuring that margins cover the true costs of sustainable local production.

Scotland's soft fruit sector is far more than just a cornerstone of our agricultural economy; it is a proud symbol of our region's heritage, our scientific innovation and our local communities. From the fields of Fife and Angus to the dinner tables around the world, our growers deliver exceptional produce against increasingly difficult odds.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I call Tim Eagle. You have up to four minutes.

18:25

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I will try to keep within that timeframe.

There is not much that flusters Stephen Kerr, but apparently the humble berry is good enough to do that, and what a resounding speech it was. There is not much that I can disagree with tonight, to be honest, and I thank Lloyd Melville for securing the debate.

I echo Willie Rennie's important comments to Maggie Chapman. If there is a question of something going wrong on a farm, we must look into that, but I would not want anyone to take away the impression that this is not an incredible sector when it comes to Scotland's produce, as it is doing amazing work.

I am not from Angus myself—

Stephen Kerr: Shame! [*Laughter.*]

Tim Eagle: —so I did not pick the berries as a youngster. I have not actually visited one of the berry farms, but it is something that I would love to do at some point. I have driven through the area many times and I have been involved in agriculture for a long time, so I am well aware of the industry.

Earlier, I was looking up some of the great examples of innovation in the sector. My understanding is that the sector is now using drones in some cases for precision pollination, and I believe that robotics are helping to deal with crop diseases. There are even new varieties after years of extensive breeding programmes. That is incredible, and we are doing all of that in the heart of Scotland.

We have spoken about Angus, which is great, and we have spoken about Fife, which is okay, but we have not yet spoken about the Highlands and Islands. The Highlands and Islands will be the future of the berry sector, surely, because we

produce great food. I love debates like this one, because we all get very territorial about the areas of Scotland that matter to us. In the Highlands and Islands, we have a combination of great produce, with plenty of jams and preserves and soft fruits coming on, such as Caithness Summer Fruits, Wester Hardmuir fruit farm, Black Isle Berries and Balnain blueberries. I am sure that there are many more that I could mention.

The important point is that it does not stop there for us in Scotland. I have disagreed with the minister on many things since I have come to the Parliament, but the one thing that I stand shoulder to shoulder with the minister on is that Scotland produces some incredible food and drink, including seafood from around our wonderful nation, beef and lamb, cheeses and whisky—the dram. That is impressive, and we should be very proud of that. That combination of outstanding natural produce and innovative businesses gives Scotland a food and drink industry that we should be truly proud of.

The real reason why I am here is not only to commend the great and humble berry but to plead with the minister—we have had this conversation before—to do more to ensure that public procurement in Scotland recognises the great assets that we have. We should make sure that there are punnets of blueberries and strawberries in every hospital and school throughout the country, and, over the five years of this parliamentary session, we should make sure that that becomes a reality.

18:28

Donald MacKinnon (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I thank Lloyd Melville for securing a debate on what is an important industry for his constituency and for Scotland.

Going by the contributions so far, I am clearly not the only one who gets excited when the first Scottish strawberries and raspberries hit the supermarket shelves. The flavour and quality of Scottish berries are surely unsurpassed, but I will not get into the debate about which area produces the best ones.

Willie Rennie: There is no debate. *[Laughter.]*

Donald MacKinnon: I am not the greenest-fingered crofter—I stick to things that are a bit woollier—but I have some blackcurrant bushes in my back garden that seem to grow despite my best efforts, and I enjoyed a small crop from them earlier this summer.

Other crofters in my constituency who are better at growing things have found great success with the use of Polycrubs and other polycarbonate tunnels that extend the growing season and the

possibilities for soft fruit production in our islands, where the weather conditions can limit the possibilities and limit the use of conventional tunnels, which have a tendency to blow away.

More food being grown and consumed locally is something to which we should aspire. The crofting township that I come from would have been close to self-sufficient 100 years ago, with vegetables, potatoes, dairy products and, of course, its own meat all being produced locally. Although those days will not return any time soon, the Polycrubs have increased the amount of fruit and vegetables that is grown in our islands.

Going back to berries, I am thankful that our commercial soft fruit growers are much more skilled than I am. I understand that there was a bumper crop last year and that this year has followed the trend. The importance of soft fruit, which makes an estimated contribution of £188 million to the Scottish economy, is not insignificant. In addition, there are exciting opportunities around agritourism, and our soft fruit industry may have led the way in that area with pick-your-own farms. I have fun memories of visiting those attractions on family holidays to the mainland as a child, and I have no doubt that there is room for growth in agritourism going forward.

Of course, the sector is not without its challenges. As we have already heard in the debate, access to labour is never far from those conversations. It is right that the UK Government has taken a pragmatic view on that, with a five-year extension to the seasonal workers visa scheme. Although I have no doubt that elements of it could be streamlined to work better and that there are areas in which further flexibility would be welcome, it is an important element of ensuring that soft fruit growers are able to access the labour that they need to meet the demands of their business.

Lloyd Melville: We have had a good, respectful, and consensual debate. The member will be aware that Scotland's agriculture sector has unique demands compared to those in the rest of the UK. The Prime Minister has set out his willingness to engage on further devolution. In the spirit of co-operation, would the member support calls for a Scotland-specific visa scheme?

Donald MacKinnon: I would not support a specific Scottish visa scheme, but I think that UK ministers should be engaging with Scottish ministers on the unique needs of the sector in Scotland and exploring where those needs are shared with other parts of the agriculture sector across the UK. The member spoke about the consensual nature of the debate, which should spill over into those discussions.

When we talk about workers and the need for labour, the way that those workers are treated is important. It is essential to ensure that they receive good pay and good living conditions. As we have heard in the debate, although few and far between, there are some isolated examples of those conditions falling short in the sector. One example is too many.

In closing, I thank Lloyd Melville for securing the motion for debate. I look forward to hearing the minister's response, in closing, to the member's ask about procurement. I also thank the soft fruit growers who are in the public gallery. I wish them well for the remainder of the season and look forward to a productive 2027.

18:32

The Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands: I have no idea how I will respond to the debate, because I have so many notes written down, but I will do my best. If there was ever a debate that I am delighted to respond to, it is this debate from Lloyd Melville about the soft fruit sector, because I am absolutely passionate about it. I thank Lloyd Melville for securing the motion for debate.

However, making the claim that Angus is the best berry producing area in Scotland is completely off the charts. Willie Rennie is talking absolute nonsense, because it is undoubtedly Perthshire—that is a fact. We only have to listen to “The Berry Fields of Blair”, written by a wonderful old woman, Belle Stewart, and made famous by Hamish Henderson.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Minister, could you look to the front, so that your remarks are on the record?

Jim Fairlie: I am not sure whether I want that on the record. *[Laughter.]*

The point that I was making is that we have a phenomenal heritage of berry picking in Scotland. We should all get behind it and celebrate it, despite the little bit of banter between Fife, Angus and Perthshire.

We used to have berry fields from the Lothians to Fife, Perthshire, Angus and Aberdeenshire. That area has dwindled and gotten smaller over the years, which is a pity but demonstrates the resilience of those who are still in the sector. The producer organisations have done some work to capture the fantastic new technologies that are available to the sector. To answer one of Stephen Kerr's many questions, the Government supports the sector through the producer organisations, in order to allow people to work together and collaborate, and to deliver the technology that has allowed the industry to flourish.

I was supposed to be recognising the importance of Lloyd Melville's motion. Calum Kerr needed to leave, but, before he did, he said to me, “Isn't it great what Lloyd has managed to bring to the Parliament today? He boasted that he is so young that he is slightly green. Imagine how far he will go when he ripens.” *[Laughter.]* Those were Calum Kerr's words; I do not take responsibility for them, but I deliver them on his behalf to Lloyd Melville.

On a serious point, the soft fruit sector is one of our success stories. It contributes more than £188 million to our economy despite the many challenges that we have talked about in this debate, such as the labour shortages that are a direct result of Brexit. I found it odd that Stephen Kerr asked us to talk to the UK Government, given that it was his UK Government that brought in Brexit in the first place and that did what it did to wages in the seasonal agricultural sector.

Stephen Kerr: I am sure that the minister listened to my speech. When I was an MP, I lobbied, along with other Scottish Conservative colleagues, to make the arrangements more flexible, because I understood the restrictions. That does not mean that I do not support Brexit; it means that we just need to get this right.

While I am on my feet, I will add that I hope that the minister will also address the issue of gene editing and give his support to the James Hutton Institute, of which I hope that he is a champion.

Jim Fairlie: I will come back to the point about gene editing, but Stephen Kerr's other point does not remove the fact that he supported a Government that made it a lot harder for the berry industry to get the people that it needs.

Despite the challenges—and there are many challenges—the sector has significantly grown its output throughout the past 20 years. That growth has been driven by steadily increasing demand for soft fruit, and that demand has been driven by soft fruit being such a quality product—not just here, but across the UK as well. So far in 2026, Scottish producers have already exported nearly 800 tonnes of soft fruit to countries around the world, which is 80 per cent more than they did in 2025. The quality of our produce is being celebrated and enjoyed internationally, from the tennis matches at Wimbledon to cities in Saudi Arabia.

We know that our climate is changing, but fruit producers have led the way in adapting to the challenges that are posed by climate change by investing in water storage lagoons and drip irrigation, which allow them to continue production during dry summers, and by exploring sustainable growing materials to reduce their reliance on peat. I have already mentioned the fruit and veg aid

scheme, which allows the berry sector to continue to make such investments.

None of that success would be possible without the expertise that comes from the horticulture sector. That includes dedicated passionate growers, plant breeders and the researchers in our scientific institutes, including the example that Mr Kerr just talked about. They work tirelessly to bring new varieties to the market and to support the sector in facing the changing climate.

I am old enough to have picked berries as a boy, which we did to pay for our school uniforms. We did not get to spend that money—unlike Stephen Kerr—because we came from a rough area. There was a type of berry in the area at that time called Glen Clova. Those berries were beautiful, big and juicy, but they had spines that were there to stop you getting your hands on them, and you would rip your arms to bits by picking the Glen Clova. I am glad that technology has managed to get rid of some of the barriers to actually picking our fabulous fruit.

I have always been a huge supporter of the soft fruit sector, and I am proud to promote it as much as I can. In 2025, we launched the berries of Scotland campaign at the Royal Highland Show. That campaign was a collaboration between the Scottish Government, Scotland Food & Drink and the berry growers of Scotland, and we dedicated a stall at the Highland Show to showcasing the sector. Since then, Scotland Food & Drink has worked with producers to develop short films and marketing campaigns to highlight specific growers and encourage the public to enjoy more of the quality soft fruit that is grown in Scotland.

That brings me to the public sector food procurement task force that I have just established, which is chaired by Assist FM and NFU Scotland. That task force will look at different ways in which we can get more Scottish produce into schools, colleges, hospitals and prisons, as well as the plans that will be developed as a result of the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022. All of those things tie together to get as much local produce into the system as we can. I hope that that answers some of the questions that were raised.

As I said, as I grew up, I was picking berries to pay for our school uniforms. One of the other great things that we have now is frames. When I was picking strawberries as a boy, they were on the ground and, other than tattie picking, there was nothing more back breaking than picking strawberries from the ground.

I believe that there is genuinely further scope for us to drive the soft fruit sector. I agree with Tim Eagle that our beef, lamb, pork, venison, seafood, gin and whisky are global brands. Berries should be right up there with all of those products to make

Scotland a destination for agritourism and food tourism—that is so important to Scotland. Would it not be fantastic if we could see the celebration of the Scottish berry season right here and right across Scotland? They have a Beaujolais nouveau festival in France. Why should we not have the same thing in Scotland for our berry sector?

I want us to be bold and ambitious in promoting our soft fruit sector, much as we are in promoting our whiskies and our other food. We should tap into the heritage that Kirsten Oswald talked about—for example, I talked about “The Berry Fields of Blair”, which was written by Belle Stewart and made famous by Hamish Henderson. We should also look at the science that is behind all of the growing that is going on in Scotland.

There is so much to talk about with the berry sector, and I am very pleased to have responded to the debate. I congratulate Lloyd Melville on bringing it forward.

Meeting closed at 18:41.

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