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Thursday 17 September 2026

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 17 September 2026

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 13:30]

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Good afternoon. The first item of business is general question time. To accommodate as many questions as possible, I ask for concise questions and answers.

Royal Mail (Festive Season)

1. **Stuart McMillan (Inverclyde) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what dialogue it has had with the United Kingdom Government regarding Royal Mail's preparations for the 2026 festive season, including how Royal Mail will support businesses in Scotland during their busiest time of the year. (S7O-00240)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): The Minister for Business and Fair Work has recently written to Royal Mail to ensure that it is fulfilling its universal service obligation and to make it clear that that must be maintained. In my role as Minister for Public Finance, I, too, have written to Royal Mail, but I have yet to receive a reply.

Stuart McMillan: Some might suggest that the reply to the minister has been lost in the post.

I welcome the constant dialogue that I have had with the Greenock sorting office and senior representatives from Royal Mail since Christmas last year, but I remain concerned about service delivery in my area. The demand that is placed on Royal Mail to deliver packages on behalf of other delivery companies for the final mile, which consumers do not always see or know about, places a strain on Royal Mail services, especially in the lead-up to Christmas.

Given that the UK Government has maintained a golden share in Royal Mail, does the minister agree that it has a duty to ensure that action is taken now to increase the workforce before the busiest time of the year? Will she again make representations to the UK Government?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: It could be a case of "Return to sender", rather than the reply having been lost in the post. Let us see.

The Minister for Business and Fair Work has recently written to Royal Mail, as have I. I want to ensure that there is equity for more rural and island communities when it comes to post, and I will continue to stress the importance of ensuring such equity in the run-up to the busiest time of the year. I am glad that Mr McMillan's mind is on Christmas as it comes down the tracks.

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): As a result of our hard-working Royal Mail posties having been instructed to prioritise parcels, mail is long delayed or not delivered at all. Serious concerns that are raised by parliamentarians on behalf of constituents simply do not seem to be taken very seriously. Does the minister agree that Royal Mail management has a lot of work to do to restore the faith of business and the public in this once great and trusted brand?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: It remains vital that the services that are provided are of the highest quality possible. I reiterate that I will continue to press for equity of service across these islands when it comes to postal delivery by Royal Mail. It is absolutely vital that the same level of service is delivered from the very north to the very south of the country.

Cladding Remediation Programme

2. **Colm Merrick (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the progress of Scotland's cladding remediation programme. (S7O-00241)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing (Shirley-Anne Somerville): As the annual report that we published this week sets out, 250 single building assessments are now under way in buildings across Scotland, which represents a major acceleration in our programme. We have confirmed assessment funding for all 956 eligible buildings, which includes £31.5 million that we have transferred to local authorities for those purposes.

We are continuing to urge and support building owners and developers to take action to commission and complete single building assessments at pace, and we have committed to providing further financial support to owners to take forward the necessary works.

Colm Merrick: I have had several inquiries on the issue. For example, many residents at the Glasgow Harbour development have found themselves in limbo due to a lack of clarity over any final decision regarding funding. Will the minister commit to engaging with officials, residents and me to resolve any outstanding issues as soon as possible?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I hope that I can assure Colm Merrick that officials remain actively engaged with residents and residents' representatives. Their most recent meeting with residents was in early September, when progress and next steps were discussed. I absolutely

recognise the uncertainty that many home owners continue to face, and we are committed to maintaining regular communication as the work progresses at Glasgow Harbour.

The Scottish Government has already provided significant support towards assessment and remediation activity through the cladding remediation programme, which is helping to improve our understanding of the issues affecting several buildings, including those at Glasgow Harbour. I will continue to engage with the residents and with the member as the work progresses.

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): The minister is keen to emphasise that the work has been done at pace, but the reality is that it is pathetically woeful. For years, we have been waiting for the Scottish Government to spend the money that it received from Westminster on cladding. It claimed that one building had been resolved and remediated, but that is not even completed now. It has been necessary to go back and do more work on that very building—so we are going backwards. When will the Government get a grip and sort out the cladding situation in Scotland?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Regarding the single building that Mr Rennie is remarking upon, we have made it clear that the external wall remediation, as recommended in the SBA, is complete for that one building. It does not need any further remedial work, and the Scottish Government funded the remediation for that work. I would therefore push back on the assertion that was made on that in the Lib Dem press release this week.

I reiterate that we now have the work and the funding flowing. I have written to registered social landlords and local authorities with buildings in the programme to urge swift action in undertaking the assessments, which will allow the work to begin. We are very conscious of wanting to move at pace.

As at June 2026, 17 single building assessments have been completed, and a further 250 assessments are under way.

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): Can the minister confirm whether the Government would seek to repeal the Building Safety Levy (Scotland) Act 2026 in the event that all cladding remediation work was completed prior to the act's 15-year expiry date, as set out in section 53?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: The building safety levy is expected to commence in 2028, and it is designed to ensure that developers make a fair contribution towards the costs of cladding assessment and remediation, as they do in England. A very fair assessment was made of the need for the Building Safety Levy (Scotland) Bill, which is now an act. I absolutely believe that that act is still needed and that its approach is a fair way of going about things, as it has been in England.

AI Data Centres (Guidance)

3. **Graham Simpson (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government when it plans to produce planning and environmental guidance on artificial intelligence data centres. (S7O-00242)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): We had a lengthy—yet also too short—debate on the subject yesterday, and where we are heading is very clear. The Government has issued guidance on considering the collective data centre applications that are coming across the country—for anything above 50MW. As of today, all existing and new data centre applications will be required to have an environmental impact assessment. As was explained yesterday, we will come back before the end of the year with updated planning guidance and a spatial framework.

Graham Simpson: The minister is absolutely right that the debate yesterday was far too short. She said yesterday:

"We are committed to coming back before Christmas with guidelines that will give business and communities confidence"

and

"It is highly unlikely that we will see decisions taken before Christmas."—[*Official Report*, 16 September 2026; c 32, 31.]

Will she give a cast-iron guarantee that guidance will be issued before Christmas and that the guidance that councils get will apply not just to new applications but to those already in the system?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: As a geologist, I am not going to get into the materials of iron, copper or any other mineral within the system. I was very clear yesterday that we will be coming back by the end of the year with guidelines—spatial and environmental, and on energy and heat use. We are wrapping our arms around that right now. It spans several portfolios: planning, energy, technology and economy. We will be coming back on it before the end of the year. As it stands, the EIA requirement that is being issued applies to existing and new data centres that will be put into the system, but we will come back by the end of the year.

Mark Simpson (North East Scotland) (Reform): Does the minister agree that Scotland risks losing investment opportunities if planning

guidance is not produced quickly and with sufficient clarity?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: That is why, yesterday, I committed to ensuring that both communities and business have confidence. I do not want to kick the can down the road on this. Unlike Labour members, I am not committed to waiting for 12 months. I want to move quickly, within the next quarter of the year, and come back by the end of the year. It is about making sure that business but also communities have confidence and that we do not kick the can down the road.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Will the spatial framework, the Government oversight process and the planning guidance take account of the possible cumulative effect of a number of data centres and the fact that, in terms of energy use, there is a maximum capacity of data centres that Scotland can accommodate?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: Our national planning framework 4 is set up to handle exactly this kind of infrastructure and planning in the system. I have faith and trust in our dedicated planning officers right across the country. I am strengthening the guidance that we are going to give them, and the EIA, which is now a requirement, also takes into account cumulative environmental impacts. We will strengthen that and we have done so already, starting today.

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): Can the minister confirm whether the Government has considered the disposal of electronic waste that cannot be recycled as part of any planning guidance on data centres, alongside the management of potentially dangerous pollutants that may result from that?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: The member is referring to perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances—PFAs—and the potential run-off from infrastructure and energy projects including onshore and offshore wind. That will be considered in the environmental impact assessment and mitigated if risks are present. That is exactly why I issued the guidance yesterday, which has come into effect today.

NEET Statistics

4. **Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government how it ensures that students who are enrolled in, but not regularly attending college courses, are accurately classified in statistics on young people who are not in education, employment or training. (S7O-00243)

The Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education (Alyn Smith): Skills Development Scotland's annual participation measure—the APM—reports on young people's most common activity throughout the year. It is created using a range of data that is collected through the 16+ participation portal. Within that, colleges provide information on student enrolments and withdrawals at least monthly throughout the academic year to ensure that data is timely and to improve data quality in the interests of both statistics and targeting support for young people who are not participating. The Scottish Government continues to work with partners to improve the quality and range of the data that is available to better understand the participation of young people across Scotland.

Katherine Sangster: I thank the minister for his detailed answer. Statistics from the Scottish Funding Council show a withdrawal rate of 5.4 per cent among 16 to 24-year-olds. What action is the Scottish Government taking, on the basis of the data that it has, to ensure that students are supported to attend college regularly and to reduce that withdrawal rate?

Alyn Smith: This is a common issue across all four home nations. In relation to England, the Office for National Statistics has been working on it consistently. We are aware of the issue, but the fact that someone is not attending college regularly does not mean that they are dropping out. Equally, however, it does not necessarily mean that they are staying. We work with the Scottish Funding Council to ensure that there is targeted support for individuals who are having a tough time or are not engaging in their course. I will keep in touch with the member as that work progresses.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North) (SNP): Following data from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service that shows a record number of young Scots gaining a place at university or college, how is the Scottish Government prioritising investment to ensure that an increasing number of young people enter positive destinations?

Alyn Smith: The Government is delivering a comprehensive range of interventions to support young people into adulthood and work, spanning the curriculum, positive destination planning, career support and employability. That includes universal support for all young people alongside more targeted and intensive support for those who need it most, with the aim of ensuring that every young person is supported to achieve a positive destination. We are doing pretty well on that. Overall, 93.5 per cent of school leavers in 2024-25 were in a positive follow-up destination nine months post-school. That is the joint highest figure on record. UCAS statistics show that record numbers of 18-year-olds have secured a university place this year, and there is a lot of good work under way in this space to build on.

Mark Simpson (North East Scotland) (Reform): Is the minister concerned that inaccurate classification could mask the true scale of youth disengagement from education and employment?

Alyn Smith: I am aware of that, but I am not concerned as such. As well as us, England has been dealing with that issue with the ONS. As I said in answer to Katherine Sangster, when someone is not regularly attending college, there could be a range of reasons for that, and not all those people are about to drop out. We want to target support to people who are not in regular attendance. That work is under way with the Funding Council, the colleges and Skills Development Scotland.

Youth Unemployment

5. **Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to address youth unemployment and whether it will work with the United Kingdom Government to support the delivery of better opportunities for young people. (S7O-00244)

The Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education (Alyn Smith): In 2024-25, 93.5 per cent of school leavers went on to a positive follow-up destination. That is a good result. Although that is encouraging, the Government remains committed to ensuring that every young person has the opportunity to develop the skills and confidence that they need to participate in the labour market.

A phrase that members will hear a lot from me is that the Government is committed to funding 150,000 apprenticeships over this parliamentary session—that is a big part of the future—expanding work-based learning and reviewing employability services. We are actively considering what further action can be taken, and we will, of course, work constructively with the UK Government on shared priorities when appropriate.

Pauline McNeill: The interim findings of Alan Milburn's review on youth unemployment, which were published in the summer, show that almost 1 million 16 to 24-year-olds are not in education, employment or training across the UK. That means that there is a generation of young people whose needs are not being met.

I thank the minister for his answer. Some of the figures look positive. However, given the overall concern about youth unemployment I am interested in what can be done to ensure that we are totally on track and can identify young people who did not do well at school and have not been found by the agencies. That is where the issue lies.

Alyn Smith: As Pauline McNeill will know, I am in furious agreement on that. An awful lot of people are not getting the support that they need, particularly the young people who are falling through the cracks in traditional education. I will be talking a great deal about vocational skills and alternative routes into the workplace.

I will also update members in due course on the opportunity presented by the Erasmus+ programme, which the UK and Scotland are going back into. The Erasmus+ element will be particularly helpful for young people. That is new money, and I will not be able to offer institutions new money very often. Erasmus offers a huge opportunity for young people, and I will ruthlessly ensure that we take advantage of it.

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Too many young Scots who are suffering from conditions such as anxiety find themselves on benefits but not in work. Will the minister commit to working with the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic to gather and publish data on the number of young people in receipt of adult disability payment who are not in employment?

Alyn Smith: I am very open to that discussion. However, we need to support people if they are having a tough time, not criticise them for it.

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): Thanks to the Scottish National Party, three quarters of a million young people have had the opportunity to go to university, because our free tuition policy means that they are not limited by their economic background. What assessment has the Government made of Scotland's offer to our young people, and how does that compare with the offer elsewhere in the UK?

Alyn Smith: Alex Kerr will find that I am in full agreement with him. Our commitment to free tuition, together with enhanced student support, means that access to university in Scotland remains based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay. The total package of student support is the most generous package across the UK, and it represents taxpayers' money going to our society. It means that Scottish students continue to have the lowest average student debt in the UK. Comparisons with other UK countries are not advisable, as the types of support that Scotland provides, such as free tuition, are vastly different from those in the rest of the UK.

Jamie Langan (South Scotland) (Reform): Does the minister agree that successive arbitrary minimum wage rises that have far outstripped productivity gains have severely limited entry-level job opportunities for young Scots?

Alyn Smith: The minimum wage is a UK matter. I want people to be paid as much as possible for the skills that they have. Jamie Langan raised a point about access to the workplace. A range of support is available to help people to get into the workplace, and I want to redouble our work on apprenticeships to ensure that workplace-based learning is the norm, not the exception.

Additional Dwelling Supplement (Repayment Period)

6. **Sanne Dijkstra-Downie (Edinburgh Northern) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on its consideration of changes to the additional dwelling supplement to take account of exceptional circumstances and introduce an extended repayment period for owners of properties affected by cladding and fire safety issues, including the Bond building in Edinburgh. (S7O-00245)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): I recognise the concerns of home owners with properties that are affected by cladding and fire safety issues. In March, as part of the land and buildings transaction tax review, the Scottish Government published a summary of an expert working group's consideration of the impact of the additional dwelling supplement when difficult or exceptional circumstances might apply. That included consideration of property-related barriers to sale. The group's work highlighted the need to consider how to balance legislative clarity, administrative feasibility, fairness to taxpayers and the protection of revenue in any approach. The Scottish Government will consider that evidence carefully, and it will inform the next steps.

Sanne Dijkstra-Downie: Two and a half years on from the Bond building fire, residents cannot live in, let alone sell, their homes because of ongoing safety and cladding defects and delayed remediation works. Some have since bought other homes and paid tens of thousands of pounds in second homes tax. They are running out of time to get that money back through no fault of their own because, unlike in other parts of the United Kingdom, Scotland's three-year repayment window offers no exceptions. Does the minister think that that is fair? Does she believe that there should be an extension that covers fire and cladding defects?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: I recognise and sympathise with the circumstances that residents of the Bond building and other affected developments face. It is important that, in our review, the Scottish Government considers any potential changes as part of a consistent, Scotland-wide approach, not for individual buildings. However, I would be happy to work with Sanne Dijkstra-Downie to understand how we can take the matter forward. I am open to listening and to speaking with her and constituents.

The Presiding Officer: Question 7, in the name of Joe Long, was not lodged, but an explanation has been given.

Bus Fare Cap (Dundee and Tayside)

8. **Heather Anderson (Dundee City West) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the roll-out of the £2 bus fare cap to the city of Dundee and the wider Tayside area. (S7O-00247)

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport (Stephen Flynn): I thank Heather Anderson for her question, which has been posed to me by members across Scotland who have not yet been able to benefit from the £2 fare cap that we have introduced in the Highlands and Islands and in the Strathclyde Partnership for Transport area. The scheme covers 60 per cent of Scotland's land mass and 50 per cent of our population. I give a commitment to Heather Anderson that I am keen to move at pace to continue the roll-out of the £2 fare cap across the rest of Scotland and will update the Parliament accordingly.

Heather Anderson: Somebody coming from Kirkton or Charleston to Dundee has to pay £3.35 for a single and, if someone is travelling into Dundee from Forfar, it is £5.90 each way. A £2 cap will mean much more money in people's pockets, which will benefit not just them but, I hope, city centre businesses. Does the cabinet secretary understand how keen we are to see the roll-out of the £2 bus fare cap to Dundee and Tayside? Will he give us a wee glimmer of hope about how quickly he might get round to doing it?

Stephen Flynn: Heather Anderson is absolutely right. We put in place the £2 fare cap, and it is our desire to implement it throughout Scotland, because we want to do what we can to combat the cost of living crisis and put more money back into people's pockets. Fortunately, in Dundee, 67,000 or so people are able to access free concessionary cards, whether they are young, old or disabled. However, we want to go further and I reiterate that we want to move at pace. When I am able to provide the Parliament with an update, I will make sure to do so.

David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): I welcome reports of an uptick in passenger numbers across the Highlands. However, as one constituent in Portmahomack put it to me, a £2 bus fare is no use if there is no reliable service. The issue is not just affordability but availability, so what consideration is the cabinet secretary giving to a new model that will give power to the communities that I represent

over when and where their buses run? Will he also clarify what assessment the Government has made of the potential impact of the £2 bus fare cap on the far north line?

Stephen Flynn: David Green makes an important point. We need more regular buses operating throughout Scotland. That is why, in recent months, the Government committed £55 million to improving infrastructure, and we have provided bus companies with the network support grant, which is worth, I think, £6.2 million, to ensure that they are able to operate routes, given the impact of the geopolitical crisis on fuel costs.

There is much more to be done, and I look forward to proactively engaging with David Green on that issue as part of consideration of the better buses legislation that we seek to introduce during this parliamentary session.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): The £2 fare cap was secured by the Scottish Greens because we know that people need affordable public transport. However, a cheap bus that does not turn up or run frequently enough to serve its community is not really an example of an affordable public transport system. When the cap is rolled out in Dundee and the wider north-east region, will the cabinet secretary commit to a plan to improve the reliability, frequency and coverage of services? Will he work with us to bring those services back into public ownership?

Stephen Flynn: It would be helpful for members of the Green Party to outline exactly what they would want that plan to look like. Over recent weeks, I have heard calls for nationalisation, for municipal ownership and for franchising. If there is a clear direction of travel that the Greens want us to go down, they should be explicit about it.

I am very happy to work with Maggie Chapman and others across the chamber to ensure that we get reliable buses in place across Scotland. That is why we have put £55 million into the bus infrastructure fund and £6.2 million into the network support grant. There is much more to be done, and we are committed to doing it.

Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Can the cabinet secretary assure us that, by such time as the £2 bus fare cap comes to Dumfriesshire, there will be an adequate bus service for people to travel on?

Stephen Flynn: I am still unsure on whether Mr Hoy wants us to spend public money on subsidising travel for the public. I am not sure whether his party has come to the point of welcoming the £2 bus fare cap, but I am sure that, in future contributions in the chamber, he will outline whether he supports the £2 bus fare cap to deal with the cost of living crisis that was caused by the Parliament that he loves.

Childcare (Rural Areas)

9. **Yi-pei Chou Turvey (North East Scotland) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what its position is on ensuring that families, particularly those in rural areas, have choice and flexibility in accessing childcare services (S7O-00248)

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Siobhian Brown): We are committed to families in rural areas accessing high-quality childcare that meets their needs, with near-universal take-up of our existing offer of funded early learning and childcare for three-year-olds and four-year-olds.

As we set out in our programme for government, we will transform our childcare offer to provide a flexible system of support for children from nine months to the end of primary school. As we develop our plans, we will continue to engage closely with families, childcare providers, stakeholders and partners to ensure that the transformation delivers for families in rural and island communities.

Yi-pei Chou Turvey: I agree with the minister that the provision of childcare options for families who live in rural areas is vital for the success of children and families, as well as for strong local economies. That is why I was surprised that, earlier this month, the Scottish Government voted against a Liberal Democrat amendment on a commitment to improve rural childcare, despite resounding support from the rest of the chamber.

The minister's party made a commitment to sustainable rural communities in its manifesto, and affordable childcare is key to that. Will she work with the Liberal Democrats to make employment viable for more rural families?

Siobhian Brown: The Scottish Government totally recognises how vital early learning and childcare is in rural and island areas, in relation to both giving children the best start in life and supporting families to work. We recognise that the provision of childcare is a key factor in allowing people in rural and island communities to enter and sustain training or employment and to start a business.

As members know, next year, a blueprint consultation will be launched on how to roll out the expansion of childcare from nine months to the end of primary school by the end of this parliamentary session.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): As I am sure the minister will know, the benefits of spending time outdoors from a very young age are huge. The younger we can encourage a

connection with our outdoors, the better. Whether it is a fully outdoor nursery, such as MAKI Pups in Lochgilphead, or a combined indoor-outdoor nursery, such as Patchwork in Dunoon, it has been clear to me on constituency visits how much the children love that experience. What action is the Scottish Government taking to support nurseries in providing more outdoor opportunities for children?

Siobhian Brown: I saw at first hand the benefits of outdoor play for young children during a visit to Little Bugs nursery in South Queensferry earlier this month. It was impressive to see so many kids thriving in an outdoor environment.

The national standard for funded early learning and childcare ensures that outdoor play is a part of children's everyday experience of funded ELC, and we have worked with the sector to develop the "Out to Play" guidance, which supports high-quality outdoor experiences. The latest data shows that children in ELC settings across Scotland spend, on average, 39 per cent of their time outdoors. We will continue to work with the ELC sector to support and promote outdoor play.

The Presiding Officer: Question 10, in the name of Duncan Massey, was not lodged, but an explanation has been given.

That concludes general question time.

First Minister's Question Time

Party Leaders

14:01

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): We now move to First Minister's question time for party leaders. Before we begin, I invite members to join me in welcoming to the gallery Her Excellency Sanja Štiglic, ambassador of the Republic of Slovenia. [*Applause*.]

Government Priorities

1. **Malcolm Offord (West Scotland) (Reform):** When John Swinney became First Minister in May 2024, he promised to lead a delivery-focused, unifying Government that is focused on four priorities: eradicating child poverty, growing the economy, improving the national health service and reforming public services. Why did he suddenly divert to Cardiff for a taxpayer-funded wee pretendy summit? Why has he given up on delivery and unity and instead chosen distraction and division? Which of those four priorities were advanced by his wee day trip to Wales?

The First Minister (John Swinney): One of the many elements of the Government that I have concentrated on, and on which I have given the Government leadership, is ensuring that we have a focus on four major themes: eradicating child poverty, growing the economy, making the transition to net zero and improving our public services. We are making significant progress in advancing that agenda. That might partly explain why I won the election on 7 May, which is a rather important point that I add to the mix.

The people of Scotland heard from me during the election campaign about the importance of self-determination for the people of Scotland and of Scotland being an independent country. If we had the full powers of independence, that option for Scotland—that opportunity—would help us to achieve our objectives of having a stronger economy and tackling child poverty. That is why I went to Cardiff on Monday.

Malcolm Offord: Let me explain to John Swinney why he is delusional to focus on that issue at the moment. The two most recent Westminster and Holyrood elections were the worst for the Scottish National Party since 2014. Under John Swinney's leadership, support for the separatist parties is now at an all-time low—only 1 million votes in May 2016, which is down from 1.6 million votes in indyref. [*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me, Mr Flynn.

Malcolm Offord: Mr Flynn is emitting more gas than a CalMac ferry.

In contrast, 2 million Scots voted to remain in the United Kingdom, and that was for a generation.

This so-called Celtic alliance pact is nothing but smoke and mirrors, distraction and division. Surely the First Minister must agree that he needs to focus on the day job and deal with our faltering economy, our declining education, our struggling NHS, our dysfunctional transport, our chaotic immigration and our rising welfare spending.

The First Minister: I have set out the Government's programme, which covers all the key areas of domestic policy and areas of responsibility. As I said to Malcolm Offord in my first answer, the Government is making significant progress on all those issues, which is perhaps one of the reasons why we won the election.

I point out to Malcolm Offord that 58 SNP MSPs were elected and only 17 Reform MSPs, and we won the election with the biggest gap between us and our nearest rival in the history of devolution. I do not think that I need any lectures from a losing force such as Malcolm Offord, the leader of Reform.

As for the question of "a generation", I note that, by the end of the decade, a million individuals in Scotland will not have been asked their opinion in a referendum on the question of independence. That is one of the reasons why it is so important that the people of this country have the chance to decide their own future and to opt for independence.

Malcolm Offord: Based on that response, it is clear that Piddington has more chance of becoming independent than John Swinney's Scotland. Why is that? It is because the SNP has not prepared for it. In the 12 years since 2014, the SNP could have used its devolved powers to make Scotland the most successful part of the UK. It could have spent 12 years answering the big four questions in relation to separation: currency, pensions, defence and borders.

Instead, what do we have? We have an economy with no growth; our world-famous education has been trashed; NHS Scotland is on its knees; our roads and ferries are in chaos; uncontrolled immigration is upsetting our communities; the police are starved of cash; local councils are about to be butchered; welfare is at an all-time high; taxation is at an all-time high; and we have a black hole of £5 billion, despite a record block grant of £26 billion. That is chronic mismanagement of the public finances—and I have not even quoted the Auditor General of Scotland on the missing ScotWind moneys.

All of that shame list relates to devolved matters; John Swinney cannot blame Westminster for any of that omnishambles—it is entirely home grown. This debacle was created by the SNP. How can John Swinney blame Westminster and say that Westminster is broken when Holyrood is in such a mess? Is the real reason that John Swinney went to Cardiff that he would rather grandstand to the media than face the uncomfortable truth that he is failing in his four priorities?

Scotland does not want a referendum any time soon—[*Interruption*.]—so will the First Minister please honour Scotland's wish to leave this for a generation?

The First Minister: It is really quite remarkable that Malcolm Offord—who seems to think that he, having lost the election, knows the views of the people of Scotland better than I, who in fact won the election, do—seems to be in a very agitated state about the prospect of Scottish independence. It suggests that he knows that he has something to fear at the prospect of being able to take our own decisions on the economy, to use the energy wealth of Scotland to lower the bills for the people of our country and to make sure that our trading relationships with Europe, which Malcolm Offord and his ilk absolutely sabotaged, are good.

That is perhaps an illustration of why the people of Scotland, in increasing numbers, as demonstrated by recent opinion polls, support the concept of Scottish independence and why people in Scotland want that choice. I am going to ensure that the people of Scotland have that choice in this parliamentary session.

Scottish Government Scrutiny

2. **Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** Before I begin my questions, I put on record my condolences and those of the Scottish Labour Party on the death of former MSP Cathie Craigie. Cathie was a much-loved colleague. She was a woman of great determination and tenacity. She was the first woman to pass a member's bill in this Parliament, protecting mortgage holders. As the daughter of a miner, she was a fierce campaigner for miners' welfare and wellbeing. She was committed to our Labour movement, to the Parliament and to her constituents in Cumbernauld and Kilsyth. Our thoughts are with her family at this difficult time. [*Applause*.]

Presiding Officer, it is another week, another court case. The Scottish Information Commissioner, the man who is tasked with holding the Government to account, is challenging the Scottish National Party in court over its refusal to release vital information. He says that the SNP Government risks undermining the public's right to access information and would relegate him to little more than a "supervisory role".

The SNP Government stands accused of seeking the power to decide what information the public can see and what they cannot see. The public's right to know is on the line, so I ask the First Minister what is more important—the right of Scots to know what their Government is up to or shielding himself, his London-based former leader and his party from scrutiny?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Before I come on to the substance of Jackie Baillie's question, although I made some remarks on Tuesday in response to the Presiding Officer's remarks, I associate myself unreservedly with her comments about Cathie Craigie. Cathie Craigie was a very distinguished member of the Scottish Parliament. She was a generous and kind lady, but she was also a lady of good fun and good humour. We enjoyed her company, and I pay tribute to her and associate myself entirely with Jackie Baillie's words of appreciation for Cathie Craigie. I express my condolences to her family.

On the substantive issue that Jackie Baillie raises, I am limited in what I can say, because there are live court proceedings under way in which the Scottish Government is a party. Jackie Baillie asked me what I believe is important, and what I believe is important is the rule of law. The Government believes that, in the decisions that it is taking, it is operating fully in accordance with the rule of law in relation to the freedom of information legislation and in relation to the disclosure of information on which restrictions are applied by court orders.

I would not be fulfilling my duty as First Minister if I did not ensure that the Government was operating within the law. That is the basis of the judgment that the Government has made, and, of course, that will be tested in the courts in the action that is being pursued.

Jackie Baillie: I thank the First Minister for that response, but my difficulty is that I have seen how John Swinney has operated over 27 years, going from honest John to the John Swinney we now see before us, the architect of secret Scotland. This is the man who deleted WhatsApp messages to hide from scrutiny over life-and-death decisions during the pandemic. This is the man who spends the public's money going to court to deny the people of Scotland access to the truth. This is the man who appointed a now-convicted fraudster, Peter Murrell, and this is the man who oversaw a culture of cover-up, contaminating party and Government.

Those are not isolated examples. They demonstrate a pattern of behaviour—decades of cover-up and conspiracy with John Swinney at its very heart. There is no failure too serious to be covered up by this Government. Is it not time for John Swinney to emerge from the shadows and finally put our country before his party?

The First Minister: It is pretty obvious that I have emerged from the shadows, because I won my own mandate in front of the electorate of Scotland on 7 May.

With the greatest of respect to Jackie Baillie, because we have rubbed shoulders for 27 years in this institution—there are only the two of us left from that first day who have been together continuously in this Parliament over those 27 years—she has been able to observe my career in government for longer than I had to observe her career in government, if I can be so indelicate. If my memory serves me right, it was 12 months for Jackie Baillie in government and it is 19 years for me in government, so we will just leave that judgment for the public to make.

My final point is this: every single thing that Jackie Baillie said there, her predecessor in that office, Anas Sarwar, said to me week after week and month after month in the run-up to the election, and the Labour Party went down to 17 seats. [*Interruption*.] As Mr Bibby shouts at me, having learned nothing from the failure in the election and absolutely not having learned that all that stuff does not work, the public can see the Labour Party for what it is: a party with no ideas, no hope and no direction—and that will not change at the weekend either.

Jackie Baillie: What the First Minister cannot escape is that everything that I said is all true. I have to say to him to that, much as I have enjoyed these 27 years together, I suspect that, if it has anything to do with Stephen Flynn, I will outlast the First Minister—[*Interruption*.] The SNP would always rather hide a problem than fix it—[*Interruption*.]

I am about to raise a very serious matter, and I hope that members on the SNP benches will listen.

The Presiding Officer: Yes. Let us listen to the question, please.

Jackie Baillie: The SNP would always rather hide a problem than fix it, and that has real consequences. Let us look at one example. We have had years of promises from John Swinney on ambulances. We challenged him on the crisis in ambulance care in May last year, September last year, November last year and again in January this year. He stood on that very spot and promised to fix the problems in the Scottish Ambulance Service, but he never does.

This summer, Julie Parker was left dying on her bathroom floor, waiting for help. The police phoned 999 when they found her. They phoned again when no ambulance came. It took four hours for an ambulance to arrive, but by then it was too late.

She was just 55 years old. That is the human cost of SNP failure. When will John Swinney realise that the Government's dishonesty and broken promises have consequences?

The First Minister: Jackie Baillie uses very strong language, and I will treat the substance of the case as I should do as First Minister.

Before I get to that, however, I note what she said about freedom of information issues and transparency in the Government. In the past six months, the Government has received 3,218 freedom of information requests; that is a 50 per cent increase on five years ago. The Government has responded to 96 per cent of those requests within the statutory timescale, so I refute, with evidence, the argument that Jackie Baillie puts forward that the Government is not fulfilling its obligations.

I will now move on to the very serious issue of the human cost of the case involving Julie Parker. I am familiar with the case, and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care has offered to meet Julie Parker's family following the outcome of a review that is currently being undertaken by the Scottish Ambulance Service and NHS Ayrshire and Arran. Cases such as Julie Parker's, and the case of Elizabeth Crammond, which Jackie Baillie raised with me last week, are examples of unacceptable health service performance and I make no attempt to shield from that.

We work hard to improve outcomes, but unfortunately there will be cases in which the outcomes are not what we would want them to be, and we have to learn the lessons and focus on improvements. That is what drives the Government's agenda. We try to ensure that we deliver the improvements that are necessary, and the health secretary will engage with Julie Parker's family to discuss the issue.

I will close by expressing my condolences to Julie Parker's family. I read this morning, in the *Daily Record* newspaper, the transcript of the call between police officers and the Scottish Ambulance Service. It is profoundly disturbing and requires to be examined, and that is exactly what will be done.

Hyperscale Data Centres

3. **Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green):** I pass on the Scottish Greens' condolences to Cathie Craigie's family and her friends in the Labour Party. Her work in establishing a register of landlords in Scotland started an important journey, which the Parliament is still on, to protect those in this country who rent their home, and it has made a real difference to people across the country.

I start by congratulating the community groups across the country whose campaign against hyperscale data centres has forced the Scottish Government to act. There is still some confusion, however, over what the Government's position now is. Ministers say that they will produce new guidance for councils by Christmas. That is welcome—it is what the Greens called for. However, ministers have also said that no decisions will be taken before then.

I struggle to reconcile that with the reality of the timeline. The proposals for data centres for Larbert, Greenock and Auchtertool could all be decided before then. The deadline for determination on the Larbert application is 4 October, and the developers in Greenock are working towards a deadline in November. The Scottish Government has said categorically that no decisions should be made before the guidance is produced, at Christmas. Has it, therefore, instructed Inverclyde, Falkirk and Fife councils to pause their determination of those live applications?

The First Minister (John Swinney): We do not anticipate that any applications will be determined by planning authorities before our planning guidance is issued later this year.

Ross Greer: I struggle to reconcile what ministers said yesterday with what they voted for and what the First Minister has just said today. I and the Greens, and communities across the country who were celebrating last night because they thought that there was a pause—a formal pause—are trying to accept the Government's position in good faith. However, MSPs across this Parliament left the chamber last night confused because they could not reconcile what ministers said with what they voted for.

The Minister for Business and Fair Work said that no decisions are expected before Christmas, based on discussion with council officials—that is similar to what the First Minister has just said. However, there is nothing in the public domain to confirm that. Today, the Falkirk Council website still has the deadline for the determination of the Larbert application as 4 October. Is the First Minister saying that, if a decision on any hyperscale data centre is made before Christmas, which some councils are still on the record as intending to do, the Government will step in, stop that and make the final decision itself, based on the new guidance that it is producing?

The First Minister: As I said in my first answer, we do not anticipate that any applications will be determined by planning authorities before the planning guidance is issued, later this year. Through the notification direction that we issued during the summer, we are closely monitoring live applications and their intended timescales for

determination, hence the statement that I just made to Parliament.

Although Scottish ministers have call-in powers, we use them sparingly, recognising and respecting the important role of local authorities in making decisions in their areas. We can, however, take steps to call in any application where that is necessary and deemed to be a matter of national importance.

Ministers can also recall any planning appeal rather than have the decision made by the Scottish Government reporter, and we have used that power recently in relation to the live planning appeal for a data centre in Edinburgh. I hope that that provides the clarity that Ross Greer is seeking.

Ross Greer: The First Minister's answer does not provide clarity. It hints at something—it strongly hints that the Government would be willing to recall those decisions—and I welcome that in good faith. However, I say again that Falkirk Council still states that the determination deadline is 4 October. The Government's private discussions with local councils appear to be quite different from what is currently on the public record. That needs to be reconciled if our communities are to have confidence in the process.

It is welcome that we have President Connolly of Ireland here in Scotland this week, not just for her leadership on solidarity with the people of Palestine, but because Ireland is a stark example of what happens when greedy technology companies are allowed to build whatever they want. A third of Ireland's entire domestic energy supply goes to powering data centres, but that pales in comparison with what is proposed for Scotland. The first 24 applications here would require one and a half times our entire national energy demand. Our Parliament was warned, earlier this week, that that could push up energy bills. That is exactly what has happened in Ireland. Because of data centres, the energy bills of consumers and households in Ireland have gone up by the equivalent of £300 a year. Councils cannot take that issue into account when making piecemeal decisions on individual applications. Therefore, will the guidance that the First Minister's Government is producing include a clear national strategy on how much of our electricity supply can be used by hyperscale data centres before they damage our climate and push up our energy bills?

The First Minister: The national guidance will set out all the relevant issues that have to be taken into account in the determination of applications. To reiterate one of the points that I made earlier, I state that, through the notification direction that we issued during the summer, we are closely monitoring live applications and the intended timescales for their determination.

Mr Greer raised the role of tech companies. The Government insisted, in its amendment yesterday, that there has to be regulation in the space around tech companies. That was a central part of the Government's amendment to the Green motion last night. I am pleased that the Government's amendment was carried, because it strengthens the representations that my Government can make to the United Kingdom Government to ensure that we are pressing for the appropriate regulatory environment, given the concerns that have been expressed over the weekend, particularly about tech companies. I was a bit surprised that the Greens abstained on that particular vote at the end of the debate, because that regulation is necessary. It is at the centre of the concerns that my Cabinet is wrestling with about violence against women and girls, as, because of the online environment, there is a greater need for regulation. As we make progress on some of those questions, there are big issues for us to wrestle with, and I hope that the Greens will be partners with us in that respect.

As Mr Greer made reference to the presence of President Connolly, I note that it was an absolute pleasure for my wife and I to welcome President Connolly and her husband to Scotland yesterday. President Connolly represents outstanding leadership in the world. She is a voice for peace, for dialogue and for respect. She has much to say to Scotland, and Scotland is listening very carefully to what she has to say.

Independence Referendum

4. **Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con):** I, too, express my condolences and those of my party to the family of Cathie Craigie.

John Swinney's new friends in Sinn Féin have never denounced Irish Republican Army terrorism. They still justify the massacre of innocent men, women and children, including Scottish soldiers. Mr Swinney shamefully told IRA victims and their grieving families to "move on", but the same politician has never accepted the decisive result of Scotland's independence referendum, and John Swinney is now working with Sinn Féin to break up our country. Why should those maimed or bereaved by the IRA move on when the Scottish National Party refuses to move on?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I have always expressed my sympathy to the victims of terrorism. Indeed, just last month, I represented Scotland at the first national day of remembrance for the victims of terrorism, which was convened by the Prime Minister in London. On that occasion, I met families of the victims of terrorism, many of whom were affected by the Lockerbie bombing in

1988. I unreservedly condemn terrorism and any terrorist act, and I always have done.

I also accepted, in good grace, the outcome of the referendum in 2014. [*Interruption*.] In the aftermath of that referendum, I also participated, in good faith, in the work of the Smith commission, which reviewed the powers of the Parliament and led to significant increases in its powers. I put forward arguments in that process to ensure that this Parliament could make more impact on the lives of people in Scotland. I did that, in good faith, to strengthen the powers of the Parliament within the United Kingdom. Mr Findlay's point is completely fatuous, as usual.

People in this country would be surprised if I did not stick to the principled reason why I entered politics. I entered politics because I became convinced that the people who are best placed to decide the future of our country are the people who choose to live here in Scotland, which is why we need the ability to make a decision—a choice—about Scotland's future in a referendum, and I will deliver that in this parliamentary term.

Russell Findlay: We know that John Swinney has denounced terrorism, but has he asked his Sinn Féin friends to denounce terrorism? We just heard, yet again, that John Swinney only cares about one thing: making Scotland poorer and weaker by leaving the United Kingdom. He and his party have never respected the outcome of the independence referendum, and Scotland is paying a heavy price for the SNP's obsession—a broken national health service, failing schools, victims betrayed by the justice system, record high taxes and funding out-of-control state benefits. The people of Scotland want the Government to focus on the issues that matter to them—those issues, not independence—so why is his constitutional obsession more important than fixing Scotland's broken public services?

The First Minister: It is really interesting that, today, Russell Findlay has pursued the same line of questioning as Malcolm Offord. That displays to us that the merger is under way between those two forces on that side of the chamber and, my goodness, it will be some marriage of convenience over there between the Conservative Party and Reform, with some of the stuff they all come out with. That will be a sight worth seeing. They have a lot in common, because Malcolm Offord was a member of the Government that inflicted austerity on this country—[*Interruption*.]

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Answer the question.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr, let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: Malcolm Offord was a member and Russell Findlay was a supporter of a Government that inflicted austerity on this country. They represent political traditions that wanted Brexit, which has undeniably made us poorer as a consequence. Therefore, I will take no lessons from Russell Findlay or his chum Malcolm Offord—

Stephen Kerr: Answer the question!

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me, First Minister.

Mr Kerr, as I have already said, please stop shouting from the back. You can express a view without yelling at the top of your voice. We are trying to hear the First Minister. If I cannot hear him from here, how is anyone else meant to hear him?

First Minister, please conclude.

The First Minister: I will take no lessons from the new chums in the Scottish Parliament, Russell Findlay and Malcolm Offord—the people who gave us decline, austerity and Brexit. Instead, I will inspire people with a positive vision of independence for Scotland.

Thirlwall Inquiry

5. **Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh North Western) (LD):** As other members have done, I, too, extend the heartfelt condolences of the Scottish Liberal Democrats to the Labour Party, the family of Cathie Craigie and everybody who loved her. She was a towering force in our politics and she will be much missed.

This week, Lady Justice Thirlwall published her report into the horrific murder of babies at the Countess of Chester hospital. That review was instructed following the conviction of neonatal nurse Lucy Letby. That was a shocking case. What has the First Minister's Government learned from the inquiry?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Obviously, it is important for us all to learn lessons from the inquiry, with regard to ensuring the quality and safety of patient care. As Mr Cole-Hamilton will know, an ongoing, persistent priority of the Scottish Government is to ensure that we strengthen patient safety in every respect of our health service care and treatment. That lies at the heart of the answer to the question from Jackie Baillie that I responded to, because vital issues of patient safety are involved in that respect. That will be the focus of our interrogation of that report, to ensure that any issues that are relevant to Scotland, and particularly to maternity services, are learned about and applied.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I am glad to hear that but, although the inquiry's recommendations stop at the border, the risk to babies does not. Parents will want to know that newborns here are given the

same protection as babies everywhere else. Lady Justice Thirlwall's recommendations include in-cot cameras with live streaming video; tighter controls on access to insulin; and a duty on every health trust to monitor all baby deaths and escalate concerning patterns.

It now falls to this Government to choose whether to adopt those vital protections, because—God forbid—should Scotland ever have its own Lucy Letby, we must have every possible safeguard in place to keep our babies safe. Will the First Minister's Government include equivalent protections in Scotland—and by when?

The First Minister: Mr Cole-Hamilton raises important issues, and I expect them to be central to the work that the Government is taking forward through the maternity and neonatal task force, which was set up to promote improvements in maternity and neonatal care, and pregnancy and birth outcomes. We have established the task force to undertake that work. It would make logical and rational sense for the task force to look at the issues that arise out of the report to which Mr Cole-Hamilton refers and to identify, based on existing practice in Scotland, where there should be strengthening. I encourage the task force to undertake the work in that way, to make sure that the lessons that can be applied are applied to meet the high standards that Mr Cole-Hamilton puts to me today.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, First Minister.

When I referred to Mr Kerr earlier, I should have said that I meant Stephen Kerr. There are, of course, five Mr Kerrs in the chamber, and I apologise to the other four.

Programme for International Student Assessment 2025

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The next item of business is a statement by Màiri McAllan on the programme for international student assessment 2025. Questions will be taken at the end of the statement, so there should be no interruptions or interventions.

14:36

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): PISA is an important measure and, rightly, the Government gives careful consideration to its results. Independent evidence of the performance of Scottish education is vital. That is why, in 2020, we commissioned the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to review the curriculum for excellence. It is why we take part in PISA and why we rejoined the other two major international assessments: the trends in international mathematics and science study and the progress in international reading literacy study—TIMSS and PIRLS. Those surveys are important as part of a package of measures that helps us understand how our education system is performing.

Before we look at the results, it is important to set PISA in context. PISA provides an important source of evidence on educational outcomes and experiences, but it should not be viewed in isolation. Section 3.7 of the "Programme for International Student Assessment 2025: National Report for Scotland", which was published last week, instructs us that

"Educational performance is multifaceted and no single assessment can provide a complete picture of the strengths and challenges within an education system."

It goes on to note:

"The findings presented in this report should therefore be considered alongside evidence from national qualifications, curriculum assessments, inspection evidence, administrative data, research studies and other international surveys. Taken together, these sources provide a more complete understanding of educational performance and outcomes in Scotland."

As Andreas Schleicher, the OECD's director for education and skills, put it,

"PISA is not a league table, it provides a compass"

with which systems can consider change. I add to that the words of Andrea Bradley, general secretary of the Educational Institute of Scotland, who noted that the report is

"limited in what it can say about the quality of learning within any education system"

and that it tells us

"only a fraction of the story".

With that context in mind, I turn to the results. This year's PISA results demonstrate that Scotland's education system is competitive by international standards. It performs significantly above the OECD average in four out of five domains—namely, science, reading, computational problem solving and environmental science. They also show that Scotland's performance has been stable since 2022, against a backdrop of further international decline. We also recorded a significant weakening in the relationship between a learner's socioeconomic background and their educational performance, particularly in reading. For reading, the results demonstrate that that link had been broken down more than in any previous PISA cycle. That means that, more than at any point since 2000, deprivation is increasingly being overcome when it comes to Scottish attainment in literacy.

PISA also provides us with insights into pupils' experiences and attitudes. It is heartening to see that our young people have a positive attitude to school and feel a sense of belonging.

I welcome those results, but I am clear eyed about the need for change and I want to see Scotland's performance improve in all the areas tested by PISA. I am determined to ensure that there is ongoing improvement in Scottish education and I am not content with the stabilisation in our results. As I have commented several times, I intend to be a reforming education secretary, and I have set out bold and ambitious plans to achieve excellence and equity in Scottish education.

Key to that programme of work will be reform of the curriculum, which is currently under way, and decisive action to remove mobile phones from all Scotland's classrooms. We also intend to seize the opportunity of public service reform to address a number of core issues in our education system. That combination will drive academic excellence and vocational strength, both of which I am dedicated to. Those reforms predate the PISA results—I stress that to emphasise that the Government is not engaging in knee-jerk reaction to the results or the commentary around them.

On the detail, the curriculum improvement cycle will represent the largest reform of curriculum for excellence since its introduction. The focus of the programme is twofold: first, it seeks to clarify the role of knowledge in our curriculum and to strengthen literacy, maths and science by providing greater clarity about what learners need to know, do and understand; and, secondly, it seeks to clarify the progression that learners ought to make across all stages of their education.

In maths, the revised curriculum will strengthen disciplinary skills, including reasoning, problem solving, mathematical modelling, justification and proof, spatial thinking, estimation, mathematical communication and fluency. That those are skills that are increasingly required in modern life is reflected in international assessment programmes such as PISA.

In literacy, the updated curriculum will make progression clearer across the interconnected areas of reading, writing, listening and talking, recognising that those skills develop together and underpin learning across the curriculum. Particular consideration has been given to the reading literacy capabilities that are reflected in international studies such as PIRLS and PISA, which include comprehension, interpretation, evaluation and the application of reading skills in a range of real-world contexts.

In science, the revised curriculum will provide greater clarity on the scientific knowledge, understanding and skills that learners are expected to develop at each stage, which will help to create more coherent progression. With its clear emphasis on scientific inquiry, investigation, critical thinking and evidence-based reasoning, the framework will help learners to understand what science tells us and how scientific knowledge is developed.

The revised curriculum will also take account of the kinds of reasoning, application and problem solving that are reflected in international studies, which will help to ensure that learners are able to apply their learning confidently in unfamiliar and real-world contexts.

The new curriculum will be implemented in all our schools from August 2028. I am determined to ensure that the teaching profession has the opportunity to continue to influence the improvement cycle, and I am committed to supporting it to successfully deliver this transformational educational reform.

That work is being undertaken in tandem with intense dialogue with local government on public service reform and our ambition, which is set out in our programme for government, to empower school leaders, raise standards and reduce unwarranted variation across the country. That plan will be informed by the report that was delivered to ministers earlier this year by the former headteacher and independent adviser on school reform, John Wilson. I intend to publish that report shortly.

In addition, we have committed to expanding our early literacy bookbug programme so that it will reach an additional 20,000 families; addressing teacher recruitment challenges by supporting more primary teachers who wish to retrain into

employment across the profession; and reducing unnecessary bureaucracy and excessive workload by shortening Government guidance and delivering reduced class contact time. We will also implement the route map for a national staged intervention model for children with additional support needs.

Much of the commentary since the publication of the PISA results has focused on comparing Scotland's results with England's, and I understand why that is the case. However, like Andreas Schleicher, I believe that

"both systems have distinct strengths"

and that, as he went on to say, there is much that we can learn from each other.

I am open minded about learning from others. Indeed, looking beyond our United Kingdom neighbours, I am very interested in the performance of countries such as Ireland and Canada, which, it can be argued, appear to have balanced academic, knowledge-based learning, skills development and wellbeing better than Scotland and England have done.

So, I will consider all that very carefully. Ultimately, however, I believe that success must be judged not just by test scores at age 15 but by where young people go next and whether they are equipped to succeed in work, training and further education. I am very proud that, in Scotland, 95.7 per cent of school leavers move on to a positive destination. That is one of the highest figures on record.

More broadly, I want our young people to experience an education that is characterised by opportunity for academic excellence and vocational strength, underpinned by a commitment to personal wellbeing and the wellbeing of the communities in which we live.

As I said in my opening remarks, it is important that the PISA results are not viewed in isolation. It is important for me, as education secretary, to put on the record the strengths of Scottish education. I can tell members, from the conversations that I have been having in the past 10 days, that it is very important to our teachers and the profession that I do so.

I wish to highlight some of that success today: our academic attainment is increasing again at national 5, higher and advanced higher; the number of grade As in national 5 and higher has increased; and an additional 1,000 candidates are entering for advanced higher in this year's exams.

The poverty-related attainment gap narrowed further this year in national 5, higher and advanced higher, and it is lower than the pre-pandemic levels in 2019. I welcome similar increases in both pass rates and the percentage of A grades across national 5 and higher compared with last year for learners with additional support needs.

Importantly, alongside that strong academic excellence, we also witnessed a further surge in vocational awards in subjects that are preparing our young people for the world of work: those have increased by 121 per cent since 2019.

That mix of academic and vocational excellence is helping to deliver a joint record of positive destinations, with a record number of young people going on to university and a record number of them coming from our most deprived backgrounds. To me, that is the hallmark of an education system that is working well.

The Government has acknowledged the PISA results, and we have noted their importance as part of a suite of evidence that is available to us. We are committed to working to ensure excellence and equity for all our young people.

As has been perfectly clear from the commentary this week, PISA divides opinion. There are those who would consider it the only measure by which to judge our education system, and there are those at the opposite end of the spectrum, who would have us dismiss it completely, believing it to be too narrow to reflect modern requirements.

I take neither of those positions. In this regard, I am concerned only with ensuring the very best outcome for all children in Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I will allow around 20 minutes for the cabinet secretary to answer questions on the issues that were raised in her statement. Both questions and answers should be short.

Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her ministerial statement. The cabinet secretary says that PISA provides a compass. These PISA results show that Scotland's attainment is heading south. Before curriculum for excellence, Scotland was an undisputed world leader, scoring a peak of 524 in maths. With curriculum for excellence, that score has plummeted to 467. That 57-point drop represents a loss of nearly two full years of school.

Today, one in three Scottish pupils fails to meet the basic international proficiency in the subject. While our scores have largely stagnated over the past four years, the long-term reality across reading, science and maths is undeniable. We are in a deep 20-year decline.

Maths matters. We are talking about the engineers, accountants and scientists of tomorrow.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Could the member ask a question? Questions have to be brief.

Angela Ross: Of course.

"Improvement cycles" sounds more like process and more bureaucracy.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): This is not a speech; it is question.

Angela Ross: Does the cabinet secretary—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Could the member sit down, please?

Angela Ross: Of course. Here is my question: does the cabinet secretary—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I asked the member to sit down. If she could sit down, please. She can then stand up again and ask her question.

Please stand up again and ask your question.

Angela Ross: Does the cabinet secretary accept that an entire generation of young people has experienced a decline in educational performance under curriculum for excellence, and can the cabinet secretary tell us exactly how many years it will take for the improvement cycles to return Scotland to our pre-curriculum for excellence levels?

Màiri McAllan: With brevity in mind, I will say that the member is wrong to dismiss the curriculum improvement cycle as she does. It is a very substantial piece of work and, as I said, it is the most significant reform to curriculum for excellence since its introduction. The cycle is being taken forward by the Government in consultation with the OECD, which confirmed that curriculum for excellence remains the right approach for Scotland but would benefit from periodic change—which is exactly what we are now undertaking.

I refer Ms Ross to the catalogue of success in Scotland's education system that I can speak to, as was set out in my statement.

Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement. I welcome the fact that the Government recognises that changes are needed, but what we have heard over the past 10 days, since the figures were published, is complacency and a lack of curiosity about what is going on. The cabinet secretary states that PISA has divided opinion and she is at pains to say that the figures are just one part of the picture, but the fact is that, aside from the snapshot that is taken every three years, we have little objective data to allow us to get a fuller picture.

Let us shed some light on the matter. I ask that the Government works with experts to identify what further data they can capture so that this Parliament can have an open conversation about what we all need to do to deliver for our young people.

Màiri McAllan: To be clear, it is not just me or the Government who is suggesting or requiring that we view the figures as just one part of the picture; it is the OECD itself. That is explicit in the PISA report, which I quoted in my statement.

I also note that Katherine Sangster's characterisation of how I have approached PISA is not correct. In the discussions that I have been having with teachers and teaching unions—coincidentally, a number of which took place in the aftermath of the PISA results—they have stressed to me that they are grateful for an approach that is balanced and that recognises the successes of the systems that they are driving forward for our young people, but which, equally, is ambitious for what we can do next and what we can do better. That is exactly the approach that I will take, and I will be pleased to work with Katherine Sangster on that.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): We all accept the need to keep driving up standards for everyone in education in Scotland. The data and the facts in PISA reports are important, although, as the cabinet secretary said, they are not the only metric that is used.

The cabinet secretary mentioned comparison of the PISA results for England and Scotland. Is she aware that independent analysis by Professor John Jerrim of University College London, who is an expert in PISA, indicates that England's PISA scores have regularly been inflated by about 10 points due to the high drop-out rates among lower-attaining schools and disadvantaged pupils? Does the cabinet secretary agree that Scotland's inclusive, all-in approach gives an honest baseline, making cross-border comparisons simply a case of comparing apples with oranges?

Màiri McAllan: There are certainly differences between jurisdictions and education systems that make direct comparisons difficult. I cannot comment on any other country's samples or their subsequent analysis, but I put on the record my confidence in the OECD sampling and quality assurance and Scotland's adherence to that.

On George Adam's point about having an education system that strives for excellence across the board and is therefore capable of supporting, for example, our young people with additional support needs to enter the education system and to leave it with the very best outcomes that they can achieve, that is what I am committed to. It is that balance and the pursuit of excellence

across the board that will characterise the Government's next steps.

Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green): As the cabinet secretary will know, teachers unions such as the NASUWT and the EIS raise workload as one of the key issues that contribute to unsustainable pressures in Scotland's classrooms and on learning outcomes. One of the simplest steps that the cabinet secretary could take is to fully implement the recommendations in the 2013 report of the curriculum for excellence working group on tackling bureaucracy and its 2015 follow-up. Will she support teachers and learners by reviewing those reports and implementing the recommendations, which are still outstanding?

Màiri McAllan: I will certainly look across the piece for suggestions and recommendations on how we can manage teacher workload, because I recognise that that is a concern for the profession. There is much within the curriculum improvement cycle. Although we recognise that it is a significant change and one that we will have to work carefully to implement, there is much to be said for it helping with workload once it has been implemented. It can also reduce class contact time. The Government is taking that forward in tandem with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and unions.

The other issue that is most frequently raised with me when it comes to workload is the support that our teaching workforce wants to offer for children with additional support needs. Again, I refer to the national staged intervention model and the route map that I have just published. We will take that forward, and I hope that it will be helpful.

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD): The cabinet secretary spoke about closing the attainment gap. Between 2018 and 2025, the reading scores of the poorest children in Scotland fell by 2 points while wealthier children's scores fell by 24 points. I suppose that that is closing the attainment gap, but what this Government is doing is limiting children's life chances and dumbing down Scotland's potential. There are indications of why that is happening. For instance, in the Borders—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member must put a question.

Duncan Dunlop: —they are handing out iPads and devices. There is a reduction in the number of teaching assistants, and 25 per cent of primary schools in Scotland do not have a library. Does the cabinet secretary agree that all those issues have a direct correlation with a record of low PISA results? What will she do about it?

Màiri McAllan: There is much in Mr Dunlop's question. For the sake of brevity, I will say that he and I have had a discussion about digital devices. He is well aware of the Government's work to remove personal mobile phones from the classroom. I think that that will have a significant impact on low-level distraction, which teachers are grappling with, and on young people's concentration and, therefore, attainment. That is just one of many measures that we are taking forward.

I have to slightly challenge Mr Dunlop's representation of the education system in relation to an issue that both he and I are concerned with. While I was assessing the downward trajectory that PISA demonstrated to me, I could see that, since 2009-10, the proportion of care-experienced young people who have entered positive destinations has increased from 58.1 per cent to 84.2 per cent. To me, that is another indication of a successful education system, and we must keep pursuing that work.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Con): The attainment gap in Scotland is narrowing, not because of better scores by disadvantaged children but because of the worsening scores of the most affluent. I did not get that data from the secretive Scottish National Party but from elsewhere.

I am organising a round-table meeting with education experts and political parties to thrash out what we need to do differently to improve outcomes for young people.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Could the member please put a question?

Meghan Gallacher: Michael Gove will be in attendance. Will the cabinet secretary join us?

Màiri McAllan: I am pragmatic and open minded about working with anyone who, like me, can recognise and celebrate the vast successes of our system but is always keen to push for improvement. I am happy to work across the piece.

However, I have to say, as I reflected when Mr Gove and I were on "The Sunday Show" on the BBC this week, that although I am keen to work with anyone, the architects of Conservative austerity—the effects of which our schools are grappling with so much—would not be at top of my list.

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): The PISA report tells us that it does not provide a complete picture of an education system. As the cabinet secretary has indicated, the key to continuing to raise attainment across the board is improving literacy, and research shows that one in four primary schools in Scotland does not have a library. Does the cabinet secretary agree that we should work with local authorities to support the Libraries for Primaries campaign, to ensure that

every primary school in Scotland has a library so that every child can access the joy of reading and the opportunities that that brings for children to thrive?

Màiri McAllan: I agree with what Patricia Gibson has said. I reiterate what I said in my statement about this year's PISA results showing that we are breaking down the gap between socioeconomic disadvantage and attainment in literacy in our country more than at any point since 2000, when records began with those tests. That should be a point of pride for us all.

I agree with Patricia Gibson that school libraries have a vital part to play in that process. That is why, among other things, the Government has invested more than £2 million through the school library improvement fund since 2017. I will continue to work on that.

David Kirkwood (South Scotland) (Reform): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement. PISA has turned out to be the power that gied us the gift of seeing ourselves as others see us, and it is not a good look. The cabinet secretary has been pleased to note that Scotland has scored higher than the OECD average, but why does it not seem to concern her that we no longer score a lot higher than the UK average?

Màiri McAllan: I know that I have already made this point, but it is worth labouring:

"Educational performance is multifaceted and no single assessment can provide a complete picture of the strengths and challenges within an education system."

Those are not my words but ones contained explicitly in the PISA Scotland report. I ask Mr Kirkwood to consider that.

The member is right. Much of the commentary has been about comparing Scotland with England. I have been clear that I do not mind doing so, because I want to understand how to drive progress across our education system. However, I also direct him once again to the comments of the OECD's director of education and skills, who is very clear that there is much that Scotland and England can learn from one other. As I said, I am particularly interested in countries such as Ireland and Canada that have successfully balanced the academic measures of PISA and the wellbeing factors.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Supporting our children and young people to thrive should not begin and end at the classroom. Whether it is through providing nutritious school meals, helping families to afford school uniforms or the bookbug programme, what is the cabinet secretary's assessment of the wider support for increasing access to learning and improving outcomes?

Màiri McAllan: The Government believes strongly in breaking down barriers to an excellent education. For some families, some of those barriers are economic so, over this session of Parliament, we will increase our free school meal offer, provide further support on school uniforms and for the cost of the school day, and continue to ensure that families do not face fees for instrumental music tuition or charges for costs for the crucial materials and resources that are needed for practical lessons. That all sits alongside our leading work on the bookbug programme and the read, write, count campaign, which provide free books and literacy support, which helps to foster a love of reading.

Jenny Young (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Lab): The cabinet secretary was right to say that our PISA results have been stable since 2022. That was Scotland's worst ever result and it is fair to say that the Government has spent the past five years burying its head in the sand in response to the 2022 PISA results.

The 2020 OECD review that the cabinet secretary mentioned highlighted two key areas: the transition to senior phase from the broad general education, and the narrowing of subject choice. Precisely nothing that the Government has done in the past five years has improved either of those areas, so what will the cabinet secretary do in the next five years on those two specific points?

Màiri McAllan: I cannot help but think that Jenny Young perhaps did not listen to the statement or did not adapt her question in the light of it, because I was clear that the curriculum improvement cycle that I spoke about, the development of which I give a lot of detail on, was not started after this year's PISA results. It was started by my predecessor after the 2022 results. The careful work of developing the new curriculum and ensuring that it will be implemented well has been going on apace and continues. I hope that Jenny Young can come to welcome that work or, at least, recognise that it has been happening.

Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): In Scotland, we have the highest spend per pupil, the lowest pupil teacher ratio and the best-paid teachers in the UK, which demonstrates the Scottish Government's commitment to building on our education system to deliver academically, vocationally and for the wellbeing of our children and young people. What assessment does the cabinet secretary make of the value of international test scores such as PISA compared with the real-world success of getting school leavers into long-term jobs, apprenticeships,

colleges, universities and other positive destinations?

Màiri McAllan: I hope that I have been clear that I view PISA as an important set of data for us to consider, but it is just one part of the puzzle. For me, perhaps one of the most important measures in pursuit of an education system that balances academic excellence and vocational strength, which we must keep pursuing, is what our young people do when they leave school. I draw Parliament's attention again to the joint record figures of 93.5 per cent of young people going on to training, education or work. That is about an education system that delivers for every young person, delivers well for our society and provides people who are well equipped to contribute to our economy.

Iris Duane (Glasgow) (Green): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement. As she said, Scottish pupils performed strongly in environmental science, with pupils believing that action could make a difference for the environment. We Greens were proud to help to bring that about in 2023, with the implementation of learning for sustainability in our schools to teach about the importance of climate and social justice. Will the cabinet secretary provide an update on the implementation of the LFS action plan? Does she believe that schools are being adequately supported for climate education?

Màiri McAllan: We are absolutely right to highlight learning for sustainability. I was also very pleased to notice the two new domains of computational problem solving and environmental science in the results. Scotland scored significantly above average in environmental science and I attribute a great deal of that to the development and implementation of learning for sustainability in our curriculum. I hope that that will continue through the CIC.

Kate Campbell (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement. Does she recognise the impact on learning of the unprecedented levels of anxiety that are being experienced by young people, many of whom have been impacted by Covid? Does she value the different approaches that schools and the third sector are taking to support continued learning in non-school environments and often, for example, in much smaller groups? There are successful examples in my constituency, such as the Bridges Project in Musselburgh or the excellent work of Portobello high school, which are improving outcomes. Does the cabinet secretary support the development of a Scotland-wide approach so that all young people can access that kind of specialised learning environment?

Màiri McAllan: I am conscious and mindful of the pressures that are bearing down on our young people as they navigate the education system and the world of work. As I have reflected, one of the pressures that I have watched intensify significantly since I was in high school is the presence of the online world and mobile phones. That is why the Government is taking decisive action in early course on the presence of mobile phones in our schools, which I hope will be able to sit within action that the UK Government will take in respect of the regulation of technology and young people's access to social media generally.

I also point to the £1.75 billion that has been invested in the Scottish attainment challenge in 10 years—money that has gone straight to schools in pupil equity funding—which allows leaders in our schools to decide exactly how best to confront the poverty-related attainment gap in their areas.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): There was not one word in the cabinet secretary's statement about the violence and abuse that teachers face every day in our classrooms, which is to the detriment of learning. It is intolerable that teachers—especially women teachers—go to work and face what they face. What specific steps will the cabinet secretary now take to address that issue, which her predecessors have ignored for so long?

Màiri McAllan: I point Mr Kerr to the "Behaviour in Scottish schools: research report 2023". A suite of data is published on the issue; the report is being updated and will be published again in the coming period.

The majority of teachers in secondary schools raised mobile phones as an ongoing disruption that they are having to manage, and the Government is taking decisive action on that. I was interested to note that violence and aggressive behaviour was, in majority, reported to be happening with our youngest pupils—in primary 1 to primary 3—which suggests that our young people have difficulty regulating their behaviour.

A whole lot of work is under way, and guidance is being developed in respect of monitoring and reporting of incidents so teachers can expect consistency. Equally, we must be prepared to understand what is affecting our young people and to work with them and their families to help them to regulate their behaviour in schools.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): That concludes the ministerial statement on programme for international student assessment 2025. I apologise to the call several members who wished to put a question to the cabinet secretary but whom I was unable to call.

Health Misinformation

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): We move to the debate on motion S7M-01200, in the name of Angela Constance, on addressing the harms of health misinformation.

15:09

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): I am very pleased to open the debate on addressing the harms of health misinformation. Nothing is more important to us than our health and the health of those we love. We are fortunate to have a national health service that provides high-quality healthcare, free at the point of use. Across Scotland, healthcare professionals work every day to prevent illness, promote wellbeing and provide care when people need it most.

Effective healthcare requires hospitals, clinics, medicines and treatments, but it also depends on public trust. The "Scottish Health Information Integrity Strategy" marks a significant step in providing NHS Scotland, educators and patients with the tools to compete with health misinformation and it places Scotland at the forefront of international efforts to address harms arising from false and misleading health information.

Understandably, people feel strongly about their own health and that of their friends and family, and sharing health information is entirely natural. The sophistication of false and misleading health information today means that we are all susceptible to sharing it. More often than not, people share health information out of concern for others and with the best of intentions. That is why we talk about information integrity. Most false and misleading health narratives are shared for very different reasons, and the response must be different.

In health, we challenge the narrative rather than the individual. Health misinformation can be viewed as a signal of the information that people need. When good information is delayed, absent or inaccessible, falsehoods fill the vacuum. Our strategy is about providing good information. Access to accurate, evidence-based health information helps people to make informed choices about their health and wellbeing. It supports productive conversations between patients and healthcare professionals, enables effective public health action and underpins trust in our health and care system.

Today, that has become more important and more challenging than ever before, because the availability of information is unprecedented. People can access vast quantities of material on almost any subject at the touch of a screen. Information that once required professional advice or extensive research can now be found instantly. That transformation has brought significant benefits. People are more empowered to engage in decisions about their care, access to knowledge has become more democratic and patients are often better informed and more actively involved in managing their health.

However, those benefits also bring risks. Health and scientific advances have always attracted false and misleading narratives. Throughout history, false claims, misconceptions and misunderstandings have accompanied developments in medicine and public health. The difference today is the speed and scale at which misleading information spreads.

Content that is inaccurate, misleading, unscientific or entirely false can reach millions of people within hours. Information that is designed to provoke fear, anxiety or anger is often shared before healthcare systems, researchers and communicators have the opportunity to understand what is happening. As a result, people are making health decisions in an information environment that is crowded, complex and not always aligned with the best available evidence. The consequences are significant.

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Does the cabinet secretary agree that the situation that she is outlining for us regarding the crowded landscape and the perennial attack of misinformation is complicated even more by the fact that the most powerful man in the White House is adding to it, given his hugely significant global platform?

Angela Constance: The motion that is before us today certainly calls on every member of this Parliament to act with integrity in how we use information. It is not for me to advise the President of the United States of America, but it would be helpful if he spent less time on X or Twitter or whatever it is called these days.

I go back to a crucial point. Health misinformation can, as we know, undermine confidence in interventions such as vaccination programmes; reduce support for public health advice during emergencies; delay people seeking appropriate medical advice; increase pressure on NHS services; and cause financial harm through ineffective or unnecessary products, tests and treatments.

Health misinformation can deepen health inequalities by targeting specific communities with false narratives or by creating distrust among groups that already face barriers to healthcare. Perhaps most harmfully, it corrodes public trust. False narratives undermine trust in institutions,

professionals and scientific evidence. Reduced trust then creates the conditions for further misinformation to flourish. It is a cycle that can be difficult to reverse. Public trust in the NHS is one of our health service's great strengths and remains our strongest defence against harmful health misinformation. Protecting and maintaining that trust must be central to our response.

Public concern about false information is growing. Increasing numbers of people report regularly encountering misleading information online. Healthcare professionals express growing concern. During the development of our health information integrity strategy, many clinicians and public health experts highlighted patient interactions that were shaped by false or misleading information that was encountered online.

The challenge continues to evolve. The emergence of artificial intelligence brings enormous opportunities for healthcare. AI is already helping to drive innovation in research, diagnostics and public health. However, it is also transforming the information ecosystem. Creating and disseminating convincing false content has become easier than ever. Deepfakes and other forms of AI-generated content are becoming increasingly sophisticated and will soon be impossible to distinguish from authentic material. A fabricated video that appears to show a healthcare professional, scientist or public figure making false claims about health interventions could influence behaviour long before its authenticity is questioned. That means that we must be alert and agile, and we must ensure that Scotland's health and care system is adapted to today's information environment and remains adaptable for the future.

There are important lessons to take from the Covid-19 pandemic, which demonstrated the importance of trusted information during periods of uncertainty and how quickly false narratives can emerge and spread during health emergencies, when demand for reliable information is high. If good information is not made available to the right people by the right means at the right time, bad information will flow in. The Scottish Government's standing committee on pandemic preparedness recognised that in its report "Pandemic Ready: Safeguarding Our Future Through Preparedness". Among its recommendations are the need for Scotland to develop the capability to identify and address challenges arising from false narratives during future pandemics and to strengthen resilience to the harms of poor-quality information.

The recommendations highlight an important point: it is not enough simply to produce trustworthy health information. Health institutions must also understand when harmful false narratives are emerging and respond appropriately, ethically and proportionately when such narratives present risks to public health.

It is against that backdrop that the "Scottish Health Information Integrity Strategy" has been developed. The strategy represents Scotland's first comprehensive approach to addressing harms that are associated with false health information. To the best of our knowledge, it is the first national health information integrity strategy anywhere.

The strategy recognises that the situation presents more than a communications challenge. It requires a comprehensive response, with co-ordinated action across health and social care and beyond.

The strategy is structured around three pillars. The first is leadership and co-ordination. Addressing harmful health misinformation requires clear leadership, strong partnerships and effective collaboration, and the strategy sets out a framework that brings together expertise from the Scottish Government, NHS Scotland, public health agencies, academia, educators and other partners to ensure a coherent national approach.

The second pillar is about building Scotland's resilience to false health information. The strongest defence against misinformation is an informed and confident public. Building resilience means improving access to trusted information, supporting digital literacy, strengthening the understanding of how false information spreads and helping people to navigate an increasingly complex information landscape. It also means engaging respectfully, listening to concerns, communicating clearly and meeting people where they are.

The third pillar is rapid response to false health information. Where harmful narratives emerge that pose a risk to public health, Scotland must have the capability to identify them, assess their impact and respond appropriately. That capability is increasingly important as technologies, platforms and patterns of communication evolve.

The approach that is set out in the strategy is guided by important principles.

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): I do not disagree with any of that, but what practical impact does the cabinet secretary think that the Government will be able to make, and in what timescale will that be achieved?

Angela Constance: That is a fair point. The strategy is designed to be practical in its implication and implementation and, therefore, helpful not just to Government but to our stakeholders and partners. However, it is important to recognise that the technology around

us is evolving all the time. There are positives to that, but there are also risks. There is a sense that we all need to pick up the pace on that across the public sector.

As I started to say, as well as its practical implication, it is important that the strategy is underpinned and guided by principles. The first is to do no harm. Responses to health misinformation must be safe and proportionate. Even well-intentioned interventions can have unintended consequences if they are not implemented carefully. For that reason, our emphasis will remain on building trust, addressing concerns early and supporting access to reliable information.

Secondly, our approach must be ethical and transparent. Public trust depends on openness and accountability. Decisions about how misinformation is identified, assessed and addressed must be guided by clear ethical principles and transparent processes.

Thirdly, we will continue learning from others. The challenge does not stop at national borders, and valuable work is taking place around the world. Scotland will continue to learn from emerging evidence and best practice.

Fourthly, our approach must be co-produced. Solutions are far more effective when developed alongside those they serve. Communities, patients, educators and young people all have a vital role in shaping effective responses.

Fifthly, we will build on the strengths and assets that are already present in Scotland. Trusted relationships, local networks, public services and community organisations all form part of the solution.

Finally, we will adopt a culture of continuous improvement, learning from experience and adapting the evidence and approach as it evolves. Implementation of the strategy's recommendations is under way, and work is progressing across NHS Scotland and the wider health system to strengthen capability, improve co-ordination and support health literacy. That work will continue to evolve as the evidence develops.

The information landscape does not stand still, but by taking a measured, evidence-based and trust-centred approach, Scotland is well placed to meet the challenge. At its heart, the strategy is about helping people to access information that supports better health; it aims to protect and build confidence in the healthcare professions and scientific evidence, strengthen our resilience in our communities and ensure that Scotland is prepared for the future challenges.

I welcome the publication of the strategy and the work that is under way to implement the recommendations. I invite members to support the motion in my name and I indicate that I will support the Labour Party amendment and the Conservative Party amendment.

I move,

That the Parliament notes with concern the increasing risk of the global spread of misinformation relating to public health on social media, including through the use of AI-altered content; recognises that accessible, science-based and trustworthy health information is essential to supporting people to make informed decisions about their health, maintaining confidence in public health interventions and improving health outcomes; acknowledges the importance of taking an ethical approach to information integrity, and that misleading or false health information has a detrimental impact on society; notes with concern the rise in vaccine misinformation that has been spread in society since the COVID-19 pandemic; agrees that anyone who is eligible for life-saving vaccinations should be able to access the care that they need without the risk of harmful misinformation causing unnecessary concern or fear; further agrees that every Member of the Scottish Parliament has a responsibility to ensure that they use factual, science-based and trusted sources of health information from the NHS, public bodies and academia to protect public health, and that members should collaborate to tackle the rise of harmful online misinformation.

15:24

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): I look forward to more detail on what we have just heard. There is obviously a lot behind that, so it is hard to know whether we agree or disagree.

I want to pick up a couple of things that the cabinet secretary said. She said that everyone here should act with ethical principles and integrity, and I am happy to say that I am sure that we are all going to do that.

The cabinet secretary also said that "do no harm" is an important point. It certainly is, and sometimes we need to look at what the evidence is. It is possible to glance through the motion—as I think that Willie Rennie did—and think, "Well, it means well—I'm sure the details will be fine." However, we should look at a few things.

The Scottish Government's motion refers to "concern" about

"the use of AI-altered content".

That is fair enough—it is a concern. It is a concern that, all the time, the algorithms bring up advertised content, often from big companies, and then the most-searched content on a subject, even if it is not the closest match to what someone is looking for. I am sure that everyone uses AI; I am sure that we have all done it for this debate.

The Scottish Government also

"notes with concern the rise in vaccine misinformation … since the COVID-19 pandemic".

It is a good point. In 2023, a Scottish Government study as part of post-shielding research found that only 29 per cent of the public trusted health information from the Scottish Government on Covid-19.

A maxim in science is that science is never settled—there is no absolute final word. We would be wise to consider that. Perhaps people believe less in the Government health information since the Covid years because almost everyone has their own experience of ill health and, despite being assured every day by our former First Minister during Covid of absolute facts, those sometimes changed when the advice changed.

Everyone had to test for Covid and stay at home for 10 days if a test was positive and then, at some point, if they were well, they could go to work and stop testing. Viruses mutate and Covid is undoubtedly still about, but that was how it happened.

Heather Anderson (Dundee City West) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Helen McDade: I will not, thank you—I have a lot to go through.

People are not daft. They distrust advice from companies and from people with a financial interest. Vaccine companies have made huge profits risk free due to commercial indemnities. Indemnity might have been reasonable during the Covid crisis, but those companies still have it: a get-out-of-jail-free card. It does not matter how much evidence or anything else comes forward; they can continue to say, "Please vaccinate every year," and they are laughing all the way to the bank.

Let us look at some of the evidence—[*Interruption*.] Sorry—who spoke? Did someone ask to come in?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member must be allowed to speak.

Helen McDade: People are not daft, and the Scottish Government has to take responsibility for its agencies' own advice. We cannot rely on commercial companies; I do not know whether the cabinet secretary was suggesting that, but we certainly cannot.

There is an arguable fact about Covid in its origin story. People can believe that a bat 1,000 miles away from Wuhan was transported to a wet market and gave a respiratory virus to a pangolin or similar, and somebody then ate it and got the respiratory virus. That did not sound terribly convincing at the time.

Interestingly, the World Health Organization still maintains that, on the balance of probabilities, that might be the case. China, which bankrolls the WHO, would certainly have accused anyone at the time who tried to challenge that narrative, which most people now think has turned out to be misinformation. If you find a survey on it, you will see that most people believe that the virus came from an accidental release from a Wuhan laboratory that was carrying out gain-of-function research on coronaviruses.

We cannot just believe what we are told—the science is never settled. The motion calls for

"accessible, science-based and trustworthy health information".

That is music to my ears. I am a veterinary surgeon; I read a lot of research, and I have often thought that there should be more engineers, doctors and nurses—I do not think that they are in the chamber, but there are some—and scientists in the Parliament. I have often thought that biology should be compulsory in schools so that people can understand health and medical issues.

Reform's amendment calls for information to be "unbiased". People should be able to make their own fully informed decisions for themselves and their families, so where will they get that information? What about the BBC? It is not Reform members' favourite, but it is certainly the favourite of some others in the chamber

Five days ago, the BBC—through its BBC verify service, so it must be right—reported the running costs of the Covid vaccine damage scheme at £83 million. Admittedly, a lot of that relates to process, but it is still a lot. The rising number of claims is the cause, and we should note that those claims are still coming in—they are not just legacy claims. Members in this chamber have heard from such people in the past.

The yellow card scheme is a United Kingdom system, but Scotland signs up to it. It monitors suspected adverse drug reactions, including deaths. The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency recognises that all vaccines and medicines have side effects. Anyone who has been given a medicine and read about the side effects has probably thought, "Hmm, I don't know if I am going to take that, that sounds quite bad." Of course, however, we all do—we all make an informed judgment and we decide whether we are going to take these things.

Something that is acknowledged in the leaflet that is given to people who receive a Covid vaccine is that they should wait for 15 minutes before driving. I do not know whether any of the members in the chamber have ever done that, or have even read the leaflet, which is handed to people as they go in. The reason for that advice is in case the

person who receives the vaccine gets anaphylaxis, which is a known side effect.

The Government cannot just hand out blanket recommendations and ignore the evidence. People can claim for damages following a vaccination and their case is found to be valid, and the vaccines that are eligible for such a payment are those for Coronavirus, diphtheria, haemophilus influenzae type B, flu and so on.

The issue is so well recognised that the Covid inquiry heard from the vaccine injured and bereaved, who told us that they felt that they were almost being pushed into the shadows during the pandemic, and that they are "the uncomfortable truth".

The inquiry heard from a father of two boys who had a high-powered job until suffering a side effect—vaccine-induced thrombosis and thrombocytopenia—and falling into a coma for four weeks—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member did not take any interventions, so she will have to bring her remarks to a close.

Helen McDade: So, we must be unbiased. Our amendment calls for unbiased information, which people should be able to access without the risk of being accused of spreading harmful misinformation.

The Government needs to set an example. Was it misinformation when NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde said that its new hospital was safe?

The Minister for Community Care (Alison Thewliss): You should set an example.

Helen McDade: I am setting an example for the people who have been ignored.

Was it misinformation when the health board said at the inquiry that the hospital was safe, and then admitted later that it knew it was unsafe?

The Government is either responsible for those agencies, or it should be very careful about what it takes responsibility for. The tenor of the Government's motion suggests that it is taking a much more authoritarian approach, and it does not have the information for it.

I move amendment S7M-01200.3, to insert at end:

"; agrees that in addition to being factual and evidence-based, information must be unbiased and balanced to allow people to make fully informed decisions and calls on the Scottish Government, in its own decision-making, to follow the example it expects others to; notes that a 2023 study, commissioned by the Scottish Government, found that only 29% of the public believed that its own current COVID-19 guidance was trustworthy, demonstrating the need for the Scottish Government to understand the role that it has played in the public losing trust in health information that it issues; believes that health information covers everything related to health, and considers statements that the Queen Elizabeth University Hospital was safe, when some wards were known and later found not to be, to constitute misinformation."

15:32

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for holding this important debate, and I welcome the content of her speech.

We live in deeply uncertain times. The rise of social media, the misuse and abuse of information, and the plethora of unreliable and incorrect information on public health issues demand that action is taken.

Regrettably, dangerous misinformation in the public health sphere is not new. We all remember the example of the campaign that was led by the now-discredited Dr Andrew Wakefield that claimed that the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine caused autism. There was no evidence for such a statement, and the result of the campaign was that thousands of children did not receive the life-saving vaccinations that they needed. All that Wakefield's campaign did was sow the seeds of mistrust in medicine, and it turned out that Wakefield was not just a dangerous quack, he was a fraudster who sought to financially gain from his claims.

We need to challenge those who seek to spread dangerous mistrust in our medical and scientific sectors, and expose the reasons for their deception. Medical disinformation can come from any corner, and we would be turning away from an uncomfortable truth if we did not admit that one party in particular has a clear problem with disinformation.

Dr Timothy Kelly—remember him?—the Reform candidate in East Kilbride and Strathaven, claimed that the Covid-19 vaccine, which is regarded to have saved countless lives, was neither safe nor effective. Further, Reform invited Aseem Malhotra to speak at its conference, where he blamed the Covid vaccine for causing cancer in the royal family. Indeed, the leader of Reform, Nigel Farage, is co-founder of Action on World Health, a very shadowy organisation that is dedicated to opposing the WHO and undermining its central messages.

Misinformation has potentially dangerous consequences, and I think that some parties in this chamber—one in particular—need to be mindful of that.

I think that the cabinet secretary would concede that vaccination levels are too low. In Scotland, last year, we had 28 laboratory-confirmed measles cases. We experienced an earlier flu season, driven by influenza A, all while thousands of

eligible Scots did not get their flu vaccine in time. Human papillomavirus vaccine coverage has declined over the past 10 years, and childhood vaccine take-up is down. That does not only present issues now, because low vaccine uptake creates a ticking health time bomb. That is why it is in all our interests to drive up vaccine uptake and tackle misinformation at every turn.

That is why our amendment calls for greater flexibility for primary care teams, so that they can ensure that all those who need vaccinated get vaccinated. In particular, I am thinking about general practitioners in rural areas who use the opportunity of patients' being in their practices to vaccinate them. We need more flexibility to make sure that we capture more people in vaccination programmes.

Although we agree with the spirit of the Government's position, there is a certain irony in its rhetoric, because trust is essential, and the Government itself is guilty of providing misinformation about the future of Monklands hospital, its failure to deliver transparency for the victims of the Eljamel scandal, and, above all, its complicity in the cover-up of the reason for deaths at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital. We agree with the Government that action must be taken to tackle misinformation, and I just hope that it realises—and that we all realise—that we all have a key role to play in that effort.

It is time to call out the quacks and the dangerous influencers who seek to spread misinformation, but it is also time to demand more from our Government and to demand transparency and truthfulness at the very highest levels.

I move amendment S7M-01200.1, to insert at end:

"; is concerned by declining childhood vaccination rates and continuing barriers to access to vaccination programmes, and believes that additional flexibility is required for trusted primary care teams to improve vaccination uptake."

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I call Miles Briggs to speak to and move amendment S7M-01200.2. You have up to six minutes.

15:36

Miles Briggs (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con): This is an important debate and a reminder of how our society and we as individuals are seeing a significant change in how we access—and how we can trust—information in relation to our health. Misleading information can lead to real harms, as we have heard, and it has led to people not engaging with or taking up our world-leading public health vaccination programmes. That is at the heart of the issue, because it undermines those programmes' ability to deliver population-level immunity.

The motion rightly diagnoses the problem, but we also need to use this opportunity to prescribe some solutions. As the cabinet secretary said, trust is at the heart of that. A recent Canadian study showed that people trust their friends, neighbours and work colleagues on social media more than they do journalists or Government leaders—and, to be honest, I do not think that was just about President Trump.

Let us face it: today, we are all broadcasters of information. Social media spreads ideas far and fast, and everything that we share, like and comment on multiplies the power of that information to all our followers, influencing the views and beliefs of friends, family and, yes, total strangers. Unfortunately, there is a lot of false and misleading health information out there. Ahead of today's debate, I did a simple Google search on some health conditions and looking for advice, and, to be honest, I was shocked at where it takes you—from claims that sunscreen causes skin cancer to perhaps the most challenging and constant myth around vaccines, which is that they cause autism, as has been raised. That myth continues to be shared online and driven towards parents, including in online parent chat rooms, and it has had hugely damaging consequences.

We need to look at how we can turn that around, because, as Jackie Baillie outlined, we are already seeing examples of how that impacts on our health in Scotland. Misinformation around the MMR vaccine has contributed to vaccine hesitancy on the part of many parents, and, as has been said, Public Health Scotland has already reported 28 lab-confirmed measles cases in 2025 and eight in the first quarter of this year. Since 2024, Scotland has also experienced substantial increases in cases of whooping cough.

I can recall many of the challenges that we saw during the Covid-19 pandemic around misinformation and mistrust, particularly among our ethnic minority and eastern European communities, resulting in significantly lower vaccine uptake rates during the pandemic and since.

One part of the debate that has interested me, and which we need to recognise, is people's increasing disconnect from the family doctor. As has been debated, we must consider the difficulty in accessing GP appointments and how that is also causing people to seek information in different ways. GPs are the most trusted source of health information, so if people cannot get an appointment to see or speak to a medical professional, they will look for health information on the internet and are often directed to these so-

called patient chat rooms. The question that we should be asking ourselves is how we can build information resilience in our society.

On Monday, I attended the launch of Movember's report on men's health in Scotland. I segue to that because there were a number of key recommendations in that report, which I hope that the Government will consider. The report is stark, especially around the evidence that shows that around 13,000 Scottish men died prematurely in 2024. That is 35 men dying prematurely every day in Scotland. The report calls for a public health approach to addressing online harms and disinformation affecting boys and young men, building on the Scottish Government's "Online Safety Taskforce Action Plan 2026/27". That also needs to be taken forward in relation to health information for men and boys and the different ways in which we engage in seeking health information.

The report specifically calls for a men's health action plan, which I believe is needed. Although the Government responded by saying that it was not looking to take that forward, I hope that ministers will look again and positively engage on a cross-party basis. That could be at the heart of addressing a number of the Government's priorities in relation to men and boys.

The report states:

"While a woman's relationship with her health and healthcare is established early during adolescence, built around her reproductive and sexual health needs, young men tend to have fewer touchpoints with the health system, reducing opportunities to develop 'health literacy'".

The lifelong skills needed to understand and look after ourselves are complex to develop, and that also includes access and understanding of online information. That is why the Scottish Conservative amendment includes a specific ask, which is

"to review how all public health information can build trust, improve health literacy and open routes"

to supporting people into services

"as part of a more coherent national approach to service redesign and public policy."

The days have passed when people accessed their information from health information leaflets on GP practice coffee tables, but we need to make sure that NHS Scotland is fit for the future. We need to make sure that the digital and information ages, in which people now live, provide the bespoke and accurate public health information that we all want to see.

I move amendment S7M-01200.2, to insert at end:

"; supports the development of a new national approach to health literacy, that enables people to find, understand and use public health information to make informed decisions about their health and to support others to do so; notes the recent Movember report on men's health in Scotland and its call for a public health approach to addressing the online harms and disinformation affecting boys and young men, building on the Scottish Government's Online Safety Taskforce Action Plan; further notes that such an approach should be adopted as a cross-government priority, and calls on the Scottish Government to review how all public health information can build trust, improve health literacy and open routes into support and services, as part of a more coherent national approach to service redesign and public policy."

15:42

Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): I thank the Scottish Government for lodging the motion. As many people have said, this is undoubtedly a prevalent and defining issue of our time, accelerated by the pervasive impact of social media on everyday lives and, it is fair to say, hastened at such a pace that Governments all around the world are struggling to catch up with it. It is therefore important that we consider the wide-ranging impacts of misinformation on our health, specifically in Scotland.

As we learned from the Covid pandemic, when we have disease outbreaks, countries that operate as lone actors—because they think that they can pull up a drawbridge to keep diseases out—are completely delusional in a world and an economy that are knitted together at every level, with overlapping supply chains and operations.

On a small scale, misinformation can look like an Instagram fitness guru saying that if people drink celery juice for a month, their skin will clear up and they will have great bowel movements. A harder example would be politicians, for years, peddling myths in society about how HIV and AIDS spread or saying that they affect only gay men. The myths around autism, which we have spoken about already, have stirred up the type of eugenics thinking that says that a dead child is often better than a disabled one.

We know that social media algorithms are built to give people what they want. For example, misinformation on diet culture can be funnelled to someone with an eating disorder when they are just trying to google for help.

Tackling misinformation is not simply a matter of producing more facts; it is also about building trust and helping people to develop the skills to assess the information that they encounter.

Naturally, everyone in the Parliament, across the political spectrum, bears a responsibility to address misinformation. Yesterday, we heard a lot of opinions about how international affairs should not concern us, but health is a strong example of

where they should. Health does not care about borders and it impacts on all of us.

I started by highlighting concerns. However, I recognise that, as the cabinet secretary mentioned, with the modern advances in health technology, we have never been better equipped to address such issues.

Patients and members of the public can now encounter health claims from influencers, commercial organisations and AI systems alongside information from doctors, scientists and public health organisations. The difficulty is that those sources can look equally authoritative and factual, even though their quality and accuracy could be very different.

We can mitigate the impacts of global health issues and disease outbreaks with effective screening, planning and preparation. However, doing that effectively requires empirical truth to be the driving factor behind decisions. If truth is not what is driving policy and decision making in Scotland, how can we maintain trust across the board? That matters because health information influences real decisions. People's decisions about whether they choose to vaccinate their child, whether they seek medical advice about symptoms, whether they follow treatment for cancer or whether they use an unproven alternative therapy can have significant consequences for those people, their wider communities and society. Vaccination provides the clearest example of why that matters: as Jackie Baillie mentioned, falling vaccination coverage creates the conditions in which diseases that were previously well controlled can return.

It is important to say that misinformation is not the sole reason for changes in levels of vaccination uptake or mistrust in healthcare. Decisions about vaccines are influenced by many factors, including access to services; socioeconomic circumstances; trust in institutions, which Miles Briggs alluded to; previous experiences of healthcare among those in the minority ethnic community; and the accessibility of reliable information.

A key aspect of our addressing health misinformation is long-term interventions such as education. Media, digital and health literacy are becoming increasingly interconnected. People need to know not only how to find information but how to question where it came from, understand evidence, recognise conflicts of interest and distinguish between genuine expertise and content that merely looks authoritative.

As has been mentioned, the growth of AI makes that challenge even more urgent. It can make health misinformation considerably more convincing because it can almost instantly generate fluent, personalised and apparently authoritative answers. I have heard from GPs who say that patients have come to them and said, "I asked ChatGPT first; this is what it told me," and what it had said was completely bonkers. That is unhelpful for both parties. AI systems can produce inaccurate or fabricated information and present it with confidence. Systems that appear to be helpful can give people information that is incomplete, misleading or plainly wrong.

Scotland's health information integrity strategy recognises that responsibility cannot sit only with one organisation or one profession. The Government, the Parliament, NHS Scotland, Public Health Scotland, schools, universities, community organisations, charities, healthcare professionals, researchers and technology companies all have different roles to play. I agree with the cabinet secretary that tackling misinformation should not mean shutting down debate; it should mean making it easier for people to distinguish evidence from speculation, expertise from unsupported claims and reliable information from content that is designed primarily to attract attention.

The Scottish Greens will back the Government's motion and support the Labour and Conservative amendments on the dangers of medical misinformation. I hope that members in the rest of the chamber will consider the need for us to come together again and back this stance, not only on misinformation in relation to health but on the misinformation that is going around the world in relation to welfare, disability, diet culture, the rights of sex workers, housing, immigration and much more.

15:49

Adam Harley (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD): I thank the cabinet secretary for having this debate. I am pleased to follow Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill's excellent speech, which included many of the excellent points that I am about to make—what can you do?

In many ways, today's debate is fundamentally about trust: who do we trust, what information do we trust and what sources of information do we trust? As we know, trust in our institutions is, by many measures, at a very low level. When people are scunnered by a feeling that things are going backwards, that systems are failing and that problems are being left unsolved, some people just switch off altogether. Others turn to sources of information and commentary that, in the past, would have held far less weight than they do today.

That dynamic is potentially most harmful when it comes to public health, where the wrong information at the wrong time can have devastating consequences. The internet and

social media have opened up the world and given almost instantaneous access to information, but they have also opened the door to misinformation and to people who are willing to exploit uncertainty and fear. That has been complicated further by the meteoric rise of artificial intelligence, whereby, as we have heard, even a simple Google search can now produce an AI-generated answer.

Increasingly, people are turning to AI for health advice rather than speaking to a doctor or another healthcare professional. Some people are turning to popular YouTubers or social media personalities with enormous reach and influence. Those people often generate fear around particular health conditions or negative health outcomes and then market products that they claim will prevent that harm or cure that illness. We need to be clear and robust in calling out falsehoods when they appear, particularly when they have the potential to cause real harm or, ultimately, cost lives.

However, there is an important point to be made about how we do that. If someone does not trust evidence-based health information, talking down to them or shaming them is unlikely to change their mind. We need to make sure that people feel able to ask questions; no question about their health should be off limits. People should be able to raise concerns, challenge information that they have seen and get clear, accessible answers from a trusted source.

One way in which we could do that is by making better use of the NHS app. We should have a comprehensive NHS digital service that puts reliable information from a source that people know they can trust and access to services at their fingertips. We know that the MyCare app was significantly delayed before its launch earlier this year and that what it offers falls below what it could provide. The wider roll-out of features and enhancements that the Government has said will come soon is needed so that people can benefit from a combination of reliable, evidence-based information from a trusted source and easier access to healthcare services.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP): I refer the member to the NHS Inform website, which provides a lot of the information that he is talking about.

Adam Harley: I absolutely take that point. I do not dispute what Clare Haughey said, but there is something quite powerful about people having an app at their fingertips. Increasingly, people have the ChatGPT app or the Claude app at their fingertips, which enables them to get immediate feedback that is tailored to their situation. Something along those lines, provided by the NHS, would be really powerful and would really help.

All of that matters, especially as we head towards winter. Doctors, nurses and other staff who work in our emergency departments are already hugely up against it, even before the full force of winter pressures has begun to hit. The roll-out of flu vaccination is hugely important not only in protecting vulnerable people, but in taking some of that pressure off the NHS. However, distrust in vaccination, which was prevalent before the pandemic and has increased since then, has made that job more difficult. We must keep making the case for vaccination by providing clear, accessible and evidence-based information.

That brings me to the responsibility of members of this Parliament. We all have platforms. People listen to what we say and share what we post, and, increasingly, we can reach thousands of people. That gives us a responsibility to ensure that what we share is accurate and evidence based, and that it comes from sources that we and others can trust. Of course, that does not mean that we should not question things—we absolutely should question the Government, challenge decisions and raise concerns—but, when it comes to public health, we should always be focused squarely on the public good, on positive outcomes for people, on clarity and on evidence. Ultimately, the aim should be very simple: to ensure that everyone has access to reliable information and the services that they need to prevent ill health, to make informed decisions about their health and to give them the best possible chance of a positive outcome when they need treatment. That is how we rebuild trust, and it is a responsibility that falls on all of us.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): We move to the open debate.

15:55

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. I am an NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde bank nurse.

The concept of misinformation is not a new one, and it is increasingly pertinent in today's world. In the health context, misinformation can take many forms. It can include false claims about the causes of ill health, misleading information about vaccines, inaccurate dietary advice, unproven treatments or exaggerated claims about the benefits and risks of particular interventions. The consequences can be particularly serious in a health context, because people may use information found online to make decisions about their own health or the health of others.

A recent study from King's College London showed that one in seven of the respondents used

AI chatbots for health advice. A fifth of those said that the technology did not encourage them to seek a professional opinion, and a similar proportion decided against doing so because of something that a chatbot told them.

In January, an investigation by *The Guardian* newspaper showed that Google AI overviews were placing at the top of online searches not just inaccurate health information, but potentially dangerous information, including on pancreatic cancer, liver function tests and women's cancer tests.

Last year, researchers at University College Cork published a report regarding online searches for information about reduced fetal movement. They found that more than half of the search results contained misinformation, primarily from US commercial websites, which contradicted clinical guidelines in the UK and Ireland and which could delay crucial medical assessments if followed.

I will give a final example. The UK used to be really good at beating measles. In 2017 the World Health Organization declared that the disease had been eliminated. Sadly, that is no longer the case. Last year, there were almost 1,000 confirmed cases in England and 28 in Scotland, mostly in young children. In Scotland, second-dose MMR vaccination rates hover around 91 per cent; across the UK as a whole they sit around 85 per cent. Global vaccination rates have fallen, and many experts blame, in part, the spread of anti-vax conspiracy theories, including ones that rehash absolutely discredited theories about links between the MMR vaccine and autism.

All of those examples highlight how crucial it is to nurture trusted information touchpoints between the healthcare system and those who access it. If there is a vacuum, misinformation such as anti-vax messaging can slide into that space and become the dominant narrative.

None of us are as immune to misinformation as we would perhaps like to think. Ipsos polling for the Academy of Medical Sciences found a 41 percentage-point gap between how difficult people think it is for others to spot misleading health information and how difficult they believe it is for themselves. It is understandable how misinformation can take root when people are vulnerable, anxious, overwhelmed or searching for answers. The Ipsos research also shows us that those most likely to be affected are those who are already facing health inequalities, which can lead to delayed care and can worsen outcomes.

Tackling health misinformation must be part of our wider efforts to reduce health inequalities and to help people make informed decisions about their health. That is not about discouraging people from learning about their health; it is about empowering them and making trustworthy sources accessible and prominent. That is why I welcomed the publication of "The Scottish Health Information Integrity Strategy" last year. It was developed by multiple stakeholders and provides a framework for a co-ordinated, evidence-based and ethical response to health misinformation. Among the key planks of the strategy are building trust and resilience, strengthening health literacy and developing and supporting trusted and reliable networks and voices, so that those are the ones that people turn to when they need advice or support.

I particularly wish to emphasise and welcome the part of today's motion that underlines the fact that

"every Member of the Scottish Parliament has a responsibility"

to use and amplify

"factual, science-based and trusted sources of … information".

The Scottish Council on Global Affairs made that point last month in a report about misinformation and disinformation in Scotland more generally, as part of its state of the world series.

A member of this Parliament is on the record as saying that they

"persuaded many other people not to have"

the Covid-19 vaccine and

"would like them stopped".

Quite frankly, that beggars belief. To be crystal clear, I note that misinformation on vaccines is dangerous. Misinformation in any health area is dangerous, and members should know better than to contribute to false claims and put the safety of Scots at risk by pushing those claims on to the public.

The SNP Scottish Government will always stand up for the sharing of accurate and detailed information when it comes to not only health, but all policy areas. We must have a collective agreement across this Parliament to ensure that the harms of health misinformation are not pushed forward by any party. I hope that we can have a constructive debate this afternoon and that we can reach consensus on that important point.

16:00

Martyn Day (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP): Misinformation is nothing new—the "Oxford English Dictionary" records use of the word as far back as the 16th century—and bad health advice is not new, either. For generations, folks have been told to sweat out a fever, that

going outside with wet hair will give them a cold, and to put butter on a burn. I confess that I might have spread some misinformation over the years, but I am still coming to terms with the reality that a hot toddy will not actually cure a cold.

The World Health Organization regards misinformation as false information that is shared without intent to mislead. Those who share it might believe it to be true or informative and they have no malicious intent. In contrast, disinformation is false information or propaganda that is deliberately used to mislead. Over recent years, fake news has become increasingly familiar, and false information of all types now travels even more quickly. The World Health Organization has a term for when that volume of information overwhelms reliable advice during a health emergency—an "infodemic".

If we cast our minds back to the Covid-19 pandemic, we can see that the most overt impact of misinformation was increased vaccine hesitancy. Misinformation was amplified globally from the highest levels. President Donald Trump repeatedly promoted hydroxychloroquine as a treatment for Covid-19 before any reliable evidence could establish whether it worked, and the US Food and Drug Administration went on to warn of serious cardiac risks.

During the Covid pandemic, Scotland saw some dreadful disinformation. In September 2021, Scottish schools were deliberately targeted with misleading information about the vaccination programme. Headteachers received hoax letters about vaccines complete with fake NHS logos and a supposed consent checklist to distribute to pupils. Schools also received anti-vaccination leaflets and petitions, and pseudo-legal cease-and-desist letters were circulated directly to local authorities and secondary schools. Deliberate false information was dressed up to look authoritative using an NHS identity in an environment where parents and young people should expect trustworthy health information.

Misinformation can have consequences far beyond confusion or anxiety. One of the starkest examples concerns pregnancy during Covid. Public Health Scotland found that, between December 2020 and October 2021, 104 Covid infections during pregnancy were associated with admission to critical care. Of those, 102—98 per cent—occurred in women who were unvaccinated when diagnosed. Vaccination rates among pregnant women were substantially below those among women of the same age in general. The "Scottish Health Information Integrity Strategy" records how false claims about vaccine safety and fertility contributed to uncertainty and fear among pregnant women.

Sadly, disinformation did not disappear with the pandemic. In evidence to the Parliament's Health, Social Care and Sport Committee last year, Dr Pavan Srireddy of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland warned of widespread misinformation surrounding neurodevelopmental conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Research examining popular ADHD content on TikTok found that more than half the videos studied were misleading. With people increasingly turning to social media for health information before speaking to a health professional, that is very concerning.

However, tackling misinformation cannot simply involve the Government or politicians telling people that they are wrong. NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde provides an interesting example of that. In 2024, it spoke directly to people living in prisons about vaccination. The discussions identified misconceptions—including that younger adults did not need vaccinations—information voids and the need for simple messages. The health board's response was to have people living in prison help to make short films for their peers, and material was developed for prison radio, with messages delivered through people to whom the audience could relate. People are more likely to listen to information that comes from sources that they understand and trust. That is why the emphasis of the "Scottish Health Information Integrity Strategy" on building trust and resilience is so important.

There is no single solution. We need good public information, health literacy, trusted community voices and rapid responses when harmful falsehoods circulate. It is regrettable that the Parliament lacks the power to tackle online harms and the algorithms that amplify health claims. To date, the UK Government has failed to address those concerns adequately. However, we all have a responsibility to ensure that what we say and share builds trust and does not undermine it. Politicians in the Parliament must be held to a higher standard and should not promote false claims to the public.

16:06

Irshad Ahmed (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for securing this important debate.

Medical misinformation is nothing new. If we walk up the road from the Parliament to the Surgeons Hall museum, we see that we have reached many of our medical milestones through trial and error, often with fatal consequences. Human biology is complicated, and our understanding is incomplete. Thankfully, medical practice has moved forward and our knowledge

has improved over generations, reinforced by years of research.

Delivering quality research can take years; spreading falsehoods can take seconds. What is new is how quickly lies can spread. We increasingly take advice on everything, from diet and weight loss to supplements and steroids, from people we do not know who are motivated by business interests to satisfy sponsors, or just by a desire for attention.

There is huge frustration among health professionals that they are not being listened to. Patients are increasingly dismissing advice provided by trained professionals in favour of false promises and bad advice from influencers and AI. According to a survey published in *The Times*, one third of young adults believe that influencers have more up-to-date health information than doctors. It also found that nearly half of Britons are spending more than £120 a year on supplements that they find on social media.

The threats from medical misinformation are not limited to reduced vaccination rates. Other threats include a sharp rise in the sale of black market weight-loss drugs, an increase in steroid sales to young men, harmful advice on how to give birth and the adoption of unusual and unhealthy diets.

I promise to support the cabinet secretary in her work to support trust in NHS staff and in going to them for advice. Our GPs should have long-standing relationships with their patients. Our digital systems should be better connected. We pushed for such improvements at the election, and they need to be made.

UK research institutions such as the Medical Research Council and the National Institute for Health and Care Research fund quality research at our universities that informs Scotland's NHS policy. They were crucial to the delivery of vaccines quickly during the pandemic.

Having strong regulatory bodies means that treatments are safe and effective and that our doctors receive clear rules against commercial influence. We can see the dangerous impact on public health when such institutions are dismantled and defunded, as they have been in the United States.

Some members will prefer not to talk about the vested interests that are disrupting our public health policy. They say that all health choices are simply about personal freedom. The reality is different. The poorest suffer the most from health misinformation and its consequences. They are targeted by harmful content from organisations that hold their personal information. In deprived areas, it is harder to access health services and it is easier to access unhealthy products, and vaccination rates are lower and death rates are higher. We need to stop health misinformation if we are to reduce our health inequalities.

Although I welcome the publication of the report, the Government cannot just comment on current trends; it must act. I want us to continue to plug into a valuable UK-wide network of research institutions that provide advice and accountability. We must find ways to support our health workforce to ensure that patients listen to them, and we must be tough on those who seek to exploit our healthcare for personal gain.

16:11

Heather Anderson (Dundee City West) (SNP): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests and declare that I am a serving councillor on Dundee City Council.

It is a bit extraordinary: I had not expected to hear Michael Gove's name mentioned three times today, so I am sorry that I am mentioning him again. Some 10 years ago, in the heat of the Brexit debate, he famously stated:

"the people in this country have had enough of experts".

Brexit, which was fuelled by misinformation and disinformation, set the scene, and we now live in a world where people can say anything based on any set of alternative facts that they find useful or profitable. Post truth is now the water that we have to swim in, in which appeals to the emotions of fear and rage can drown out reasoned arguments, facts or straight scientific evidence. Navigating that blizzard of misinformation, disinformation and downright falsehoods is the new normal, and it is more important than ever that we challenge it, because, as we have heard, it causes significant harm every day.

It is particularly galling because Scotland is, has been and, I hope, always will be a nation that produces world-leading experts, and none more so than those in medicine and health. Alexander Fleming gave the world penicillin. Joseph Lister gave us antiseptic surgery. James Young Simpson introduced chloroform anaesthetics. The list goes on.

Research in Scotland continues to be on the cutting edge of medical discovery. Only last month, in my city, a team of scientists at the University of Dundee's drug discovery unit discovered that an antimalarial compound that they had developed was effective in malaria treatment and prevention. They are at an early stage of taking trial evidence but, if evidence can prevail over misinformation, that breakthrough could help millions, if not billions, of people. Scotland should be proud of its experts and its expertise.

I will highlight three diseases that could, in my lifetime, move from the incurable category to the eradicated category: cervical cancer, HIV and hepatitis C. Each journey to eradication involves overcoming misinformation and disinformation and building trust.

First, I will address cervical cancer. It used to be one of the leading causes of cancer deaths among women. Now, we have the HPV vaccination, which is administered in Scotland to boys and girls in secondary 1 and can be offered to people up to the age of 25. The HPV vaccination protects boys and girls from HPV-related cancers: cervical cancer, head and throat cancers and genital cancers. It also prevents boys from passing on the virus to their partners.

We now know that there have been no cases of cervical cancer caused by the HPV virus in fully vaccinated young women since 2008, when the vaccination programme was introduced. We have, in effect, eliminated cervical cancer among girls who are immunised. That was unthinkable 20 years ago.

Although coverage of the vaccination programme in Scotland is the highest in the UK, uptake has not reached 100 per cent, as we have heard. There has been a decline over recent years, particularly among young people from more disadvantaged groups. Although 90 per cent of girls in the most affluent areas get the vaccine, only 75 per cent of girls in the most deprived areas do so. For cervical cancer to kill any young woman in Scotland is unacceptable, but it is completely unacceptable that it is more likely to kill young women from more deprived areas. We must tackle the misinformation and disinformation that are being spread.

Secondly, I want to speak about AIDS and HIV, which continues to kill people around the world, often due to gross disinformation. In January 2020, the public health minister was my mighty predecessor, Joe FitzPatrick. He announced the target of 2030 for the elimination of HIV transmissions—thank you, Joe. That has been made possible by pre-exposure prophylaxis, which reduces the risk of contracting HIV by 99 per cent and blocks the HIV life cycle. However, people must take the medication for it to work. Thankfully, since 2017, nearly 14,000 people have done so, thanks to Joe. In the 1980s, we could not have imagined that eradication was possible, but it is, and Scotland could be the first country in the world to eliminate HIV transmission.

Lastly, I want to speak about hepatitis C, an infection that is shrouded in misinformation. In 2020, NHS Tayside and the Hillcrest Futures harm reduction service were able to achieve the world's first micro-elimination of hepatitis C, in Tayside. Hillcrest Futures told me how much work that took: it had to challenge outdated information and explain that modern direct-acting antiviral treatments work more effectively and do not have the dire side effects of previous treatments. It was only through building trust over time that people could be supported to make informed decisions and engage with the treatment—and they did.

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

Heather Anderson: I am concluding.

Scotland hopes to eliminate hepatitis C, which is a major public health concern, over the next couple of years. Let us keep up the good work and ensure that we do.

Michael Gove—I am sorry to mention him again—was wrong about a lot of things, but he was particularly wrong on this: the people of this country have not had enough of experts; in fact, it is more important than ever that we listen to some of them. Let us not let misinformation and disinformation get in the way, and let us hit our targets.

16:17

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): I am grateful to the cabinet secretary for introducing the debate. Health misinformation has always presented a huge challenge, but more so now than ever, given the ability for instant communication that comes with social media and, even more dangerously, the power that comes with generative AI. AI has dangerous potential to allow false—or, what is perhaps worse, misleading—information to proliferate at an uncontrollable rate. The need to take action grows more urgent every day.

It is incredibly important to note that the use of automation and artificial intelligence, as in the case of social media, is not necessarily an inherent social harm. AI is a tool and, like all tools, its impact on society can be determined by how it is used.

When AI is used safely, such as for automating frustrating work in our busy public services, to allow those who work in and support the public sector to focus on what they do best—helping people who live and work here—it can have a hugely beneficial impact on our society. With human oversight, it can be used to analyse data and identify important trends in our country and the actions that we can take to support people better. Specific forms of artificial intelligence have been used to push the frontiers of medical science in attempts to discover new treatments. That is when the tool is used for good.

When it is used for the worse, it can automate fake social media accounts and spread disinformation and misinformation across the internet, as other members have mentioned. We have heard stories about the devastating use of image-generation AI to misrepresent and degrade individuals. It is becoming increasingly difficult to identify artificially generated media, although it is still possible at this point. For example, I expect that I might not be the only person in the chamber who has had to explain to a family member or close friend that the video they have recently seen of a dog saving a baby from a waterfall is, very sadly, not real.

As the cabinet secretary has mentioned, the window in which we can relatively easily identify falsified content is closing much faster than everybody had hoped. This weekend's news that the three largest AI labs have come together to call for a slowdown in AI development to allow increased regulation should be one that concerns us all. It is rare that an industry calls for increased regulation of itself.

Just last week, three researchers warned that artificial intelligence could kill off humanity within a decade, with one of the researchers resigning from his role in protest. He was publicly backed by one of his former colleagues, Evan Hubinger. Evan is the lead in the company's alignment division, which is focused on ensuring that AI models do what we tell them to do. He put the chance of AI eventually killing all humans at 10 per cent. I do not know what other members think, but those do not sound like great odds. We have an absolutely fantastic Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care, but I do not expect her to personally save us from AI.

The need for vital further regulation of AI has been highlighted in today's motion, and yesterday we agreed to pause planning consideration for hyperscale data centres in Scotland following the Minister for Public Finance's motion. I am glad that the Scottish National Party is leading the way here on calls for the regulation of AI companies. When it comes to misinformation and disinformation, as members of the Scottish Parliament we have an important role to ensure that we educate ourselves on the evidence, so that when we are confronted with misinformation or disinformation we can challenge it strongly. As the cabinet secretary's motion eloquently puts it, members have

"a responsibility to ensure that they use factual, science-based and trusted sources of health information from the NHS, public bodies and academia to protect public health".

Health misinformation is a deeply dangerous issue that can have serious consequences for individuals, but also for the whole of society. To be clear, I echo the comments of other speakers, particularly Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill and Adam Harley, that, when it comes to our health, it is essential that we rely on trustworthy information, medical professionals and well-supported academic evidence.

Health decisions should never be based on rumours, social media posts or information from unreliable sources. If we have concerns about our health, the people we are best placed to discuss them with are qualified medical professionals, who can provide accurate advice and guidance based on the most up-to-date scientific evidence.

As health misinformation continues to spread, it not only impacts individuals but can undermine public trust and contribute to poorer public health more generally. We have seen that happen in the past, particularly with misinformation surrounding vaccines and various health conditions. That is why it is important that we question the information that we see, check where it comes from and ensure that what we believe about health is supported by reliable evidence.

Ultimately, tackling health misinformation is about not just correcting false information but protecting people, building trust in our healthcare and creating a healthier and better-informed society. I look forward to supporting the cabinet secretary's motion and working with colleagues across the chamber, from different parties, to tackle misinformation and disinformation so as to protect our communities.

16:22

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): The risk of the global spread of misinformation relating to public health, particularly via social media, is of concern to us all and represents a huge challenge in our times. Indeed, experts at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine are worried about a surge of harmful health information in areas such as vaccines, reproductive health, disease outbreaks, and climate and health. That coincides with people increasingly turning to influencers, unverified wellness apps and AI chatbots for health advice that, as Clare Haughey pointed out, can turn out to be misleading, inaccurate or even dangerous.

Health misinformation is not new, but the scale, the speed and the impact of it that we are seeing today are unlike anything in modern history. In 2025, the American Psychological Association released a consensus statement that underscored health misinformation as one of the most urgent threats to public health. The World Health Organization has called it an "infodemic", which, as Martyn Day pointed out, means an overabundance of information, both accurate and not, that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy guidance when they need it most.

The consequences of misinformation go well beyond online confusion. It leads to an erosion of trust in clinicians, science and healthcare systems; delaying or avoiding care, including the refusal of preventative services; worsening disease severity and outcomes; and an increased strain on public health infrastructure. Clinicians and health leaders often encounter patients whose health benefits or decisions have been shaped by misinformation long before they have had contact with the patient.

Misinformation and conspiracy theories persuade some people to avoid taking their children for important childhood vaccinations or to take unproven treatments. The AI chatbots that hallucinate clinical details not only put individuals' lives at risk but will eventually lead to a sicker, less productive population.

The re-emergence of infectious diseases that were once considered defeated or tightly controlled is one of the most pressing public health crises of the 20th and 21st centuries. Quite simply, medical misinformation costs lives, and the scientific community is quite clear that it must be tackled, confronted and fought in a robust way.

However, that is not easy when we have a US President who has warned that pregnant women should stop taking paracetamol for fear of giving their children autism—a claim with no basis in scientific fact. The White House health secretary, Robert Kennedy, has claimed that some people have a harder time giving up antidepressants than they would heroin. Vaccines have been a common target for the current US President, who has falsely correlated vaccination with autism, and for his health secretary, who has challenged the safety of the Covid-19 vaccine and the diphtheria, tetanus and polio—or DTP—vaccine. Such claims from the most powerful man in the world are not easy to counter, and those madcap and dangerous claims are finding traction around the world and, sadly, even in this chamber.

Deputy Presiding Officer, you would not believe the nonsense that we had to listen to at Westminster, but at least the Tories had the good sense to suspend a former MP who compared the Covid vaccine to the Holocaust, which is both irresponsible and offensive in more ways than I have time to explain.

Technology is moving really fast, as are cynical ways to mislead and exploit people by using that technology. As we have heard, sadly, gone are the days when patients who were worried about particular symptoms would seek the advice of their GP or another qualified medical professional. Increasingly, people are prey to health misinformers and platforms with their own agendas—often commercial or political—via AI and social media. Without any medical training or oversight, they advise people on vaccinations, whether they be against Covid or those designed to keep babies and young people safe from a whole range of diseases such as polio, whooping cough, meningitis, sepsis, measles or rubella. That can have serious and deadly consequences, and this is a serious public health emergency that must be confronted.

The Covid-19 pandemic taught us something very important: falsehoods can spread as fast as any virus. Some people believe that we now have a whole generation—some would call it a "lost generation"—that simply does not know where to turn to for trustworthy advice. That is why the only answer to the situation is to provide people with high-quality health information that answers their questions and addresses their concerns. I am very interested in the approach of countries such as Finland, which is preparing for the next infodemic with a national media literacy programme that involves teaching children and adults how to identify and resist misinformation.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Ms Gibson, you must conclude.

Patricia Gibson: We need a co-ordinated approach to monitoring the dangerous health misinformation that is circulating around the UK and further afield. One of the aims of the proposed new network would be to monitor for health misinformation attacks on key topics and to collaborate on social media and online interventions that could counter such attacks. Currently, there is no western or global co-ordinated approach, so we appear to be losing the argument. Scotland needs to act, but we cannot act alone.

16:28

Adam Harley: This is my first attempt at summing up a debate without having already written a speech, and I will do my best—please bear with me.

I again thank the Government for securing the debate. On the whole, there has been a lot of consensus in the debate, which I welcome. The cabinet secretary spoke about the unintentional sharing of false information that can happen, which is a really good point that speaks to the need for us all to educate ourselves about what, among all the health information that we might find online, constitutes information that we can trust and that we know has come from a trusted source. That is as much for MSPs and other people in the chamber as it is for the general public.

The cabinet secretary made a point about the need for effective collaboration as part of the Government's new strategy. I would say that that work needs to be done in collaboration with the UK

Government, especially when it comes to the digital element of some of those harms. There is a real need to work collaboratively there.

Jackie Baillie mentioned how misinformation on the MMR vaccine started much of the wider mistrust of vaccines since then, which has made the issue grow arms and legs. I very much agree with the point that she made about the need for flexibility when it comes to receiving vaccines, especially in rural areas.

Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill made some excellent points and mentioned stark examples of harm. She made an important point about the need for an international and cross-border approach, including sharing vaccines with other countries that need them or taking different approaches to the online space.

Martyn Day made good points about the unintentional sharing of falsehoods. I, too, cannot come to terms with the fact that a hot toddy apparently does not cure a cold.

Miles Briggs spoke about his alarm at some of the health advice he had seen online following a quick Google search. I have to say that we can put some of that at the feet of lazy journalists who like to share the latest bit of health information, so there is perhaps a bit of correlation over causation happening. We need to be aware of when the aim of an article is to get a quick click so that it will be shared on social media.

Mr Briggs also made an important point about men's health, and I agree with him on that. Scottish Liberal Democrats are minded to support his amendment, the Labour amendment and the Government motion.

16:31

Miles Briggs: One of the negative side effects of being a health spokesperson that I have found in the time that I have served in Parliament is that it has turned me into a hypochondriac. I do not know whether the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care, the Minister for Community Care and others who speak on health have found the same.

I make that point not in jest, because there is a serious point to make. When people across our country feel unwell, they often turn to their phones to seek information on the internet. As Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill said, if they can build up the confidence to go and see their GP, that results in their saying that they have googled their symptoms and have found their problem. If we walk that back, we find that that is not often the case, but the internet is where people will access their health and public health information, so we need to be wise to where people now seek it.

That is why Adam Harley's point was important—I return his compliments. When we are talking about people not trusting our health information, the last thing we should do is talk down to them and say that they are stupid or that they need to change their minds. We need to give them the facts.

I very much welcome the briefings that members received ahead of today's debate. I thought that Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland provided a very useful piece of information by pointing out that the Patient Information Forum trusted information creator—PIF TICK—mark is where we should be looking for a UK-wide recognised quality standard of health information. I had not heard of it until this debate, so we need to make sure that that is promoted more widely.

Martyn Day made important points in his contribution, and perhaps also highlighted that he is not going to be appointed the Parliament's medical adviser any time soon. He summed up the key point that we have all wanted to get across in the debate: that we need to look towards how we transform our health service, but that that should be done with technology at its heart.

There are criticisms about where the NHS app has gone in Scotland compared with the information that is readily available in England at the moment, but that will represent a great opportunity for many people to manage their health conditions. We all want to see person-based self-management in the future, but many people will seek information online rather than from a medical professional, so we need to make sure that it is right.

Heather Anderson made several important points. I suggest that she does not watch the new reality TV show "The Wargame". She may be for the former First Minister, but she might not like the other contestants on that programme. There is a serious point to make on hepatitis C, because in relation to the elimination programme on which Scotland has been world leading—Tayside, in particular, has made welcome progress on that—we are falling backwards, and we need to recognise that.

We will need to work hard to catch up on that, and we must do so urgently. The seek-and-treat target has not been met, and in many health board areas that work has not been undertaken, especially with difficult populations such as the prison population. I hope that, in the coming months, the Government will make a statement to Parliament on how that will be addressed.

To conclude, the issue of online misinformation will not be solved by politicians, but we can look towards developing a new national approach to health literacy so that people—our fellow

citizens—can find, understand and use public health information to make the informed decisions that we all need to take about our health, and to help others whom we might be supporting.

16:35

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Green): As we have heard from members around the chamber, access to good and reliable healthcare advice is essential, but there are far too many places where misinformation exists. Martyn Day's confession about spreading misinformation inadvertently was amusing, but it demonstrates how harmless people think that sharing information is. Nevertheless, I would like him to share his sources for the hot toddy comment.

The cabinet secretary said in her opening speech that some people share misinformation unknowingly and out of concern for others. I was pleased that she mentioned meeting people where they are to give them information. Health information can often be technical and jargon heavy in nature, and making it plain and easy to digest is essential because that is what AI is doing, which is what we are battling against.

Irshad Ahmed mentioned the need to support GPs and other clinicians in dealing with the misinformation that people are bringing in when they have asked ChatGPT about their symptoms. That is an essential part of all this.

My colleague Kayleigh Kinross O'Neill mentioned how education, health and other parts of Government policy can overlap to ensure that we upskill people to interrogate information. That is essential in preventing people from passing on information that they may not know is untrue. It would be good to know how the strategy is being shared across other parts of Government to make sure that they all play their part in tackling health misinformation and upskilling children and young people in particular to ensure that they can interrogate the information that is in front of them.

Although some people share misinformation unknowingly, we have to be aware that others do not have such good intentions. In the previous session, the Parliament resoundingly passed my member's bill, which became the Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) (Scotland) Act 2024, which was designed to ensure that women can access abortion care safely and with dignity. In February 2025, the vice-president of the United States was on the stage at the Munich security conference saying things that were categorically untrue about information that the Scottish Government had shared about the act.

There are global players who are very willing to undermine the confidence that we are trying to provide the public with, and abortion care is absolutely on the front line of that. Safe access zones were the first small step in making abortion care easier to access and less traumatic. The bill faced huge opposition and there was huge misinformation about it; it took a full chamber effort to challenge that, and I am hugely grateful to colleagues who played their part in that.

If we are to make progress on abortion care—on the two-doctor rule, for example—we will face that level of misinformation and challenge again. It will take all those in the chamber who are willing to continue to make progress.

Social media is a fantastic tool, but we have heard repeatedly, over several years, about the issues with information on those platforms. The speed at which information can be shared versus how quickly the Government can respond is a difficulty to which we are yet to find a neat solution.

Jackie Baillie mentioned the misinformation around the MMR vaccine, which shows that this is not a new problem—misinformation on vaccines goes back decades. Confidence in those life-saving healthcare interventions is hard gained and easily undermined. Making vaccines part of everyone's routine healthcare is essential, so the work that we do has to focus on building parents' confidence in getting their children vaccinated and getting the habit in early. Fantastic work is already being done at antenatal appointments, on midwife visits and through health visitors to encourage parents in that regard. Everyone with whom I came into contact when I had my baby last year was excellent at answering questions with empathy and dispelling myths when they were raised. Creating space, especially for first-time parents, to ask questions without feeling silly is essential if we are to have a well-informed population.

However, that can easily be undermined, particularly by some of the trends that we see in America, where people hold so-called measles parties to intentionally spread the disease in the hope that deliberately making children unwell in that way will make them acquire immunity, completely ignoring the potential complications for those kids. That seems both extreme and ridiculous, but the popularity of such parties has risen in the past decade or so. Research from Columbia University partially credited them for the measles outbreak in New York in 2019, saying that it is likely that that was the result of increased contact between children in the one-to-four age category, likely through measles parties.

We need to ensure that we do not rest and let ourselves believe that it is impossible that that trend could come here. We need to make sure that parents know that vaccinations are the best way to acquire immunity.

The situation is not all bleak, though. We have overcome misinformation before. I was once groaned at in this chamber for saying that I was too young to remember the misinformation of the 1980s around HIV. Jackie Baillie was there, and was one of the ones who groaned.

Jackie Baillie: I am doing it again.

Gillian Mackay: I see that.

Battles against misinformation that we have fought and won do not live on for ever in the minds of those who are taking policies forward. We need to ensure that we continue to share what we have already done and that that informs what comes next. I follow Heather Anderson in committing my party to doing everything that we can to work towards the HIV elimination target.

This entire chamber has the duty to tackle health misinformation, and I believe that there is a coalition of the sensible across the chamber that is willing to do that.

16:41

Joe Long (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I am grateful to the Scottish Government for bringing this important topic for debate in the chamber this afternoon. We will support the motion and the Conservative amendment, and I welcome the health information integrity strategy, which will be an important piece of work.

It is vital that all our health and care policy is built on the basis of robust evidence and comes from a place of compassion and a desire to understand the experience of those who need support. Those must be the qualities that guide day-to-day practice in services, and our political rhetoric and debate must likewise combine the qualities of sound evidence on the one hand and compassion and empathy on the other. Both are needed if we are to retain the trust and confidence of those we serve and tackle misinformation.

I experienced health misinformation in a number of ways in my previous career in autism services—I refer to my entry in the register of members' interests in that regard. I was working in front-line autism support roles when the famous Wakefield study wrongly linked autism to the MMR vaccine, which several members have alluded to this afternoon. That study was based on flawed methods and problematic evidence and reached unsound conclusions, and it was subsequently retracted by many of its co-authors. Not only was that one study problematic, but we also have sound evidence to refute its claims from population-level studies, such as the Yokohama study in Japan, where the MMR vaccine was withdrawn but prevalence rates of autism continued to rise on exactly the same trajectory as before.

The flawed Wakefield study sowed the seeds of a long decline in vaccine uptake and had two disastrous outcomes. First, there was a rise in measles outbreaks, which we have heard about today from Gillian Mackay and Clare Haughey. Measles is a life-threatening disease for infants that had been all but eradicated; it can have very serious long-term effects for people who catch it in childhood. Secondly, there developed a stigmatising narrative about autistic people as being somehow less than others, and about autistic children as being undesirable. I associate myself with Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill's comments in that regard.

I am afraid that that trend of misinformation has continued in the long term. More than 20 years after that first study, I found myself on the radio debunking the falsehood from the US President that paracetamol taken in pregnancy caused autism—another unfounded conclusion. That assertion had already been proven by European studies not to be the case and was based on the misapprehension that autism is a homogenous phenomenon with a single cause. Once again, there was a stigmatising narrative about autistic people.

Since that time, I have heard of US-based scholars for whose scientific research there have been funding cuts, sometimes in the middle of projects, because it did not fit the political narrative. We saw unfounded assertions about vaccines flourish during the Covid pandemic that claimed lives at an alarming rate. So, the stakes are high. We must never allow Trumpian politics, which sows misinformation and stigmatises disability, to take hold in our country. I welcome Patricia Gibson's comments about the US President's role in that.

We would do well to follow the maxim that we must first do no harm. Therefore, I have been heartened to hear colleagues across the chamber this afternoon make speeches that align with that thought.

Several of us have spoken about autism, vaccines and measles. I was heartened to hear Heather Anderson's important contribution on HIV, HPV and hepatitis C and to hear, in Miles Briggs's contribution, that we need a gendered, and sometimes a cultural, lens with regard to providing health information and tackling misinformation. Being sensitive to the different needs of different demographics will be an important part of the information integrity strategy. Adam Harley said that, if we are to tackle misinformation, it is not just the information that we put out there that is important but where it sits.

As members on the opposite side of the chamber have said, it is right that we understand, and have rigorous evidence on, the effects of vaccines, when they are undertaken, but it seems odd that the party that lodged an amendment that mentioned one-sided evidence did not mention the tens of thousands of people across these islands who lost their lives during the Covid pandemic or the thousands of lives that have been saved by those vaccines. I am an asthmatic who had a very early Covid infection, with quite long-lasting effects, so on the basis of sound information, I could not roll my sleeve up quickly enough to have the vaccine.

Those of us who are part of our national conversation have a responsibility to ensure that sound information gets to those making decisions about their health and that misinformation is called out and rebutted. Our media have a responsibility to report health news proportionately and with care, valuing expertise and scientific consensus over sensationalism and click rates. Social media platforms have a significant responsibility to stop the spread of misinformation, a theme that is likely to run through much of the work of our Parliament, whether that is about health information, misogyny or the wellbeing of our young people. The tech giants must be properly regulated, and we need to work with the UK Government to achieve that.

As politicians, we have to hold ourselves to high standards in the discourse that we embrace, use robust evidence as the basis for public policy, and show compassion and care in the words that we use and the stories that we tell about what we are trying to achieve for those we serve.

16:46

Victor Currie (Highlands and Islands) (Reform): I am an employee of the NHS. I thank the cabinet secretary for bringing this debate to the chamber and my fellow members for their contributions. Let my party be absolutely clear from the outset: the proliferation of deliberately deceptive or harmful medical advice is a serious issue. When individuals are defrauded or physically harmed by predatory actors advocating fake cures, the law should step in, just as it does with any form of fraud or malpractice. Any attempt to empower, or to control or curate information must be dealt with judiciously.

However, the wording of the motion reveals deeply concerning legislative potential and trends in modern governance: the unintentional establishment of a de facto monopoly on truth, the demonisation of legitimate scepticism and political leaders' absolving themselves of their primary democratic responsibilities. The public's trust is not something that the Government is entitled to; it is something that the Government must earn.

The motion calls on us to rely solely on trusted sources, including public bodies, and further defines those under the three pillars detailed by the cabinet secretary. However, history teaches us that science advances not through blind compliance but through rigorous scepticism. When we label any deviation from the official narrative as misinformation, we strangle the very engine of scientific process. True science requires the unbiased presentation of all facts, not just the convenient ones.

Let us look at the official data: according to the Scottish Government's own Public Health Scotland data, during the pandemic, the landscape of risk was highly stratified. For example, healthy children faced an incredibly low statistical risk from acute respiratory viruses, and yet the official public health messaging pushed an aggressive one-size-fits-all counter-measure strategy, and children are still scheduled for Covid vaccinations today, regardless of consideration of any underlying conditions. When independent clinicians raised early concerns regarding specific documented risks, such as the elevated incidence of myocarditis in young males following mRNA therapeutics—a risk later formally acknowledged by both the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation—they were initially branded by mainstream political institutions as purveyors of unnecessary concern and unhelpful narratives.

Further, in February 2022, Public Health Scotland stopped publishing weekly hospitalisation and death data by vaccination status, citing the misrepresentation of raw statistics by anti-vaccine groups. When the state uses its platform to suppress nuance, it does not protect public health but undermines it. Sometimes, the most dangerous misinformation downstream is the oversimplified absolute proclaimed by a Government authority.

When I have a patient in front of me and I am recommending an intervention, I tell them five things: what the intervention is; what the rationale is; how it will remedy the condition; what the complications are; what the alternatives are; and what happens if we do nothing. I believe that the rise of what the motion calls "vaccine misinformation" is actually a direct symptom of the public feeling that we were denied a balanced, informed view in favour of emotional forcing.

During the roll-out of various public health programmes, the traditional, cautious definitions of clinical efficacy were blurred. For instance, looking at the data regarding vaccine uptake and transmission rates, public health authorities initially implied that those interventions would completely halt transmission, a claim that real-

world epidemiological data quickly disproved. When the state implements measures such as vaccine passports for workplace mandates—

Angela Constance: Will the member give way?

Victor Currie: Yes.

Angela Constance: I appreciate the opportunity to intervene. I hope that, in the tone and tenor in which I led the debate, I demonstrated that it is important that we tackle misinformation in a manner that does not infringe freedom of expression or scientific debate.

Do the member and his party agree that there are bad-faith actors who have weaponised misinformation or disinformation as attacks on freedom of expression, and that there are bad-faith actors who have deliberately avoided any recognition of nuance and reduced the debate to the lowest common denominator?

Victor Currie: I agree with that completely. The point that I am trying to articulate is that the drafting of the motion and the Government's past record in attempting to manage debate has meant that nuanced, legitimate scepticism has been steamrollered over and not properly allowed into the debate in order to formulate a final policy that is balanced.

If we want to improve health outcomes, we must treat the Scottish public like adults. Coercion destroys trust. We cannot have trust where we have no choice. We must provide transparent and unvarnished statistical realities, including the absolute risk reduction rates, and trust individual citizens to make the right decision for their own bodies. I welcome the attempts made in the motion, but I do not accept any attempts to limit what can be said.

Finally, I must address this Government's dangerous habit of contracting out political responsibility to unelected experts and institutions. Expert panels, advisory committees and academic bodies are vital—they provide data—but they do not possess elected authority and must never be used as procedural shields for political leaders.

We saw this repeatedly throughout the pandemic and its aftermath. Decisions to close schools, lock down communities and disrupt cancer screenings, which led to a measurable and tragic rise in non-Covid excess deaths and late-stage diagnoses, were frequently defended by ministers claiming that they were simply following the science. Science does not make policies; ministers make policies. Science can tell us that a virus spreads, but it cannot weigh the societal cost of a child missing a year of education, the economic ruin of small businesses, or the mental health crisis that is currently gripping our youth. When political leaders contract out their judgment to a closed circle of approved experts, there is a danger that an echo chamber will be created, with an absolution of the leaders' duty to balance competing harms.

Reform UK stands for a return to democratic accountability. We do not need a Parliament that acts as a rubber stamp for technocratic consensus; we need a Parliament that interrogates that consensus.

In conclusion, the motion asks us to collaborate to tackle online misinformation by potentially narrowing the scope of acceptable debate. The antidote to bad information is not censorship; it is more transparency. If the Scottish Government expects the public to adhere to high standards of truth, it must lead by example with its own decision making.

Health information is not a selective category; it covers everything that impacts patients' wellbeing. When statements were made assuring the public that the Queen Elizabeth university hospital was safe, at a time when specific wards were known—and later proven—not to be safe, that constituted not just a failure of communication, but misinformation. We cannot defeat misinformation out there if we permit it within our own institutions.

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

Victor Currie: That concludes my contribution.

The Presiding Officer: Perfect timing—thank you.

16:54

The Minister for Community Care (Alison Thewliss): I thank the vast majority of members who engaged in the debate in good faith and made important contributions. The fact that there have been 16 speakers shows its significance. I did not quite expect the range of examples of misinformation that would be raised, from fitness influencers and diet culture to vaccines, wellness and hot toddies. We have certainly covered a wide variety of types of misinformation and the ways in which they are spread. Patricia Gibson reflected on the scale, the speed and the impact of the spread of misinformation—we should be mindful of that.

When she opened the debate, the cabinet secretary set out the case for action and the reasons why the "Scottish Health Information Integrity Strategy" matters. The strategy has been developed in response to the changes that are affecting health systems around the world and increasingly influencing how people access information, make decisions about their health and engage with public services.

The strategy, which was published in October 2025, was co-developed with the World Health Organization. It sets out the framework for

"a safe, coherent, evidence-based and ethical approach"

to addressing false and misleading health information. It sets out a national approach to ensure that the general public have ready access to accurate information to help them to make the right decisions about their own health and wellbeing. It will help Scotland's health system to adapt to the unprecedented volume of online health information and respond effectively when widespread misinformation poses a real risk to public health. It is built on the latest research, and will evolve as evidence changes, helping to ensure that people have access to reliable health information so that they can make the best choices for their own wellbeing.

The strategy is also a practical guide and was designed with implementation in mind. It has 22 recommended actions, which are being implemented with partners. It is preventing harm from poor health information, which is, after all, a global challenge. We are at the forefront of actions on health information. We regard the strategy as world leading and, we, as a country, can be incredibly proud of it.

I take this opportunity to encourage students to get their meningococcal group B—MenB—vaccines, and to tell all those who are eligible for a flu vaccine to take up the offer. That will not only help their own health but take pressure off our NHS as we head into the winter.

It is clear that vaccines save lives. In 2024, the World Health Organization found that immunisation had saved about 154 million lives in the past 50 years. That is equivalent to six lives every minute of each of those 50 years, 101 million of whom were infants. There are diseases that were once commonplace, such as smallpox and polio, that we can now consider to be practically eradicated. We have made so much progress in that area.

Helen McDade: Does the minister accept that the Covid vaccine has had a huge number of referrals relating to serious adverse effects—20 times those of all other vaccines? Not all vaccines are the same.

Alison Thewliss: As elected members, we in this Parliament all have a responsibility not to undermine vaccinations. Vaccinations save lives and we have a responsibility to our constituents and to the wider world to make sure that that is recognised.

Thinking about the impact of where we have come in this area, I note that Heather Anderson reflected movingly on the range of different vaccines that have been introduced over time. She noted the work that is being done in Dundee to eliminate malaria, and the work on cervical cancer, including the particularly stark statistic that there have been no cases of cervical cancer in vaccinated young women since 2008. That is remarkable—again, we should be very proud of the progress that has been made on it. She paid tribute to Joe FitzPatrick—I concur—and his work to introduce PrEP, which has been administered to 14,000 people and is helping to protect people from exposure to HIV. She also mentioned the important work that Hillcrest Futures is doing on the micro-elimination of hepatitis C, which is an ongoing challenge.

Over the weekend, I had the privilege to attend the exhibition of the UK AIDS memorial quilt at the Tramway in Glasgow. The stigma and pain of the spreading of a virus to which there was no cure was wrought through the quilts that are on display. I would recommend that everybody take the opportunity to see that exhibition before 27 September. The exhibition remembers the lives that were lost at a time of great stigma and pain. We have made huge progress in the period since, but the virus still affects too many people. I would also like to thank Ally Van Tillo, who recently passed away, for starting that project and for making a huge difference in commemorating those who lost their lives.

As many members have mentioned, people now encounter health information in places that were not designed to share such information, such as online networks and digital communities, or through means such as ChatGPT. The fact that those apps give information that is not reliable and cannot be trusted is something that we should all be quite worried about. I encourage people to seek out important sources of information from their own practitioners and from NHS Inform, which is a reliable source of information that we, as elected members, should inform all our constituents of to ensure that they get the information that they need.

Trust in health professionals remains high. Members have talked about trust, which is a key aspect of the health information integrity strategy. I encourage everyone to seek trusted information from GPs. We have walk-in clinics where people can get advice. Miles Briggs mentioned men getting access to such information. I understand that, in Shetland, men are dropping their kids off for sports activities and seeking advice from the walk-in GP clinic there. That service is really important, because they might not have got that advice otherwise. It shows the value of such services, where underserved communities or people who might not even be considered to be underserved can get that kind of advice.

Other members, including Irshad Ahmed, mentioned the need for young adults to get information. The inequalities issues have also been mentioned. It is important that we ensure that people have access to such information.

There is a range of advice out there—there are pharmacists, optometrists, dentists, allied health professionals and audiologists. Whatever health query someone in Scotland has, they can be assured that there will be people who can help them and whom they can trust to get that information to them.

The false and misleading health information that we are talking about today undermines that trust. It can weaken confidence in healthcare professionals and institutions; discourage people from seeking medical advice; contribute to delays in diagnosis and treatment; and affect confidence in public health interventions. In some circumstances, it can deepen existing inequalities by creating additional barriers for communities that already experience poor health outcomes. It can cause real harm. The relationship between trust and information is one of the most important themes running through the strategy.

People often seek health information because they are worried and uncertain. They are not sure what is affecting them, and they look for advice for themselves or somebody close to them. Some people share information because they think that they are being helpful. The strategy recognises the reality of that situation and the motivations that people might have for sharing that information. As Adam Harley and others reflected, we need to meet people where they are. We should not shame them or make them feel uncomfortable. We should answer their questions as best we can and direct them to the appropriate sources of information so that they can feel confident in the information that they get.

The strategy also recognises the importance of trusted voices in our communities. People do not receive information only from Government, public health agencies or healthcare organisations. Family members, friends, community leaders, charities, educators and local organisations all play an important role in shaping our understanding and influencing decisions. Those trusted relationships in communities are a real asset to people in Scotland, and we should make the most of them.

At this point, I would like to recognise Margaret Lance, an HIV campaigner who passed away in 2025, who was such an important voice in the African Scots community. She worked for Waverley Care. She did incredible work to make sure that those communities were not missed from public health messaging. She was a trusted source to people of all ages and backgrounds in that community. I put on record my thanks to her and say that we all very much miss her and her contribution.

The strategy recognises that the strongest defence against misinformation is an informed and confident public. There have been lots of challenges in that regard over the years. Some members reflected on the Covid pandemic. I think that we forget, in retrospect, just how scary that time was, when a virus about which we knew very little was spreading. The public health responses were made very much in that context. It is easy to look back now and criticise decisions that were made or things that were done or not done. Everybody did the very best that they could in the circumstances that were handed to them. It was scary.

In my family, my uncle Eric was one of the very early people we believed—there was no test, so we could not tell—to be affected by the virus. He worked as an air conditioning engineer, so he probably had access to everybody's viruses, which were flowing through the systems. That has affected his health on an ongoing basis. We are glad still to have him with us, but it was a very scary time and people did not know exactly how to tackle that virus. I pay tribute to everybody who worked on the vaccines to bring them to us with the speed and the alacrity that the situation required.

Presiding Officer, I am now concluding—I can see you staring at me sternly. I had a lot to get in, and I apologise if I have not reflected everybody's comments in my summing up. I thank everybody for what they have contributed; it has been an incredibly useful debate.

I want members to be assured that implementation of the plan is already under way, and I encourage everybody to engage with it. We also need to recognise our own roles here. The role that we all play, as individuals and as elected members, is important. We have a responsibility to share good, reliable health information through NHS Inform and the channels that are available to us. I encourage everybody to do so.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on addressing the harms of health misinformation.

Ferguson Marine

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is a statement by Stephen Flynn on Ferguson Marine—planned investment and future business.

17:06

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport (Stephen Flynn): I welcome this opportunity to update Parliament on Ferguson Marine. Before I do so, however, it is important for us to remember how we arrived at this point. Ferguson Marine entered public ownership following the collapse of its previous private owners. Without intervention, Scotland could have lost its last commercial shipyard on the Clyde, along with hundreds of skilled jobs and an important industrial capability. Nationalisation protected jobs, retained skills and safeguarded a significant part of Scotland's industrial base.

Today, Ferguson Marine remains a major employer in Inverclyde and an important contributor to Scotland's maritime economy. It has built vessels that operate in Scotland and around the world, and it has a well-earned reputation for the skills of its workers and the quality of its apprenticeship scheme.

I am aware of the strong public interest in the yard, and I know that members across the Parliament recognise the importance of retaining industrial capability, preserving vital skills and supporting Inverclyde's future. Our programme for government reaffirmed our commitment to Ferguson Marine, and today I will update Parliament on the work that is being undertaken to support a sustainable future for the yard.

In March this year, we announced our intention to award contracts for four vessels to Ferguson Marine, subject to detailed due diligence and assurance processes. They comprise two ferries from the small vessel replacement programme, a marine protection vessel and a marine research vessel. The ferries will serve the Sound of Harris and Sound of Barra routes, supporting vital connections for island communities. The marine protection vessel and marine research vessel will support Scotland's marine environment and wider national priorities.

We expect that each vessel will serve our country for many years to come, and it is therefore right that our technical and procurement experts take the time to conclude robust due diligence. The proposed vessel programme forms part of a wider package of support that is intended to modernise the yard, strengthen its competitiveness and improve its long-term sustainability. Ministers must be satisfied that the programme provides value for money, complies with procurement and subsidy control requirements and represents an appropriate use of public funds.

Since March, alongside procurement activity to develop vessel designs and the governance needed to support timely delivery, Scottish Government officials, Ferguson Marine's senior leadership team and external advisers have worked intensively to assess the viability of the wider transformation programme. That has included reviewing and challenging the yard's business plan, testing assumptions, delivery proposals and financial projections, and analysing Ferguson Marine's contribution to the local and national economy so as to inform an evidence-based case for public investment. Like everyone who cares about Ferguson Marine, I want that work to move forward as quickly as possible.

It is equally important that decisions are evidence based, transparent and capable of withstanding scrutiny. That is why we are taking the necessary specialist advice and doing everything that we can to protect public funds and ensure that decisions are made transparently and responsibly. The Parliament would expect nothing less.

There has been considerable interest in the role of the Competition and Markets Authority in the process. To establish that a subsidy is lawful, the Scottish Government must prepare a detailed principles assessment demonstrating that the policy rationale, economic case and commercial justification align with subsidy control requirements. The technical requirements for each vessel must be developed sufficiently to allow Ferguson Marine to prepare designs, delivery plans and cost estimates. Those estimates are then assessed through independent technical, commercial and financial scrutiny.

Due to the nature and value of the proposed support package, the Subsidy Control Act 2022 requires a mandatory referral to the CMA. The CMA does not approve or reject proposals. Its role is to independently assess the evidence and publish advice, which ministers must carefully consider before reaching a decision. That important safeguard helps to ensure that any support package is supported by credible evidence and robust analysis.

Scottish Government officials continue to engage closely with the CMA and, under the current timetable, we expect the principles assessment to be submitted for formal pre-referral assessment in the coming weeks, with a final submission following thereafter. The resulting report will inform the decision that ministers ultimately take. I will continue to keep Parliament updated on key milestones.

In planning for Ferguson Marine's long-term future, I am also conscious of the immediate challenges that are facing the business. The MV Glen Rosa is the final vessel that is currently under contract and, once it is delivered, the yard will have no contracted shipbuilding work scheduled for 2027. Without a future pipeline of work, the business faces significant challenges in retaining skills and securing long-term sustainability.

Let me be clear that the issue is not technical capability. Ferguson Marine retains a highly skilled workforce. The challenge lies in competing in a global market where many overseas shipyards benefit from lower costs and greater scale. That is why vessel opportunities, business transformation and capital investment are being considered as part of a single programme to modernise the yard and strengthen competitiveness. Investment to date has focused on essential repairs, health and safety improvements and targeted equipment upgrades. Any future investment will remain subject to the wider business case and subsidy assessment process and will be directed towards supporting a more sustainable operating model.

I also want to address the voluntary redundancy consultation that is under way at Ferguson Marine. No compulsory redundancies are proposed and participation in the scheme is entirely voluntary. The company considers that the changes will support the transition to a more modern, efficient and competitive operating model. As shareholder, the Scottish Government sought assurances that the proposals were subject to proper governance and oversight and an appropriate business case before consultation commenced. Having received those assurances, I have agreed that the workforce changes are necessary to support the long-term future of the yard.

Separately, officials continue to work with Ferguson Marine's leadership team to manage the period between completion of the MV Glen Rosa and the proposed direct awards. As part of those discussions, the business has requested working capital to enable it to build a small number of tug boats for subsequent sale into commercial markets. I have agreed that that proposal should be taken forward because I agree with the board that it represents a sensible commercial approach to maintaining productive activity in the yard following delivery of the MV Glen Rosa. It has the potential to retain critical shipbuilding capability and workforce skills during an important period for the business.

I have therefore asked officials to work with the company to progress the necessary commercial, financial and governance arrangements as quickly as possible. That work is separate from the broader programme of vessel opportunities, investment and transformation that is currently under consideration.

I place on the record my thanks to everyone who has taken a constructive interest in Ferguson Marine, including trade unions, local communities, industry partners and members across Parliament. Above all, I thank the workforce. I recognise that this remains a period of uncertainty for many employees and their families. Despite that uncertainty, they continue to demonstrate professionalism, resilience and commitment while delivering the MV Glen Rosa and supporting the future of the yard. The skills that they possess are of enormous value and they matter to the future of Scottish shipbuilding.

I believe that Ferguson Marine can have a strong future as a modern and competitive shipyard. Our ambition is not simply to preserve Ferguson Marine; it is to strengthen Scotland's shipbuilding capability, to retain critical skills and to ensure that the Clyde continues to play an important role in our maritime and industrial economy.

I also want to be clear to island and coastal communities that delivery of these vessels remains every bit as important as securing a sustainable future for Ferguson Marine. The communities that rely on these services need modern, reliable vessels, and they need them as soon as possible. The work that we are undertaking is intended to achieve both objectives.

This is about more than a single shipyard. It is about retaining the capability that is needed to support ferry services, protect our marine environment and sustain commercial shipbuilding in Scotland for future generations.

The Presiding Officer: I will allow around 20 minutes for questions on the issues that were raised in the cabinet secretary's statement. Members who wish to ask a question should press their request-to-speak button now.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of his statement. However, it will come as no comfort to workers at the yard. There is no contracted shipbuilding work for 2027.

We have known about the legal issues around a direct award for years, but, in March this year, Kate Forbes announced the intention to award four vessels to the yard. She called it "a watershed moment" and said that there was a "clear … pipeline of work". Now, there is no contract, no watershed and no pipeline of work apart from maybe some speculative tug building. Stephen Flynn appears to have rowed back on that announcement. He told us today that the

Government does not know whether the programme provides value for money—his statement says that that needs to be assessed—whether it complies with procurement and subsidy control requirements or whether it represents an appropriate use of public funds.

When will workers be told whether there will be a direct award? What happens to the yard if there is no direct award? Where will that work go if it is not offered to the yard? How much working capital is being requested for the tugboat programme and how many vessels are envisaged? Are there customers out there? After years of public ownership and substantial public expenditure, what is the Government's timetable for Ferguson Marine becoming genuinely competitive and capable of winning commercial contracts?

Stephen Flynn: I am a little unsure whether Mr Simpson supports the additional proposals in respect of Ferguson Marine or whether he wants the yard to simply close. [*Interruption*.] It would be closed if it were not for the Scottish National Party Government and the decisions that we took in years gone by. [*Interruption*.]

I will come to Mr Simpson's points, because I think that he has confused my explaining the complex legal process that we must go through in relation to the—[*Interruption*.]—CMA with my expressing doubt in relation to the four vessels. I did nothing of the sort, and he should listen more carefully—not just in relation to that, but in relation to the points that I have made about the tugboats. We want to offer certainty to the yard, to ensure that it has a pipeline of work into next year. I have agreed that the proposal for the tugboats should be taken forward because I agree with the board that that represents a sensible commercial approach. It would be good to hear from Mr Simpson and his party whether they support investment in Inverclyde.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): The cabinet secretary stated that the Government's actions have been driven by the need to protect jobs. That is why I and others on the Labour benches supported the nationalisation of the yard. Yet, now, up to 70 workers are set to lose their jobs on his watch, and not one of the many ministers who have been responsible for the ferries fiasco has lost theirs.

Why does the cabinet secretary support those redundancies when the GMB has warned that the yard risks losing vital experience and that goes against the Government's previously stated aim? The GMB is also warning that it will take a year to cut the steel for the four vessels that are designated for direct award. Does the cabinet secretary therefore accept the urgency of the situation for islanders and workers? Is he confident that he will deliver on the Government's promise of direct award to the yard?

Stephen Flynn: I am glad that someone on the Opposition benches recognises the purposeful and right decision that we made to nationalise the yard in order to protect it long into the future.

With regard to the point that I think Mr Bibby was making about what happens next, I outlined clearly the process that we must comply with in relation to the Subsidy Control Act 2022 and the CMA. Those requirements are set down by the United Kingdom Parliament and we are responding to them accordingly. I will update the Parliament as swiftly as I can, as I outlined in my statement, once I know the answers to the points that the CMA will likely make in respect of the desire to make the direct award.

The workforce will welcome the announcement that I made about the opportunity to move into a commercial space with regard to the tugboats, because it will give them the opportunity to put their expert skills to use and to provide evidence that the yard can be turned around and be commercially viable long into the future. Through the tugboats and the four future vessels, we are investing in Ferguson's to ensure that the yard can deliver for Inverclyde and Scotland long into the future. I am sure that Mr Bibby will agree with those sentiments.

Stuart McMillan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I welcome the announcement of the funding for tugboats and see it as an interim measure towards a brighter and more sustainable future for the yard. The cabinet secretary spoke about the four vessels that were previously announced. To be frank, any work going to the yard is good news if it helps to maintain not only experienced workers but the apprentices, so that, when we get more work, we will have a workforce that can deliver.

Does the future investment mentioned in the cabinet secretary's statement include the £14.2 million of capital investment that the Government previously announced or is it additional money? Once the principles assessment is submitted for pre-referral assessment, what is the timescale for information coming back from the CMA?

Stephen Flynn: Mr McMillan has been a fierce advocate for Ferguson's over many years. That is reflected in the support that he has in his local community.

The £14.2 million of outstanding investment to upgrade infrastructure in the yard is very much still on the table. It is directly related to the future delivery of the four vessels that will happen as part of the direct award. It is important that those things happen in tandem, to support productivity at the yard.

It is important that I be clear with members that I do not decide the timeline for the CMA's answers to us. However, I advise members that I will take the CMA's response very seriously. That is why we are putting a significant amount of work into providing it with all the details that it requires.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): The Greens, too, welcomed the action that was taken to save the yard. We want modernisation to work so that the yard is not only viable but thriving into the future. However, I remain a little unclear about the Government's long-term intentions. Is the cabinet secretary's view that such a business should remain in public hands only while it is struggling and in need of support, or should a future vibrant and successful yard remain in public hands so that, in the long term, it operates in the interests of the public sector and the workforce?

Stephen Flynn: I appreciate Mr Harvie's desire to talk long into the future and discuss what the yard's future could look like at an unspecified date. However, he will appreciate that my focus right now is on ensuring that we work closely with the board of Ferguson's to deliver on the tugboat proposal that it has put to us and to get on and deliver the four vessels that are required, to ensure that the yard can properly evidence that it has a viable, vibrant commercial future. I am sure that we can revisit the wider discussion in the future.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): This is either gross ministerial incompetence or a con by the SNP's spin machine. We knew all of this six months ago, when, just before the election, it was made to sound as if the orders were in the bag and the yard's future was secure, as was referenced earlier. It was a watershed moment. However, as many of us said would be the case, not one contract has been awarded—there was no submission to the CMA and no work for the yard in 2027, and now redundancies have been announced. What exactly has the SNP Government been doing for the past six months, apart from conning the good people of Inverclyde?

Stephen Flynn: I am not sure from Stephen Kerr's remarks whether he is supportive of the proposals that I have put on the table today to ensure that the yard has work next year. That was missing from his comments. What was also missing was the reality that we have to comply with the UK's Subsidy Control Act 2022 and the CMA. I do not know whether Mr Kerr is intimating that we should ignore those aspects, just as we should ignore the good news that has been announced in relation to tugboats. Mr Kerr seems very angry on both of those points, Mr Speaker—I mean Presiding Officer—but I am sure that he will clarify things in the future.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Speaker or Presiding Officer—I am confused. I call Willie Rennie.

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): It is now clear that the Government had failed to carry out all the appropriate legal checks before it told the chamber, before the election, that it would make a direct award to Ferguson's yard. The consequences of that are now being felt by a third of the workforce, who have lost their jobs at Ferguson's as a result of the Government's negligence. The cabinet secretary must have some clue about that. The workers deserve to not have to wait another minute, so at what point does he think that the Government will make a decision?

Stephen Flynn: I contend furiously the point that Mr Rennie has made. As an esteemed member of the Parliament and a parliamentarian of many years, he knows that, when it comes to direct awards, we have to comply with the Subsidy Control Act 2022 and the provisions that are set out by the CMA. If he is suggesting that he is unaware of our duties in that respect, that is on him and not on us.

The Presiding Officer: A member from each party has asked a question and we are 12 minutes in. Many members will not be able to ask questions unless we have shorter and sharper questions and responses.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): I hope that everybody here wants Ferguson Marine to have a sustainable future. Will the £14.2 million of capital investment be invested in modernising the yard while we await the CMA's recommendations? I hope that we will be able to get that in place before the four direct awards are made to Ferguson Marine.

Stephen Flynn: I thank Alan Brown for his interest in this important topic. As I outlined earlier and as my predecessors have outlined on many occasions, it is important that those two things happen in tandem, because the productivity benefits that will be gained from the £14.2 million of investment are directly linked to the delivery of the four vessels.

David Smith (West Scotland) (Reform): Most of the workers at Ferguson Marine are on temporary contracts. Is the fact that Ferguson Marine has reduced the number of full-time employees and replaced them with temporary contractors not a clear statement that it does not have confidence that the Government will award it the contract?

Stephen Flynn: I am afraid that the issue of individual contracts is a matter for the Ferguson Marine board. I am sure that David Smith will take up that matter directly with it to get the clarity that he—surprisingly—needs.

I want to make the important point—which I did not make in response to Mr Bibby's question, which was perhaps unfair—that we did not want to be in a position in which voluntary redundancy was put on the table. We want the yard to be successful, which is why I have announced that we are moving forward with the tugboats and the direct awards. Safeguarding the jobs of the people of Inverclyde is paramount to the future success of the company.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank the cabinet secretary for his statement. I absolutely agree that the delivery of vessels is as important to our island and coastal communities as ensuring that we secure a sustainable future for Ferguson Marine. Will the cabinet secretary advise whether, in order to support the pipeline of work that he mentioned, the Government might consider further direct awards, given the points around the Subsidy Control Act 2022, in relation to, for example, in my constituency, the Dunoon and Gourock route and the Campbeltown route?

Stephen Flynn: I thank Jenni Minto for raising a very important point as to what happens next. I can advise her and other members that we will continue to monitor whether we can make direct interventions to support the yard and—this is incredibly important—ensure that the communities that she and others in the chamber represent have the reliable ferries that they need in order to get around in their daily lives. That is important to me and to the Government, and we will continue to work to that end.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): In announcing the Scottish Government's plan for direct awards in March, the then Deputy First Minister, Kate Forbes, said that a lot of the scoping work and the work relating to legal advice had already been done, but that an application needed to be made to the Competition and Markets Authority. Was that correct? Today, the cabinet secretary seems to be going backwards. We were told that there would be a pipeline of work. Will the cabinet secretary commit to fighting for the award of those contracts and confirm that the promise made in March will be kept?

Stephen Flynn: I appreciate that members might have pre-prepared questions, but I cannot keep reiterating the same point. When it comes to the 2022 act and the CMA, we are working through a complex legal process. I cannot be any more clear with the Parliament than I am being in that regard.

Opposition members seem to be ignoring the fact that we are seeking to provide certainty for the yard during the gap between the delivery of the Glen Rosa and the award of the new contracts by making sure that we have a commercial alternative in place with the tugboats. That is to be welcomed, but there is a shortage of welcome coming from Opposition members.

Jack Middleton (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary tell me more about the expected timeline for the delivery of upcoming vessels and the benefits of the pipeline of work?

Stephen Flynn: It is important to, once again, reiterate the Government's commitment to delivering those four vessels. That is why we are putting the effort into making sure that we can comply, through the 2022 act, with the provisions that could be placed on us by the CMA. We need the process to be as robust as it can be, but that award is not enough in and of itself, which is why I am pleased to have been able to come to the chamber to outline our intentions in respect of tugboats.

Kristopher Leask (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Ferguson Marine must remain competitive, and I welcome the cabinet secretary's commitment to that principle, but, at a bare minimum, it must also be able to tender for contracts. In the longer term, the yard's lack of activity and track record of build history will only hamper its ability to tender for work. We saw that directly with the ineligibility to tender for the MV Lord of the Isles that was procured by Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd.

Does the cabinet secretary acknowledge that liability to Ferguson Marine? How will he overcome that barrier to ensure that it is competitive beyond Government contracts?

Stephen Flynn: Government contracts give Ferguson Marine the opportunity to say to the wider commercial market, "This is what we can do and this is what we can deliver." When it has delivered on those contracts, I hope that Ferguson Marine will secure the commercial orders that will be essential to its vibrant future. I believe that the tugboats proposal can play a key part in that process.

Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary provide further information on the Scottish Government's latest conversations with the Ferguson Marine workforce and the trade unions in the light of the outlined investment in the shipyard's future? What steps are being taken by the Scottish Government to ensure good planning, cost control and delivery on site?

Stephen Flynn: I thank Dawn Black for raising those very important points. It is vital that we continue to have positive discussions with the workforce and the trade unions. I met the trade unions on 8 July, when I was in Glasgow, and the First Minister had the opportunity to speak with

unions and the workforce on 24 August. It is my intention to go to the yard in the very near future to meet both. I am sure that they will welcome the announcements that I have made in the Parliament today.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Does the cabinet secretary accept that the fundamental issue is that we do not have competitive shipbuilding finance in Scotland, which hampers any shipyard in Scotland in winning commercial work? Does he agree that we should be exploring section 45 of the Subsidy Control Act 2022 and its national security provision, and will he write to UK defence ministers on that issue? Has the Pemamek panel line been ordered yet, because that is a critical piece of machinery with a long lead time for installation?

Stephen Flynn: I assure Mr Sweeney that my officials remain in constant dialogue with the UK Government on a host of matters, one of which is certainly the Subsidy Control Act 2022. If there is an opportunity for me to have a discussion with the UK defence secretary at some point in the future, I am more than happy to take up that particular order with him.

I assume that the finance question relates to the written questions that Mr Sweeney has posed to me about the regimes that exist elsewhere, particularly in Spain, and its ability to procure contracts through the Canary Islands. I gently say to Mr Sweeney that I have looked at that matter in great detail, and I am not sure that his colleagues in Westminster would welcome us pursuing that approach, given the ability of the Canary Islands to operate with a significantly reduced tax rate.

Malcolm Offord (West Scotland) (Reform): This is the only shareholder statement that I have ever read that includes zero financial information. Will the cabinet secretary please explain why?

Stephen Flynn: I am sure that Lord Offord will get the opportunity during the budget process to look at the numbers that the Government operates under.

Decision Time

17:36

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. The first is, that amendment S7M-01200.3, in the name of Helen McDade, which seeks to amend motion S7M-01200, in the name of Angela Constance, on addressing the harms of health misinformation, 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.

17:36

Meeting suspended.

17:39

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: We move to the vote on amendment S7M-01200.3, in the name of Helen McDade. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Sanne Dijkstra-Downie (Edinburgh Northern) (LD): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Your vote has been recorded.

Kate Nevens (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Apologies—I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Your vote has been recorded.

For

Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
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)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
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)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Green, David (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
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)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Lorna Slater]
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
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-01200.3, in the name of Helen McDade, is: For 18, Against 95, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S7M-01200.1, in the name of Jackie Baillie, which seeks to amend motion S7M-01200, in the name of Angela Constance, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
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, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
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)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Green, David (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
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)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Lorna Slater]
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
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)

Against

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)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S7M-01200.1, in the name of Jackie Baillie, is: For 96, Against 17, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S7M-01200.2, in the name of Miles Briggs, which seeks to amend motion S7M-01200, in the name of Angela Constance, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S7M-01200, in the name of Angela Constance, on addressing the harms of health misinformation, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
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)
Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
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)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Gethins, Stephen (Dundee City East) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Green, David (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Hoy, Craig (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Long, Joe (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
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)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green) [Proxy vote cast by Lorna Slater]
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)
Offord, Malcolm (West Scotland) (Reform)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)
Ross, Angela (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Schmulian, Kim (Glasgow) (Reform)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)
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)

Against

Bannerman, Max (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)

Abstentions

McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S7M-01200, in the name of Angela Constance, on addressing the harms of health misinformation, as amended, is: For 109, Against 2, Abstentions 1.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament notes with concern the increasing risk of the global spread of misinformation relating to public

health on social media, including through the use of AI-altered content; recognises that accessible, science-based and trustworthy health information is essential to supporting people to make informed decisions about their health, maintaining confidence in public health interventions and improving health outcomes; acknowledges the importance of taking an ethical approach to information integrity, and that misleading or false health information has a detrimental impact on society; notes with concern the rise in vaccine misinformation that has been spread in society since the COVID-19 pandemic; agrees that anyone who is eligible for life-saving vaccinations should be able to access the care that they need without the risk of harmful misinformation causing unnecessary concern or fear; further agrees that every Member of the Scottish Parliament has a responsibility to ensure that they use factual, science-based and trusted sources of health information from the NHS, public bodies and academia to protect public health; that members should collaborate to tackle the rise of harmful online misinformation; is concerned by declining childhood vaccination rates and continuing barriers to access to vaccination programmes; believes that additional flexibility is required for trusted primary care teams to improve vaccination uptake; supports the development of a new national approach to health literacy, that enables people to find, understand and use public health information to make informed decisions about their health and to support others to do so; notes the recent Movember report on men's health in Scotland and its call for a public health approach to addressing the online harms and disinformation affecting boys and young men, building on the Scottish Government's Online Safety Taskforce Action Plan; further notes that such an approach should be adopted as a cross-government priority, and calls on the Scottish Government to review how all public health information can build trust, improve health literacy and open routes into support and services, as part of a more coherent national approach to service redesign and public policy.

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

Policing, Crime Prevention and Mental Health (Mid Scotland and Fife)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S7M-01039, in the name of Stephen Kerr, on policing, crime prevention and the response to the mental health crisis in Mid Scotland and Fife.

The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the findings of HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland's report, Thematic review of policing mental health in Scotland, which was published in October 2023 and reported that at least half of deployable frontline uniformed officers are regularly engaged in mental health-related calls, a single such call can engage two officers and a vehicle for a full shift and Police Scotland "is filling gaps in the health and social care system in Scotland"; further notes the evidence provided to the Criminal Justice Committee that mental health calls rose from just under 400 per day in 2018 to an average of 666 by the first quarter of 2024, that the officer time absorbed by mental health incidents in 2023-24 was equivalent to 612 full-time constables, which is more than the staffing complement of five local policing divisions, and that approximately 70% of such incidents occur at NHS hospitals; acknowledges the views of the Association of Scottish Police Superintendents that present arrangements amount to "mission creep", and of the Scottish Police Federation that handover of mental health crises to the most appropriate service is at best delayed and at worst non-existent; considers that communities across Mid Scotland and Fife are best served by officers who are free to prevent and detect crime, and believes that an individual in mental health crisis is entitled to a response from health professionals with the training, powers and facilities to help them, rather than from the police.

17:46

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to have this issue discussed in the chamber. The first principle of policing is not complicated. Sir Robert Peel's model was built on prevention of crime and disorder, the maintenance of public order and the protection of the public. Police legitimacy comes from doing those things effectively, with the consent of the public. However, in Scotland, that basic purpose has become blurred.

Police Scotland is increasingly expected to be a mental health service, a social work service and, under new housing legislation, even part of the homelessness prevention system. That is not right. Yes, those issues matter, but that does not make them policing responsibilities. The police must have the ability to say, "This is not our role," and other services must step up to the mark, because those added burdens are putting

immense strain on police resources, especially front-line resources.

HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland found that, at times, at least half of deployable front-line uniformed officers—which is a smaller number than the total number of police officers—were dealing with mental health-related calls. Its conclusion was blunt:

"Police Scotland is filling gaps in the health and social care system".

Figures that have subsequently been given to Parliament are extraordinary. The number of mental health-related calls rose from just under 400 a day in 2018 to 666 a day in 2024. The officer time absorbed was calculated to be the equivalent of 612 full-time officers. That is police capacity on a massive scale being taken away from preventing and investigating crime, patrolling communities and responding to victims.

The chief constable herself now says that that "cannot continue". In her submission of 16 September, Jo Farrell said that Police Scotland recorded more than 230,000 mental health-related incidents in 2025-26—around 18 per cent of all incidents—and that approximately 85 per cent of those incidents involved no crime. She said that policing's role had grown

"beyond what is best for vulnerable people, what is intended in legislation and what is financially and operationally sustainable".

So, why are police officers still going to these calls? Part of the answer to that question is mission creep. The Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012, which gave birth to Police Scotland, says that the main purpose of policing is to improve the

"safety and well-being of persons … and communities".

That is an unusually broad statutory formulation. Elsewhere in the United Kingdom, the core legal duties of police remain much more closely centred on protecting life and property, preserving order, preventing offences and bringing offenders to justice. In Scotland, the idea of wellbeing has helped to blur the boundary, and has expanded over time. I do not doubt that the use of that wording was well-intentioned. However, in practice, it has helped to create an open-ended expectation that the police will pick up whatever other public services cannot or will not deal with. It has contributed to a culture in which the police become the service of first and last resort whenever another public service cannot cope.

Another part of the reason is risk aversion. Officers are understandably concerned about the consequences for them personally of making the wrong judgment call, leaving a person in crisis, putting the phone down or deciding that there is no more that they can do to help. That is not healthy. Officers are being asked to do work that they were not trained for and did not sign up for and which properly belongs to other services. We do not expect doctors or nurses to tackle crime. Why, then, do we expect police officers to respond to mental health incidents?

This situation cannot go on. If somebody is committing a crime or poses an immediate threat to life or serious harm, or if police powers are needed, the police must act. Mental illness alone should not turn a person into a police matter.

The minister who is responding to the debate needs to answer three questions. First, will she redefine the boundary of policing in Scotland so that health, social care and housing responsibilities sit with the professionals who are trained to deliver them? Secondly, will she review section 32 of the 2012 act and clarify that wellbeing does not create an open-ended welfare duty for Police Scotland? Thirdly, when will front-line officers see the benefit of any changes to their responsibilities?

While ministers talk about collaboration, police resources are being consumed, crime is rising, victims are left waiting and visible policing is disappearing. The police cannot be everybody else's emergency stop.

There is one fundamental question that the minister should address in her response to the debate: where does policing end? If the Government cannot define that boundary, mission creep will continue to occur, front-line capacity, which is already stretched, will continue to disappear and police officers will spend less and less time doing what we all want to see Police Scotland doing: preventing crime, protecting the public and pursuing those who break the law.

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

17:54

David Linden (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP): I commend Mr Kerr for securing a very topical debate. He is a valued member of the Criminal Justice Committee, which this week took evidence from Police Scotland, the Scottish Police Authority and HMICS on the issue. Although he and I will often come to debates from different angles—certainly, politically and ideologically—I think that some of the issues that he has raised are important and fit within the wider public sector reform agenda that will cast such a shadow over session 7 of the Scottish Parliament.

Before I go any further and get into the meat of the issue, it is important that the Parliament places

on record its sincere thanks and appreciation for our police officers, who work, day in, day out, running into incredibly difficult situations. [*Applause*.] In particular, I pay tribute to Chief Inspector Jonny Watters, who leads the police in my constituency in Shettleston.

Mr Kerr is right to bring the issue to the chamber, because it is frustrating for those of us in the criminal justice sphere, and, no doubt, for the Cabinet Secretary for Justice. Mr Kerr put some of the challenges in context, but, to broaden that picture, last year, we lost 775,000 policing hours as a result of mental health call-outs, which have cost an estimated £34 million from the policing budget. Every mental health call-out takes up an average of 5.34 hours of police time, which is a colossal amount of time that could be spent dealing with issues that we know of in our constituencies, so Mr Kerr is right to place that on the record. Some work has been undertaken to move the dial on that, but I was very struck by some of Police Scotland's written evidence to the Criminal Justice Committee, and, in particular, by the following quotation:

"we have been unable to generate the momentum and pace of system change required and mitigate the immediate pressure which is still resting on policing by default, rather than design."

Ms Constance, the previous Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, looked at the issue, and the current Cabinet Secretary for Justice is looking at it. We are going to have to start thinking outside the box a bit more on the issue, because Mr Kerr is absolutely right to acknowledge that there is a grey area, and the committee has heard significant evidence on that in relation to police officers turning up at accident and emergency areas. All the body-worn cameras in the world would still not get to the nub of the issue for police officers, who feel that they are unable to leave people at A and E, and I agree that there is an issue with regard to risk aversion.

I understand why police officers are risk averse, particularly because of fears, if something goes wrong, in relation to the Police Investigations and Review Commissioner and having to appear before committees such as ours. It is human nature to be risk averse, but we have reached a situation where we need to look at things differently. I am very attracted to learning more about the right care, right person approach that we explored in the committee, and which Humberside Police piloted from 2020-21. It is not a panacea—there are issues that we will need to look at—but this is an example of where, cross-Government, we will have to have further discussion. I can understand that the health service is stretched and that they see these situations in accident emergency departments.

I want to press the minister on the roll-out of mental health triage cars. Obviously, I was delighted that my party won the election, and I am sure that there was a manifesto commitment to roll those out. That would be welcome, but we need a much wider conversation in the context of public service reform in which we can ask, "Do we have a place where we can drop people off?" The police will still be called out, because the nature of these incidents means that there will be a degree of criminality at times. Therefore, the police will have involvement in this work, but I am absolutely clear that we cannot have a situation where, on average, a mental health call takes up 5.3 hours of policing time, because that is putting massive pressure on the criminal justice system. We need to work much more closely and in a much less siloed way on the issue.

17:58

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I am grateful for the early call to speak and for permission to leave early to cover another event tonight.

For nearly three quarters of my more than a decade in the Parliament, I served as the shadow cabinet secretary for justice, and, throughout that time, it was always the same story. Issues such as mission creep in the police are raised by the Opposition, discussed in the chamber or in committee, and nothing is done. Stephen Kerr is absolutely right to hammer that point, yet again, in his excellent motion, because the police's own research describes their officers as "a backstop" in the ongoing mental health crisis. Instead of being on streets or responding to an incident, they are, to use their word, "babysitting" people in distress in A and E.

Incredibly, more than one in six Police Scotland incidents were classed as mental health related in 2024-25, and the time and cost of that was accurately, and terrifyingly, set out by David Linden just now. We cannot continue draining police resources because the Scottish National Party Government fails the health service and will not give the Ambulance Service sufficient capacity to respond.

This is not only about what the police are being asked to do and the gaps that they are being asked to fill; it is about the impact that mission creep is having on the officers. As the Scottish Police Federation has warned time and again, the stress, pressure and expectations that are placed on officers are going up exponentially, while the resources that are made available by the SNP are plummeting. When Stephen Kerr flags that time absorbed by mental health incidents was equivalent to 612 full-time constables, that is in a context where there are more than 1,000 fewer

police officers than there were before the pandemic. They are working from fewer stations, with 18 having been sold between 2023 and 2025, and more than 300 of those remaining requiring repairs.

Stephen Kerr: I thank my colleague and friend for giving way, because the point is that the number of officers who are available for front-line duties is shrinking faster than the number of lost officers, because there are modified officers and there is a huge sickness absence level. At any one time, more than 10 per cent of the force is absent due to sickness, so the number of available officers is diminishing all the time. That is creating a greater crisis beyond what we are able to describe in the words that we are using in this debate.

Liam Kerr: My friend is absolutely right. Unbelievably, some of the officers are having to buy their own uniform because of problems with the standard issue kit. They have then had to use that kit on the almost 50,000 officer rest days that were cancelled in 2024-25 for the reasons that Stephen Kerr has just set out. It is no wonder that, last year, *1919 Magazine* reported that police officers lost almost 80,000 working days to their own mental ill health. Indeed, in the first quarter of this year, nearly 32,000 working days were lost to psychological disorders. The officers have been overworked, underresourced and overlooked by this Government.

In my 10 years here, there have been four cabinet secretaries before this one. In all the debates, they all gave exactly the same spad-prepared soundbite answers. I have my bingo card ready but, to allow the minister to adjust her speech, I will warn her what is on it: “We recognise the pressure”; “Wellbeing is a priority”; “Support is available, but it is an operational matter for Police Scotland”; “More must be done, so we are investing and working with partners”; and, of course, the inevitable, “We have more police support money than England does”. Yet nothing changes; it gets worse, such that the data suggests that it gets ever more challenging to serve as an officer in Scotland.

I beg the cabinet secretary and the minister to go where Yousaf, Brown, Constance and Matheson refused to go. I beg them to listen to this debate, to the officers and to the police; investigate the multitude of evidence that underlying organisational pressures and mission creep lie at the heart of the issue; and respond positively to Stephen Kerr’s three questions.

I would love to see the new cabinet secretary and minister sort the problem, and I readily offer any assistance that they need in order to do so. However, I fear that the NHS data that the cabinet secretary left behind when he was reshuffled in May means that I will wait a very long time.

18:03

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): I thank Stephen Kerr for bringing this debate forward, and I am particularly pleased to talk about this issue because the motion references Mid Scotland and Fife.

I will start by talking about Mid Scotland and Fife and other rural areas. I have lived in Perthshire for more than 20 years and I lived in north-east Fife on previous occasions, so I know what life in towns such as Perth, St Andrews and Cupar was like and is like now. The atmosphere has changed; that is not just my perception but what people tell us when we go round the town centres. Approximately four police officers used to come up to Highland Perthshire—which includes Pitlochry, Aberfeldy and Dunkeld—where there are some issues and obviously a lot of car accidents.

Sadly, we rarely see the police in those areas now, but we hear them nearly every day when they respond to the car accidents. We should take into account the trauma that that must involve for those police officers, whose job has fundamentally changed—in that case, the issue is not about anyone’s mental health but their own. I pay tribute to those officers because often, when I hear those sirens, the road has been closed because there has been a serious accident.

In the town centre, whenever people suggest to ruffians or whoever else might be there that maybe they should not bother, we never see the police. There is a reason for that. Police Scotland has been asked about the closure of the police custody suite in Perth. When I was campaigning, I met the man who had been the police sergeant when the closure happened. He asked me what I thought of the police. I said something, and then he told me that he had been the police custody sergeant in Perth but that now he had to go to Dundee because there was no nearer custody suite.

We hear from other police officers that, now that there is nothing in Perth, they do not have anywhere to take people. They have to decide whether they are prepared to drive to Dundee with the person—which would involve two officers—and, if Dundee is full, because there are fewer spaces available, they might have to drive to Aberdeen. Police Scotland says that there is no requirement to revisit that decision.

David Linden: Helen McDade says that we are not seeing the police around too often, but that custody suites are full. The two things cannot both be true, can they?

Helen McDade: They could be true, depending on how long someone was in a custody suite for. I am not in a position to talk about that. However, I believe that they are true—I was told by the police sergeant that that was his experience and I have been told it by others. I would be interested to know what David Linden's explanation would be for their perception.

Stephen Kerr: In support of what Helen McDade is saying and in answer to David Linden's question, the reality is that there have been huge cuts to the capacity of custody suites. It is quite regular for police officers to have to travel for up to two hours with someone that they think should be retained in custody. Often, when they get there, they wait a long time to be seen and then the individual is released. It is a deeply frustrating situation, which is borne of the fact that there have been massive cuts to custody suite capacity and the availability of cells.

Helen McDade: Thank you—I welcome both interventions.

That is one problem. We also need to look at how people feel in the areas in which they do not have visible police. Many women in Perth have said to me that they do not want to walk around the town centre at night in the way that they used to, maybe as a group of women, and that they are frightened to go across the big areas of grass that we call the inches. The centre is less vibrant and many shops have closed, and I have been told by many people that there has been a change in how they feel. I have also been told that friendly taxi drivers will stop and ask people whether they want a lift if they think that they might be being followed.

Once, I walked up to the optician's and the door was shut and locked. I thought that I might have got the time wrong. No—it had to lock its door because people were coming in, stealing all the best sunglasses, going away and coming back a fortnight later to do it again. They were doing it in front of the staff; the staff just had to sit there in the same way as you are sitting over there, Deputy Presiding Officer. That situation would never have been contemplated in the past. I know of a lady who shut her shop because somebody had come in and caused an incident.

Obviously, there has always been crime, but the question must be asked: what has been the benefit to rural areas from Police Scotland? I would like see the figures. As I said, we are aware that there are fewer police officers about. Where are the police?

There are great examples of the third sector helping out.

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

Helen McDade: I agree entirely with Stephen Kerr's point that people need that third sector involvement. There are various good examples of change in relation to mental health, such as the things being done by the nook and Community Justice Scotland. We need to look at that and we need to do something.

18:09

Joe Long (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I thank Stephen Kerr for securing the debate, and I recognise the picture that he paints of the experience of police officers and of those in mental health crisis. I do so both as a fellow representative of Mid Scotland and Fife and as my party's spokesperson on mental wellbeing.

It was precisely because of engagement with the Scottish Police Federation and in response to its 2023 report on police time spent on dealing with mental health emergencies that Scottish Labour proposed in our election manifesto in May the setting up of an emergency mental health response division across Scotland. The chief superintendent publicly raised the problem of the amount of police time spent on dealing with mental health emergencies as long ago as 2019, and my colleague Pauline McNeill highlighted the issue in the chamber earlier this year.

Labour proposed the creation of an emergency mental health service to ensure that those who were in crisis would receive timely, skilled support from mental health professionals and that police officers would be able to get on with the job of policing instead of spending time chaperoning vulnerable people on A and E wards.

In 2024-25, Fife was one of the pilot sites for mental health response cars, in which a paramedic from the Scottish Ambulance Service and a mental health nurse attended emergencies together. The service, which was funded by Fife Council, resulted in a significant reduction in the time that police spent supporting people in the A and E department of the Victoria hospital. The pilot, which originally operated in Leven and was later rolled out to cover Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, ran from 8 pm to 6 am, Friday to Sunday, but, since the pilot ended in 2025, wrangling over funding has meant that the future of the service has been uncertain.

So, I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment, in the programme for government, to mental health triage cars. We are very used to seeing effective interventions being piloted but not being scaled up or put on a sustainable footing, so I will be genuinely delighted if we start to see more well-evidenced programmes rolled out in that way.

Just this week, I met Penumbra Mental Health, whose team, which includes peer support workers,

provides essential services to people on the road to recovery, whether that be through home-based support for those at risk of homelessness in Fife or in the 24/7 crisis centres, such as Hope Point in Dundee. Change Mental Health has highlighted to me its work in deploying the distress brief intervention model in other parts of Scotland. I also recognise the excellent work that is done in non-clinical settings such as SAMH's the nook in Glasgow, which I had the opportunity to visit over the summer.

The way to stop people ending up in mental health crisis is to support those preventative and early intervention services. There will not be a magic bullet or a one-size-fits-all solution, but such models, the success of which has been proven, together with the expertise that the third sector brings, deserve sustainable support and funding.

We need to have a joined-up, whole-system approach to mental wellbeing. The Mental Health Foundation highlights how vital it is to counter the harms to mental health in the workplace and online in social media and to tackle bullying among children and young people, but we also need to ensure that mental health is not just a proxy term for mental ill health. We must recognise the positive wellbeing effects of the community-based services—whether places, events, groups or pastimes—that are not nominally about mental health, but which are spaces of belonging, wellbeing, connectedness and purpose. Despite that, those services are often on the most precarious funding and the first to be cut when finances are tight.

If the Scottish Government is to succeed with a preventative agenda, around which there is broad cross-party agreement, such a whole-system approach will be necessary to support the wellbeing of our people and to let the police get on with policing.

18:12

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank Stephen Kerr for securing the debate. We have started some good conversations on this subject at the Criminal Justice Committee, so I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss further how we can secure safety and wellbeing in our communities.

The intersecting crises of climate catastrophe, cost of living and housing all fuel another crisis—the mental health crisis. Census data shows that the number of people who report having a mental health condition more than doubled between 2011 and 2022, and Police Scotland, being on call 24/7, has clearly been affected.

I mention the other crises because they cause all our services and facilities to be stretched. University staff report soaring cases of student mental health crisis, as students struggle to balance study and work with poor housing and decreasing support services. Council housing officers report increasingly complex homelessness presentations, while substance abuse services report clients' declining mental health. Austerity has taken its toll.

The focus of the past 15 years should have been one of prevention, as outlined by the Christie commission and referenced yesterday by Assistant Chief Constable Catriona Paton at the Criminal Justice Committee. Instead, standards of living have fallen and public and third sector infrastructure has not been resourced to deal with current crises, never mind shift to prevention. The police are often the only port of call left, and the more than 600 daily police visits to people in mental health crisis are not, for the most part, to people who have an abundance of wealth and opportunity. They are to people who are living in homes that they cannot afford to heat and to those who are socially isolated because local services that they once relied on have been cut.

A 2024 Scottish Government survey showed that 48 per cent of women and 39 per cent of men reported that their mental health had been negatively affected by the cost of living crisis. No doubt there are similar examples in Mid Scotland and Fife.

For 25 years, Rosie's Social Enterprises in Aberdeen, in my region, offered specialist creative workshops for people with mental health conditions, with the products sold through its gift shop. It provided inclusion, vocational training, support and work experience for people in mental health recovery. Rosie's has now closed, because of a funding cut made by Aberdeen health and social care partnership. I am deeply concerned about how those affected will be coping.

Of course, police officers should rarely be the first responders to someone in mental health crisis anyway. That is not just because mental health professionals are more appropriate but because the police can make some mental health crises worse. Many people in mental health crisis will have had previous, and often negative, engagement with the police. Just this week, a constituent of mine in severe mental distress had six police officers turn up to undertake a so-called welfare check. My constituent became even more distressed. They were physically restrained on the ground, they suffered significant bruising and cuts, and they ended up being arrested. I do not believe that that would have happened if a 24/7 mental health service had attended. Aside from that being very poor use of police time, the additional trauma and distrust will make it harder for other services to provide support.

We desperately need properly funded urgent-response mental health services.

Stephen Kerr: I appreciate the tone of Maggie Chapman's speech. We come at this subject from different directions, recognisably, but I think that we have ended up at the same place, which is to say that the police should not be the ones who bear the burden of responding to mental health crisis. Does she welcome the fact that there seems to be a consensus right across the chamber, from those from different parties who have spoken tonight, that something now needs to be done to address that fundamental need?

Maggie Chapman: Yes, absolutely. It is quite clear that, although our police officers should be able to recognise and support people in mental health crisis, they should never be the first responders. We desperately need to properly fund urgent mental health response services.

We must expand the 24/7 mental health triage cars, which were mentioned by David Linden and which have been piloted in Dundee, so that appropriate mental health professionals can urgently attend people in crisis without the need for police presence. I hope that the minister will provide an update on that in her closing speech.

We need a core minimum of services available to anyone with mental health needs. We all must recognise the links between inequality and poor mental health. Ultimately, as Professor Clare Bambra says, poor mental health is "the human price" of the economic decisions that we make. We can choose to create a country where people have access to warm homes, decent incomes, good health and social care when they need it, opportunities for social connection and hope for a liveable future. Then we will have addressed the mental health crisis that is causing the problems for our police service, as we have been discussing today.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Due to the number of members who still 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.—[*Stephen Kerr*]

Motion agreed to.

18:18

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I commend my friend Stephen Kerr for securing a debate on this very important topic. It is clear from the speeches that we have heard so far from all parts of the chamber that there is a huge degree of consensus around the issue.

I was very much struck by the comprehensive briefing from the Scottish Police Authority that was supplied to us. The authority states that policing has become the default first-response service for people experiencing mental health distress and crisis. Clearly that should not be the case, but that is the reality, as we have heard from Mr Kerr and others.

The figures that are quoted by the Scottish Police Authority are stark. In 2025-26 alone, the police had 234,000 mental health calls. They accounted for 22 per cent—nearly a quarter—of all police deployments. As David Linden said, that represented 775,000 policing hours, or the equivalent of 481 full-time-equivalent officers fully employed. However, the starkest statistic is that only 13 per cent of those call-outs resulted in a crime being recorded. Fewer than one in seven related to criminal activity. As Stephen Kerr said, the police are instead being diverted into social work, which should not be their core activity.

It is a common complaint from communities across Mid Scotland and Fife—I am sure that this is also the case in other parts of Scotland—that they feel a lack of police presence. People do not see the police in their communities. When they call the police, perhaps for something that is not an emergency, they have to wait a long time for a police officer to attend, and they seldom see the police out on foot patrols, which we know are a good way of deterring the low-level crime and antisocial behaviour that plague too many of our communities. However, the police are starved of resources.

The Scottish Police Authority says that it wants more visible policing because that is what the public expect and it knows that that deters crime and antisocial behaviour. It is right to make that call. The local police in the area that Stephen Kerr and I represent need more resources. We know that there are fewer police officers today than there were when the SNP came to power, as Liam Kerr said.

There is a particular issue in Perth and Kinross. Helen McDade made a fair point about the closure of the custody suite in Perth a number of years ago. It means that, if somebody is picked up in Perth and Kinross and they have to be taken into custody, two police officers have to accompany them to Bell Street in Dundee and sit and wait while they are processed and taken away, before the police officers can come back into Perth and Kinross.

Even more seriously in this context, the nearest mental health admitting facility for Perth and Kinross is the Carseview centre in Dundee. If

somebody has to be taken into mental health custody, two officers have to accompany them to Carseview. From what I have heard from the local chief inspector, they sometimes sit in Carseview for hours waiting for the person to be admitted before they can even consider coming back to resume their shift. Frequently, two police officers will spend their entire shift accompanying one person to Carseview, which takes them away from the streets and their core activities.

As others have said, we need alternative pathways. It should not be down to the police to become social workers. We need to take the burden off the police and get them back to what should be their core activities of detecting, solving and deterring crime. That is what the public expect, and the Scottish Government needs to get on and deal with that.

18:22

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): I congratulate Stephen Kerr on bringing this important debate to the chamber. Most things have been covered, but I will carry on with what I have to say.

Our police officers play an essential role in ensuring that we are all kept safe. As we have heard, they do an excellent job under very difficult circumstances, but they should not be expected to act as emergency social workers. Their job is to deter crime and catch criminals, and we should fully support them in doing that.

I know only too well from my role as a Fife councillor the difficulties that our communities face in trying to access the police. When I attend meetings locally with organisations, community councils, people at the grass roots of their communities and the constituents who come to me each week, their complaints are about antisocial behaviour, thefts from shops and day-to-day crimes, and they are simply not being addressed. I stress that the blame is not on individual officers across my area or anywhere else, who are doing their level best. I regularly speak with the police on these matters, and it is the deep structural issues in the policing system that are causing the problem. Ironically, more mental ill health is caused because our constituents bear the brunt of unchecked crime in their areas.

With regard to the motion, I want to focus on another fundamental issue that has been touched on but has not been addressed enough. Rather than asking what our police can do for us, we need to ask what we can do for our police and make sure that we are considering their wellbeing. I also believe that our modern system of policing and damaging Government policies have resulted in more undue stress being added to their role. The SNP's merger that created Police Scotland in 2013 was supposed to reduce those pressures and make policing more efficient and accountable, but, more than 10 years on, it has only made those issues much worse.

There are notable examples of bullying and harassment in Police Scotland that there have been attempts to sweep under the rug—the Rhona Malone case from a few years ago is one of them—but there have been plenty of underreported instances of individual officer misconduct. In some of those cases, the accused has been suspended with pay for years on end before justice has been served. His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland has even gone so far as to report that that a damning delay in justice has left victims who serve in the police feeling suicidal. Is that really good enough for our brave policemen and policewomen?

How much that situation damages the effectiveness of policing in our communities cannot be overstated. It demoralises our officers, deters newcomers from joining the force and, ultimately, pulls much-needed resources away from the real problems on the streets. That is before I have even mentioned some of the other issues that have been spurred by the SNP Government's short-changing of our police, such as the closing of local police buildings across Scotland, which has also resulted in Scottish police officers being encouraged not to make arrests because of capacity issues. In addition, who could forget the utterly embarrassing hate-mongering campaign in the previous parliamentary session, which was the result of Humza Yousaf's Government essentially forcing Police Scotland to justify his deeply unpopular attempt to erode free speech in Scotland?

I raise all of that to make the point that, even if we were to accept the premise that our police should take on mental health incidents as part of their role, there would simply not be enough officers to do so as a result of the consistent underfunding and undermining of basic police services.

For policing to work, we need to believe in our police, and the police also need to know that we believe in them. I look forward to working with colleagues across the chamber and with local police representatives across my region to make sure that we get this right across Mid Scotland and Fife.

18:27

Kate Nevens (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): I am aware that Stephen Kerr and I do not always see eye to eye on matters of criminal justice, but I am happy to say that I support the

motion and would like to thank the member for bringing this topic to the chamber for discussion.

I, too, am really worried by the evidence that there has been a rise in mental health calls to the police and that Police Scotland is essentially filling gaps in the health and social care system in Scotland. People experiencing mental health crises should always have access to the most appropriate service, and the police is rarely that service. Police Scotland itself is declaring that it is under unsustainable pressure from the need to respond to mental health incidents. Officers told the review team that it is not unusual for half of the deployable front-line uniformed officers to be on mental health-related calls at one time.

Expecting overstretched and inadequately trained police teams to be the primary response to mental health crises risks leaving extremely vulnerable members of society without the care that they need. It can also further stigmatise people who are struggling with mental health issues.

In my view, this discussion really highlights the need to move more funding into community mental health support by transferring mental health responses from Police Scotland to properly funded community crisis services, which would enable the reduction of police call-outs. We can take inspiration from communities around the world, such as those in Minneapolis, where local governments have been voting in favour of proposals to reduce their local law enforcement budgets and remove police as responders for non-criminal calls in areas such as homelessness, mental ill health and substance abuse.

Sadly, it is no wonder that we are seeing a rise in the number of mental health calls to the police after decades of austerity and declining funds for our mental health budget. If we want to support the long-term safety and wellbeing of our communities, we should be prioritising the funding of preventative services and addressing the root causes of poor mental health. As Change Mental Health tells us, we should be using every opportunity to protect and enhance local mental health crisis pathways

Investing in community support is also particularly important when trust in policing is not shared equally across society. For example, participants at focus groups that were run by LGBT Health and Wellbeing discussed at length the significant lack of trust that minoritised communities have in policing and Police Scotland, with past negative experiences and systemic inequalities contributing to hesitancy in seeking police support.

As today's debate is also about Mid Scotland and Fife, it is important to pay tribute to the family of Sheku Bayoh, who have now been fighting for more than a decade to uncover through a public inquiry whether race played a role in Sheku's untimely and tragic death at the hands of the police. Sheku was aged just 31 and clearly experiencing a crisis. His family are still waiting for answers from the inquiry, and I hope that they get the solace and answers that they need and deserve soon.

In 2023, Scotland's police force acknowledged that it was institutionally racist and discriminatory, and the chief constable made a set of commitments to Sheku Bayoh's family about understanding, recognising and acting upon institutional racism within Police Scotland. However, Police Scotland's chief officers team still does not have one person from a minority ethnic background on it and we have heard little more on those commitments since then.

The lessons of the Sheku Bayoh case demand that we listen to communities and ensure that people with experience of racism and other forms of discrimination help to shape the services that are intended to support them. They also demand that we push for antiracism education in schools, police and justice practices while recognising that our communities—in particular, our marginalised communities—are not best served by the police when experiencing a mental health crisis. Ultimately, we need to invest in inclusive community mental health and broader support services to keep our communities safe and well.

18:31

Miles Briggs (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con): I congratulate my friend and colleague Stephen Kerr on securing the debate. It is timely, especially given the Government's approach to what could be a significant redesign of services. I hope that the cross-party consensus that is emerging about needing a new model is acted upon urgently, because, from speaking to police officers in my region, I know how frustrated they have become.

As Murdo Fraser outlined, we need to consider what a positive outcome is for the police response to a mental health crisis. Sitting with an individual in A and E, where a medicine review might take place, before returning a person home is not a good use of anyone's time, including the A and E staff's.

A few weeks ago, I visited the nook in Aberdeen and was impressed by the data that the staff there shared with me about how that service is being the first point of call. They take someone who is in mental health crisis and work with them, and they are building strong links with the police, who transport the people there in some cases. There is

a good opportunity for that service to be expanded. There is another service operational in Aberdeen and Glasgow, and there is soon to be one in Edinburgh.

The nook is a good model, but we need to consider not only that; as David Linden mentioned, we can also consider the right care, right person framework, which is delivering great results in England. The National Police Chiefs Council in England suggests that that new approach has saved more than 1.1 million officer hours. We know what works in England and we need to adapt it in Scotland as soon as possible. Unless there is an immediate risk to life, the police response is not to attend.

A police response is not an appropriate response to a mental health crisis, so we need to develop the services that will meet that need head on. I spoke to a number of police officers about the issue over the summer recess. One of them has left the police service because they had had enough of how they were being treated. The key message that I took from a meeting that I had was that many female police officers complain that they are now the ones who are tasked with responding to mental health call-outs. I do not have evidence that that is the case, but that is what female police officers have told me and I wanted to raise the point in the debate.

Maggie Chapman made an important point about integration joint boards. Every year, over the past five years I have served as a member of the Parliament for Edinburgh, I have campaigned to prevent our crisis centre from being closed because of cuts to the IJB. What infrastructure we have is slowly being eroded as well. I hope that the minister will also consider that. We were told that A and E would be the response and that, if the crisis centre was closed, people could go to A and E without it being an accident or an emergency. However, we need to understand and consider what the response is at the weekends, because there are often no social work or NHS services available then, and that is when the police are the only response available. What does the 24/7 service look like? We have not really developed it.

As I return to covering the health portfolio, I am disappointed that we have not made any real progress on mental health. I raised the issues during my time on the Health and Sport Committee and had hoped that we, as a country, would have adapted some of the new models that have worked in England. I hope that the minister, in her response, speaks to that new approach and that we urgently look towards changing how the police respond.

18:35

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): It is a pleasure to respond to this important debate. I thank Stephen Kerr for raising the topic, and I thank all members who have contributed.

I echo what David Linden and Julie MacDougall said, and I convey the Scottish Government's sincere thanks to police officers. I acknowledge that the deployment of officers to mental health incidents takes up a disproportionate amount of their time, and we are seeing the impact that that is having on them and on communities. Police officers should not routinely find themselves carrying responsibilities that belong elsewhere in the public sector.

The cabinet secretary and I hear the calls from police officers, the Scottish Police Federation, the Association of Scottish Police Superintendents and the chief constable. I reaffirm to them and to members that the Scottish Government is committed to working with our partners to address the highlighted challenges and to achieve reform in mental health services and policing following His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland's thematic review.

Public service reform—indeed, mental health service reform—is a priority for the Government. The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and I are all committed to ensuring that people in mental health distress receive the right support, in the right place, at the right time. Indeed, I know that the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care have met on that specific topic.

Poor mental health and mental distress are multifaceted issues, as Maggie Chapman eloquently outlined. We know that a range of factors contribute to our mental health. We cannot address such issues without also considering employment, housing, the cost of living, opportunities and people's relationships. As we have heard, that requires a whole-system approach. Moreover, people's lives are increasingly complex, and the response to mental health distress does not fit neatly into clear organisational boundaries.

In response to the inspectorate's thematic review, a partnership delivery group has been established involving the Scottish Government, the Scottish Police Authority, Police Scotland, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and other partners to adopt a collaborative approach to improving our emergency and unscheduled mental health care pathways. Last year, the group developed and published a framework for collaboration and a collaborative commitments

plan. We are 18 months into that programme of work, and we are seeing its benefits. I know that members have been interested in hearing about those.

Stephen Kerr: Will the minister take an intervention?

Kirsten Oswald: I will make some progress first, but I will try to address the remarks that members have made, which I hope they will find helpful.

In relation to Maggie Chapman's points, each health board is now providing access to a mental health clinician 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for those who require urgent mental health assessment or urgent referral to local mental health services. Police officers have 24/7 access to those mental health clinicians. NHS 24's dedicated mental health hub within the 111 service ensures that people who make emergency calls when they are in distress or in need of mental health support get advice from trained professionals 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The enhanced mental health pathway ensures that referrals from police to NHS 24's mental health hub are carried out safely and effectively. Last, but certainly not least—this will be of interest to colleagues in the chamber—the Scottish Ambulance Service is operating mental health paramedic response units in Glasgow, Dundee and Inverness.

We recognise that all that work sits in an environment of rising demand for mental health services. Police officers will always encounter people in crisis; they have a vital role in protecting life and keeping communities safe. I am encouraged that we are doing the right thing. The 2026 mental health distress partnership delivery group's report shows a multiyear reduction in the number of police-related mental health incidents, by more than 6,000 incidents since 2024. That is one of the things that Mr Kerr—I mean Stephen Kerr; there are too many Mr Kerrs this evening—asked me to look at.

Many serious points were made. Stephen Kerr was interested in section 32 of the Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act 2012 in relation to wellbeing. I do not consider the definition of "wellbeing" to be in itself a cause of demand; the challenge that we face is broader pressures across the public services and society.

The Scottish Government is looking at a national review of Scotland's strategic police priorities to ensure that they remain relevant and responsive to the needs of our communities.

Stephen Kerr: Will the minister give way?

Kirsten Oswald: I will give way briefly, but I do not have a lot of time.

Stephen Kerr: I respect where the minister is coming from—she has her brief—but I have to say to her sincerely that her understanding of the effect of the framework is grossly overexaggerated. The evidence that the Criminal Justice Committee has collected at the beginning of our time suggests that the modest progress that has been mentioned is next to zilch. Police officers on the front line would not agree with how the minister has characterised the support that is available to them in that regard.

I ask the minister to speak to the Scottish Police Federation and to the superintendents. They will tell her a completely different story, because serving police officers are telling us a completely different story from the one that we are getting tonight from the minister.

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful to Stephen Kerr for that intervention. I will try to make progress now. I ask members to bear with me.

David Linden: Will the minister give way?

Kirsten Oswald: No. I am going to make progress now, as I have said. That was a long intervention from Mr Kerr. He is quite right to make an intervention if he wants to, but there are things that I want to cover.

Another issue that Stephen Kerr asked about was boundaries. His point about the importance of understanding what those are is a reasonable one. The Scottish Government is aware of the standard operating procedure review, on which Police Scotland is consulting partners. That is an important point. Our focus is on making sure that people who are experiencing distress or crisis receive timely and appropriate support. That all plays a part in the discussion.

Stephen Kerr asked about when we would begin to see the benefits, and I think that I have covered that quite adequately already in relation to the data. However, this is an ongoing body of work, so Mr Kerr's point about it being somewhere that we are moving towards rather than somewhere that we have arrived at is reasonable.

Mr Linden and Mr Long talked about mental health triage cars, which I have also mentioned. There is a commitment to expand that service, based on an evaluation, covering the existing three locations, that should be with us this autumn.

Mr Linden and Mr Briggs talked about the situation in England and Wales. Police Scotland, the Scottish Police Authority and the Scottish Government agree that that is not the right approach in Scotland, where we continue to adopt partnership working, particularly in light of the findings of recent coronial inquests resulting from the implementation of the policy there. Last year, the committee received evidence from the assistant chief constable that the approach that we

have here will be far more sustainable, which is an important point.

Liam Kerr asked about the mental health of police officers themselves, as did Julie MacDougall. That is a welcome and important point. There is significant investment—£17 million—in employee assistance as well as mandatory mental health interventions, but it is a serious point and one that we should continue to give time to. Liam Kerr also raised the issue of the police uniform, which is a matter for the chief constable. Obviously, my expectation is that people should have the kits that they need.

I point Kate Nevens to the new Police (Ethics, Conduct and Scrutiny) (Scotland) Act 2025, which I think will answer her questions. Public trust in policing is really important.

Our ambitious programme for government reiterates a prevention-first approach across public services. That is echoed in the "Health and Care Improving Flow Plan 2026-2031", which aims to ensure that we have one connected system with simple routes to care—mental health care being key, as well as early intervention. It also outlines our support for expanding community walk-in mental health hubs and investment in third sector support services. I know that that will be of interest to Murdo Fraser and Kate Nevens, who raised those issues.

We want to ensure that when somebody is in need of emergency mental health care they can receive it appropriately and in a timely way. That is why our focus is not just on improving access to support but on building a stronger system. We will strengthen crisis support through the new paramedic response units, expand access to help by delivering psychological therapies through NHS 24 and fund better support for children and young people in crisis.

In addition, there is a joint commission between Police Scotland and NHS board chief executives to move faster on reducing inappropriate police demand and improving access to timely support for mental health distress. Helen McDade made important points about partnership working, and I will absolutely reflect on what she said.

Taken together, the comprehensive package of measures that I have set out will improve mental health and wellbeing in communities, which is the aim that members spoke about.

I would like to finish where I started—with a note of gratitude to the police. Confidence in our police service is vital if we are to achieve a safe and just Scotland. The majority of adults are confident in the effectiveness of our police in dealing with incidents, solving crime and catching criminals. I look forward to continuing to work in this space with Police Scotland, our NHS partners and members across the chamber in delivering this vital programme of work in this area.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): That concludes our business today.

Meeting closed at 18:45.

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