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Coinneamh na Pàrlamaid

Tuesday 29 September 2026

Session 7

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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 29 September 2026

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Good afternoon. The first item of business is time for reflection. Today, this will be led by Frank Strang, who is the founder of Scotland's Four Words of Hope.

Frank Strang (Scotland's Four Words of Hope): Presiding Officer, what a pleasure it is today to give the time for reflection. Thank you very much, Sanne Dijkstra-Downie, for putting me forward.

For 40 years, I gave ministers from five different parties little slips of paper with ideas about what they should say. I notice that no minister is reciprocating by returning the favour today. [*Laughter.*]

Seriously, it is a joy to be here, not least because I have before me the Parliament's beautiful ceremonial mace and, to my left, Michael Lloyd, who made it. Scotland's Four Words of Hope exists to promote wisdom, compassion, justice and integrity. These are the wonderful words inscribed on the mace by Michael: wisdom, compassion, justice and integrity. Michael describes, somewhat wistfully, how these words encapsulated a generation's hopes for this place. They have the same charm and the same power today.

However, we do not promote these words out of nostalgia. We promote them to help to restore trust and hope. Our fellow citizens seem to be at risk of losing both. Election turnout is in decline. There has been a fall in the proportion of people who say that they trust this Parliament. I invite you today to reflect on how much this matters. The decline in trust is not just some dispiriting statistic that undermines the reputation of this place. Without trust, it becomes impossible to take the steps or implement the laws that will improve people's lives day by day.

One local politician whom I spoke to about these words said, without hesitation, that their policies were clearly wise, just, compassionate and honest. Maybe that person might have reflected a bit first. I suspect that Michael inscribed the words not to help us to justify what we already think, but to prompt thoughtful interrogation. For example, how will these plans work out in five or 10 years? Have we explicitly addressed fairness? Is this based on an honest assessment of the facts? Finally, does this alleviate suffering not just for those whom I know and like?

I do not want to add to your burden with a lecture. One of our guiding principles is that, if we want our elected representatives to show compassion, they must be shown compassion. You are, above all, human beings, and we must bring greater humanity to our politics.

These words are not a stick with which to beat you, but an invitation to return, every time that you enter this chamber, to the reason why so many of you entered politics in the first place: to act with wisdom, justice, compassion and integrity to help to create a Scotland where all can thrive.

Business Motion

14:04

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S7M-01389, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on changes to business. Members wishing to speak to the motion should press their request-to-speak button now.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for

(a) Tuesday 29 September 2026—

after

followed by First Minister's Questions (Backbench Members)

insert

followed by First Minister's Statement: The Roles and Functions of Scotland's Law Officers

(b) Wednesday 30 September 2026—

after

followed by Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party Debate: Protecting Scots from Significant Income Tax Rises

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Alexander Dennis Ltd.

delete

5.30 pm Decision Time

and insert

6.00 pm Decision Time.—[Jamie Hepburn]

Motion agreed to.

General Question Time

14:04

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is general question time. As always, I ask for short and sharp questions and answers.

Question 1, in the name of Marie McNair, has been withdrawn. An explanation has been given.

Question 2, in the name of Holly Bruce, was not lodged. An explanation has been given.

I am pleased to say that Murdo Fraser did, indeed, lodge his question.

Universal Library Offer

3. **Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it will take to implement a universal library offer, as recommended by the Scottish Library and Information Council in its report on how public libraries are supported, measured and funded. (S70-00303)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): Local authorities have a statutory duty to ensure that there is adequate provision of library services for their residents, aligning library provision with the specific needs of their communities.

In addition to record funding of £15.7 billion for local authorities in this financial year, the Scottish Government provides more than £1 million to the Scottish Library and Information Council, which includes £550,000 for the public library improvement fund. For members who are interested, in this financial year, the fund is supporting innovative projects that promote reading for pleasure among children with additional support needs, tackling digital exclusion, reducing inequalities and welcoming new Scots, including refugees and asylum seekers.

Murdo Fraser: I thank the cabinet secretary, but I did not actually hear an answer to the question that I asked. Let me try again.

Across Scotland, local libraries are well used, supported and loved by local communities, including in the area of Perth and Kinross, which is part of the region that I represent. However, they have had an axe hanging over them for years due to local government funding cuts. They are looking for some central assurance about the nationally defined minimum library offer, so that those vital local resources can be protected.

Given that the report was published in February, when will we get an answer from the Scottish

Government about whether it will accept the report's definition?

Màiri McAllan: I want to re-emphasise that, as I consider the report's recommendations, I recognise the absolutely vital role that public libraries play. I used my initial answer to speak about some of the investment that we are putting into them. However, Mr Fraser is quite right—the Government is still considering the recommendations, and I will respond to them and to the Parliament as soon as I can.

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): As the cabinet secretary has pointed out, reading for pleasure is one of the strongest indicators of children's future success and life chances. In recognition of that, the Government has delivered the bookbug programme and recently provided additional funding to school libraries.

However, will the cabinet secretary explore working with the Libraries for Primaries programme, which is run in partnership with the National Literacy Trust and Penguin Books, in order to build on the good work to promote literacy that is already being undertaken and strengthen outcomes by ensuring that every state primary school has a library or dedicated reading space?

Màiri McAllan: Since 2010, the Scottish Government has funded the Scottish Book Trust, which Patricia Gibson has rightly spoken about. We do that so that it can deliver the bookbug programme. In this financial year and in the previous financial year, the programme was included in our fairer funding pilot, which meant that it was awarded a two-year grant of £1.8 million per year, offering continuity for planning and for the roll-out of services. I state that to the chamber in order to emphasise the importance that we place on that.

Ms Gibson also raised an additional proposition, which I am very pleased to take up and discuss with her.

Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): As has been acknowledged, local authorities are mandated to deliver library provision. However, they are mandated only to provide one library per local authority. Can the Scottish Government look at mandating a higher number of libraries in local authorities, based on population and geographical spread?

Màiri McAllan: Ms Black is quite right that there is no definition of "adequate" when it comes to the provision of services in the statute that underpins this work. The statute's flexible approach was intended to allow local authorities to respond to their local needs and to match provision with their communities' requirements. However, as I said to Mr Fraser, I am conscious of the report's recommendation about clarifying "adequate" library services. I am considering those recommendations and will be sure to keep Ms Black and other members up to date.

Group-based Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (Public Inquiry)

4. **Senga Beresford (South Scotland) (Reform):** To ask the Scottish Government what information it holds regarding when the public inquiry into the response to group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation will begin. (S7O-00304)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): The formal establishment of the inquiry is one of my top priorities, and work has been undertaken at pace to develop the terms of reference and finalise operational arrangements.

In August, I met the chair of the inquiry, Professor Alexis Jay, to discuss the terms of reference. Professor Jay has emphasised that the inquiry must proceed in a timely manner while retaining flexibility to investigate all areas that it considers necessary.

I also attended the national child sexual abuse and exploitation strategic group earlier this month, to engage with expert stakeholders on that matter and on aligning work with the inquiry. I will consider the finalised terms of reference in due course, and Parliament will be updated in the near future.

Senga Beresford: So, there is still no clarity for the victims. I will move on. There are reports that women are being sex trafficked and forced into pop-up brothels in my home town of Dumfries as we speak. What is the Scottish Government going to do to directly tackle that issue and protect those victims? Or will it fail them in the same way as it is currently failing the victims of grooming gangs?

Màiri McAllan: In response to the first question, I put it on the record that the establishment of an inquiry into group-based child sexual abuse and criminal exploitation is a top priority for me and for the Government. Likewise, the matters that Senga Beresford raises are a top priority for Police Scotland. A significant amount of work is currently under way. We have the expert group that I spoke to, the inspectorate review—the "National review of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and child criminal exploitation"—which we have had the phase 1 report from, the truth project, Lady Smith's inquiry and a forthcoming inquiry by Professor Jay, all of which indicate the seriousness with which the Government treats these matters.

The Presiding Officer: We have a number of supplementary questions.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Here we are, a year after the Scottish National Party and the Greens voted down Liam Kerr's amendment to set up a grooming gangs inquiry, and this review—a multi-agency review—says that we still do not have accurate data and that there is not even a requirement to collect or report the data that is necessary for such an inquiry to take place. It is shameful. It was a mistake not to vote for Liam Kerr's amendment to set up a grooming gangs inquiry last year, was it not?

Màiri McAllan: That is a confused account of the processes that have led us to where we are. Where we are, as I said in response to the initial question, is that a significant amount of work is under way and a concerted effort is under way to make sure that the abhorrent crime of child sexual abuse and criminal exploitation is well understood in our country, is identified wherever it is taking place and is rooted out. I want to make it absolutely clear, from the action that is under way, that there is no place for that abhorrent crime in Scotland, and the Government is attending to that.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP): It is hugely important that efforts to safeguard children can meet the evolving dangers that we see today. Ensuring that technology cannot be used for exploitation must be a priority. What engagement is under way with the United Kingdom Government to strengthen protections against online harms?

Màiri McAllan: The online world is a new and ever-developing forum. We must be continually curious about its impact on children and young people, and that is absolutely part of what the Government is taking forward. The regulation of technology is, of course, a matter for the UK Government, so my colleagues and I are in contact with it frequently. Indeed, by way of example, we are supporting efforts to implement new powers through the UK Crime and Policing Act 2026 to tackle online child sexual abuse and exploitation in Scotland. Under those measures, it is illegal to possess, create or distribute artificial intelligence tools that are designed to create child sexual abuse materials. We have also outlawed possession of advice or guidance about child sexual abuse, including AI-generated abuse. We are working with the UK Government on that. All the while, we are using every tool at our disposal within devolved powers to protect children from online harm. We are clear-eyed about the fact that that is another frontier for the potential abuse of children, and we want to shut it down.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Scotland still has no clear national picture of the scale of group-based sexual abuse and exploitation, partly due to the lack of an agreed definition and the inconsistent approach to data collection. As has been said, the "National review of group-based child sexual abuse and exploitation and child criminal exploitation" urges Scottish ministers to deliver a national definition outlining reporting requirements and to set clear data collection standards by updating national child protection guidance. Can the cabinet secretary confirm whether the Scottish Government will enact those recommendations ahead of the public inquiry?

Màiri McAllan: It is always worth pointing out that the Scottish Government commissioned the inspectorate review in order to get absolute clarity on the extent of the issue throughout Scotland and on local responses to it. There are things that I welcome in the report, including the confidence in public protection arrangements and the points about strong safeguarding in education and effective multi-agency and contextual safeguarding. The review also highlights the value of existing national initiatives that the Government supports, such as the roll-out of the bairns' hoose and the Scottish child interview model. However, the review goes on to raise matters that we know require to be addressed, including on information sharing, multi-agency approaches and, of course, the matter of a definition, which I expect will form part of what Professor Jay considers in her inquiry—although, of course, that is up to her.

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): The minister might be aware of ongoing petition PE1979, which the Public Petitions Committee recently agreed to keep open and write to the Scottish Government about. Does the minister agree with the petition's proposition on setting up a national whistleblowing officer to scrutinise public body failures that have enabled historical child abuse to take place and to prevent them from happening in the future?

Màiri McAllan: I must apologise, as I did not catch the exact reference to the petition that the member spoke about, so I will have to get back to her in writing once I have clarity on that.

However, on the question of whistleblowing, I absolutely support the point that nobody anywhere should feel that they can or should fail to disclose any concerns about a child. In our programme for government, the Government supported the bringing forward of mandatory reporting, which will be a strong provision to say that child abuse, wherever it is happening, must be disclosed by responsible adults.

Health Boards (Proposed Replacement)

5. **Craig Hoy (Dumfriesshire) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the potential impact of its plans to replace the 14 territorial national health service boards with two strategic health boards on healthcare

provision in Dumfriesshire, including access to locally delivered services. (S7O-00305)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that people in Dumfriesshire have access to safe and high-quality healthcare as locally as possible. The proposed reforms are about the strategic governance and planning of NHS services and simplifying access to care and how it is delivered. They do not determine where individual services will be delivered.

We are not taking a one-size-fits-all approach. Local needs will be central to our planning, and we will work closely with local authorities, NHS partners, communities and stakeholders to ensure that future arrangements reflect local circumstances and support services being delivered as locally as possible.

Craig Hoy: The cabinet secretary will be aware that rural communities, such as those in Langholm and Gretna in my constituency, fear that reorganisation will inevitably mean centralisation. However, given the proximity to the border, many of my constituents travel to Carlisle or Newcastle for local healthcare and specialised treatment, not north towards the central belt. As part of the reform process, will ministers look to remove the administrative, structural and funding friction so that patients who travel south to access medical treatment in England find the process as seamless and safe as possible?

The Presiding Officer: We move to supplementaries. I bring in Calum Kerr. Oh—sorry. I will bring in the cabinet secretary.

Angela Constance: I am happy to answer Mr Hoy's supplementary question. He raises the important issue of cross-border transfers. We know that that works both ways. There are patients south of the border who come to Scotland and, of course, there are constituents of his who go south of the border.

I will say one thing about our reforms. For too long, people have had to fit into the system, and I do not want that for anybody, irrespective of whether they live in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Mr Hoy's constituency or our remote and island communities. We have to design systems that, first and foremost, work for people. That is what I am committed to doing, and I am more than happy to engage further with any members on the detail of that.

The Presiding Officer: As he suspects, I am going to call Calum Kerr for a supplementary.

Calum Kerr (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I would have been happy to answer Mr Hoy's question, too.

I welcome the fact that the cabinet secretary agrees that we must look at robust evidence on how we reform our health boards and how that will improve services for patients and increase capacity. What discussions will be had between the Scottish Government, wider health board staff and unions ahead of the changes? We must ensure that we bring them with us in the transformation in order to meet care requirements in our communities.

Angela Constance: I assure Mr Kerr that the reform process must be done with, and not to, the workforce. The Scottish Government is engaging first and foremost with our workforce and, as part of that work, we will set out an agreed process with trade unions to ensure that the workforce is able to help to shape the plans. Those in the workforce—the people who are on the front line and in crucial roles that support those who are on the front line—often have some of the most informed views about how to reduce duplication and improve services.

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): Has the cabinet secretary consulted each of the NHS territorial boards, noting that some boards are performing better on particular issues? For instance, NHS Fife's record on drug deaths, which decreased in the area by 13 per cent last year, shows that best practice can be shared out from that area rather than lost.

Angela Constance: The whole purpose of the reform programme is to ensure that there is not unwarranted variation. I am not talking about a one-size-fits-all approach; I am talking about reducing unwarranted variation in access to healthcare and reducing health inequalities in this country. If there are interventions that work well in one area—whether that is on reducing drug deaths, improving waiting times, improving access to orthopaedics or discharging our old people—and there is no reason why they could not be applied elsewhere, it is beyond me why we would not ensure that that happens, because doing so is in the interests of the health of the nation and the overall health of our population.

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD): My constituent Victor King has spent a year in hospital after a stroke because not one care provider covers his rural address in Kirkpatrick Durham in Dumfriesshire. NHS boards often cite social care shortages as the main driver behind delayed discharge, yet social care is a council responsibility. What assessment has the cabinet secretary made of how the reorganisation of health boards and councils will affect locally delivered care for people such as Mr King in Dumfriesshire?

Angela Constance: I am very concerned to hear about the experiences of Mr Dunlop's constituent Mr King. Mr Dunlop touches on

important matters regarding the locally available capacity of care home provision, on which we need to work hand in glove with care providers. I would be happy to receive more information on Mr King and on the solutions that we will all need to work together to bring to bear on the issue.

Local Government Restructuring (Costs and Savings)

6. **Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what estimate it has made of projected costs and savings associated with its proposed restructuring of local government. (S7O-00306)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): The proposals that were set out by ministers on 21 September are intended as a starting point for discussions on local governance reform with those who deliver and use our public services. That dialogue will help us to develop a shared vision for reform and better understand the full implications of change, including the financial impacts. That will ensure that any future projects are aligned with the fiscal challenges that we face while delivering improved outcomes for our people and communities.

Alexander Burnett: Yesterday, it became clear that the Scottish National Party is hiding whether its £1.5 billion public sector savings plan is on track. John Swinney has repeatedly failed to explain the detail of his public service reforms. Does the Deputy First Minister think that the current local government proposals will cost more or less than the £556 million that the 1994 local government reforms would have cost today?

Jenny Gilruth: It is fair to say that the Government has been up front about the quantum of savings that are required through the portfolio efficiency and reform plans. Together, those plans will help to deliver £1.5 billion of recurring annual savings by 2028-29. I am sure that there will be further questions on that when I attend tomorrow's meeting of the Finance and Public Administration Committee.

More broadly, it is important to set out that, at the current time, local government reform is in a consultative period, and we are engaging with our local government partners on the future shape of local government. I invite Alexander Burnett and his party colleagues to be part of that dialogue to help us to arrive at a shared consensus on the future for local government in Scotland.

Rural Communities (Empowerment)

7. **David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what steps it is taking to democratically empower communities across rural Scotland. (S7O-00307)

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): Thriving rural communities and empowering communities are priorities for the Scottish Government, which is why we have taken steps to empower communities to participate in decision making. We have reviewed the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and introduced new land reform legislation that favours community buyouts. We have published proposals for the reform of local governance, which we will discuss later today. In addition, through our islands programme, we provide new funding for infrastructure projects that will help to boost employment, empower communities and ensure a sustainable future for Scotland's islands.

David Green: A constituent recently listed to me some of the consequences of having a one-size-fits-all approach to policy, including the closure of the Inverness control room, more patients having to travel outwith Highland for care, and rural fire station appliances being off the run. What works in the central belt will not always work for rural and island communities. The Parliament endorsed that principle when it created the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, but it must now answer the question for rural Scotland, too. Former SNP MSP Gail Ross recognised that when she championed the case for a rural-proofing bill. Does the minister agree that Gail Ross was right to do so?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: Mr Green is as committed to and passionate about the strength and diversity of rural and island areas as I am. Our Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 is a landmark piece of legislation for this Parliament. I want it to be used further, and I want island communities to use it further. I look forward to working with Mr Green on that, and I am sure that he will be very engaged in the debate that is coming up later this afternoon.

Disinformation (Government Response)

8. **Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will develop a strategy to respond to disinformation. (S7O-00308)

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Jamie Hepburn): Misinformation and disinformation represent a growing risk for all societies. The Scottish Government is working to consistently identify and, where we can, counter suspected misinformation, and we are active in United Kingdom and international information networks. We are developing an action plan to supplement our existing work.

The First Minister has spoken out against rumours and false narratives on social media and he has written to tech companies about that issue. He has also highlighted Police Scotland's warnings that provocative online misinformation that contains incendiary language can cross the

threshold into criminality, and he condemned the deliberate setting on fire of a Glasgow apartment block following false online rumours.

Patrick Harvie: I recognise that, incident by incident, there can be individual responses, and I welcome the Government's decision to be proactive in relation to health disinformation. However, this is a much broader issue, whether it is about the targeting of asylum seekers, migrant communities and LGBTQ+ communities or about the chilling rise of far-right violence and intimidation on our streets. Does the Government recognise that disinformation, including deliberate disinformation from some Governments and major corporations, is now one of the most profound threats to our society? Will it consider developing a cross-Government strategy and consider whether legislative change is needed?

Jamie Hepburn: I fundamentally agree with the premise of the questions that Mr Harvie poses. We are all concerned about those things. We brought a debate on health misinformation to the chamber and I was glad to see the Parliament overwhelmingly agree on that.

As I mentioned, we are developing an action plan on these areas, and we will be happy to consider further what more we can do. In some areas to do with the spreading of misinformation and disinformation online, there is a limit to what we can do, because the powers are reserved. However, we will of course always be willing to consider what more we can do.

The Presiding Officer: That ends general question time. I apologise to the members I could not call to ask supplementaries.

First Minister's Question Time

Back-bench Members

14:29

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is First Minister's questions from back-bench members. I ask for short and sharp questions and answers.

Artificial Intelligence (Controls and Safeguards)

Paul McLennan (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP): What is the First Minister's position on controls and safeguards for artificial intelligence, following the recent announcement by the United Nations-backed independent international scientific panel on AI, which called for stronger safeguards?

The First Minister (John Swinney): There are many advantages that will come from artificial intelligence, but there are also many challenges and risks into the bargain. The Scottish Government supports a much stronger regulatory framework for the development and application of AI. That is not within the Scottish Parliament's responsibilities, but it will be a shared responsibility across many jurisdictions around the world. That is why there is a need for clear, emphatic and global leadership. We will engage with the United Kingdom Government to ensure that it takes such an approach to influence global dialogue on this important question.

NHS Grampian Critical Incident

Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP): This weekend, NHS Grampian declared a critical incident due to extreme pressure on emergency departments at Dr Gray's hospital and Aberdeen royal infirmary. Staffing, hospital capacity and social care pressures were cited as factors, with a small number of patients from Dr Gray's hospital diverted to Raigmore. Although the decision to stand down the board-level incident yesterday and the Dr Gray's hospital incident today are welcome, what discussions have the First Minister and others had with NHS Grampian over the weekend? What support can we offer to prevent further incidents as we head into the winter season?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care has been in regular dialogue with NHS Grampian over the course of the weekend during what I recognise would have been a concerning incident for residents in the NHS Grampian area. I pay tribute and express my thanks to members of staff for their sustained efforts to manage the situation. The cabinet secretary briefed members of Parliament for the area earlier this afternoon and she stands

ready to provide further information about the incident.

I am glad that the incident has been stood down. The issues that have been addressed include an accumulation of high presentations at accident and emergency departments, along with challenges related to the number of delayed discharge patients in Dr Gray's and the Aberdeen royal infirmary. We have been working closely with the health and social care partnerships in the locality to ensure that patients can be delivered into communities with appropriate care packages to avoid congestion in hospitals, which undermines the flow of patients. We will continue to work closely with NHS Grampian and other health boards to resolve those issues as we approach winter.

Glasgow City Council Pay Dispute

Iris Duane (Glasgow) (Green): As the First Minister will know, Glasgow City Council was forced last week not to commence the largest firing and rehiring process in United Kingdom history, which forced 23,000 staff members to take a pay deal that they had no say in. Although the Government has finally stepped in, Glasgow Green councillors wrote to the First Minister a number of weeks ago to indicate our concern about the level of detriment faced by workers and the financial ability of the council to deliver a fair deal in the equal pay dispute. Will the First Minister also step in and provide the financial support that is required to ensure that all Glasgow City Council employees get a fair deal that trade union members can be balloted on?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am glad that the Deputy First Minister's intervention on Friday resulted in the creation of more time to negotiate an agreement that can be put to trade union members. Glasgow City Council has been trying to resolve a long-running issue that the current administration inherited from its Labour predecessors, which meant that unequal pay has been part of Glasgow City Council's pay scheme.

There have been extensive negotiations. Two unions wish to put the current offer to their members, but one has been unwilling to do so. I hope that there can be dialogue over the next few days so that the issue can be resolved. It is important that there is fair and equal pay for people who have been disadvantaged for many years as a consequence of the pay scales in Glasgow City Council. The Government stands ready to engage in constructive dialogue to try to bring about an agreement that will be acceptable to the interested parties.

Ketamine Use (Treatment and Awareness)

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): The BBC has reported that children as young as 13 are suffering from serious bladder damage as a result of ketamine use, with some experiencing such severe symptoms that they are unable to attend school. I recognise that NHS Grampian has established a specialist clinic and has launched an awareness campaign following an increase in admissions from young people.

What action is the Government taking to ensure that everyone across Scotland has access to specialist treatment? Will he commit to a national awareness campaign that highlights the long-term and permanent damage that the drug can cause?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I share Claire Baker's concerns. We are working with alcohol and drug partnerships and specialist services to ensure that the issues that Claire Baker raises are widely understood and appreciated in our healthcare systems. We welcome the establishment in Aberdeen of the ketamine bladder clinic, which provides a specialist service to people experiencing the debilitating impacts of extensive ketamine use on normal bladder function.

It is, of course, utterly and completely inappropriate for that to affect children and young people. Several Government-funded organisation, including Crew, WithYou and the Scottish Drugs Forum, are raising awareness around ketamine use, particularly among young people. As part of the wider work that the Government is undertaking on drug use, and to address the issues that were raised in relation to the statistics last week, we are strengthening the messaging on those points to ensure that there is wide awareness of the dangers of the use of drugs such as ketamine and of the enormous damage that they can cause young people, should they use them.

Antisocial Behaviour (Under-22s Bus Passes)

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con): On Friday evening, the 240 bus service was removed from its route in North Lanarkshire due to some passengers' antisocial behaviour. Bus drivers should feel safe at their work, and passengers should feel safe when using the bus. When will the First Minister adopt a zero-tolerance approach to antisocial behaviour that is caused by under-22s and permanently remove their taxpayer-funded bus passes?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government has a zero-tolerance approach to those questions, because anybody who is involved in antisocial behaviour should have their conduct

addressed by the relevant authorities, including Police Scotland.

In relation to the question about the bus pass, this issue concerns the behaviour of a very small minority of young people, who are abusing the facilities that are available. The Government has legislated to address the very issue that Meghan Gallacher has put to me.

Support for Industry (United Kingdom Government)

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Nationalising British Steel cost the UK Government £750 million on the first day and has cost it £1.3 million a day thereafter. Yorkshire-based Speciality Steel UK has also been taken into public ownership. Although Scottish taxpayers contribute to those schemes, there are no Barnett consequentials in return, because they are deemed UK-wide interventions. Meanwhile, Grangemouth is overlooked. Although £22 billion was pledged for carbon capture in England, the Acorn project is also overlooked. Given that the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer has just made a pledge about reindustrialisation, what discussions does the First Minister plan with the UK Government on fair support for Scottish-based jobs?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Mr Brown makes a very fair and important point, on which the Scottish Government is taking a number of steps. I saw some of those steps in action yesterday at the port of Montrose, where significant investments were announced by Subsea Micropiles and significant commitments were offered by SSE, which will deliver a strengthened industrial future for Montrose port as a consequence of the investment in renewables that have been made by the Government.

On the example of Grangemouth that Mr Brown cites, it is an absolute scandal that the support that the Labour Party promised in 2024 has not been forthcoming, and the Scottish economy has been damaged as a consequence of that.

The Scottish Government will maintain the dialogue with the UK Government to press it to remember that Scotland has a necessity for industrial investment too, and to remind it that the investment that has been prioritised south of the border must be extended north of the border as well.

Electroconvulsive Treatment

Amanda Lindsay (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform): A recent freedom of information release found that more than 50 per cent of patients in Scotland who are receiving controversial electroconvulsive treatment are being subjected to it against their will. There were 2,128 of those treatments in the past year alone, so it is not a small problem. Worse, NHS Tayside admitted that it carried out the treatment

"without properly checking if patients needed it or if it was helping."

What urgent action will the First Minister take to ensure that vulnerable patients are fully protected from a treatment that is effectively a form of torture?

The First Minister (John Swinney): That area of clinical intervention is of a very sensitive nature. I understand the significance of the points that Amanda Lindsay raises with me. Very high standards are applied in any particular cases of such a nature, because the individuals who are likely to be considered for the treatment will, without doubt, be some of the most vulnerable individuals in our society. Therefore, high standards must be set, and have been set, and they must also be applied.

Obviously, clinical judgments have to be arrived at, and it is totally inappropriate for me as First Minister, or for any minister, to speculate on them. It is down to the exercise of clinical judgment to support vulnerable patients where it might well be, or will be, in their interests for such treatment to be administered. However, that must be after the application of the highest standards of clinical care in exercising that judgment.

Household Bills (Energy Costs)

Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP): Despite pledging to cut bills by £300, new analysis shows that household bills are up significantly since the Labour Party came to power. The University of Aberdeen published new research that shows that 58 per cent of Scots face fuel insecurity. Despite that, Andy Burnham has skimmed just £4 off energy bills for energy-rich Scots. What action is the First Minister taking to put more money back in the pockets of hard-working Scottish families?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish Government has set out a range of different measures that we are taking to support individuals who face cost of living challenges, whether through the expansion of childcare that we are delivering, free breakfast clubs, or the steps that have been taken to apply the £2 bus fare cap around vast areas of the west of Scotland and the Highlands and Islands. There is also a commitment to extend that to other parts of Scotland, including the areas represented by Mr Melville.

The issue that Mr Melville raises is about energy costs. The Labour Government was elected on a commitment to reduce energy bills by £300. However, energy bills are still higher than when

Labour came to office, with further increases projected in the foreseeable future.

The lesson for me is that, in an energy-rich country such as Scotland, it is clear that Westminster is failing to deliver the sustained reduction in energy bills that is required. If the United Kingdom Government will not deliver that, it should devolve energy powers to the Scottish Government so that we can take action to reduce the bills of people in Scotland.

Maternity Services Review (Remit)

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): More than 4,300 people have signed a petition because the maternity services review will look only forward. Bereaved parents, including families who have lost loved ones at Ninewells, have called that an absolute insult. Does the First Minister agree that their trust in this review is hanging by a thread before it has even begun? Will he now widen the remit so that past cases of death and avoidable harm are properly investigated?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The maternity services review is an independent review that will be informed by the lived experience of those who utilise maternity services. It will be for the review to decide how it takes forward its agenda.

I note that, at the Government's request, Healthcare Improvement Scotland has embarked on a series of inspections to look at the delivery of maternity services.

If my memory serves me correctly, the review has already looked at the situation in Tayside and has published its findings in that respect, requiring certain actions to be undertaken. I assure Helen McDade, and those who are concerned about the issue, that the review will exercise its independent judgment and will be comprehensive in taking into account the views of members of the public who have lived experience in that area of activity.

Mining Remediation (Clackmannanshire)

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): What discussions has the Scottish Government had with the Mining Remediation Authority, and other relevant agencies, following reports that its investigation into the ground movement at Coalsnaughton in my constituency has now widened to other sites in Clackmannanshire, where similar historical mining remediation work was undertaken? What assurances has it sought regarding whether there could be implications for other former mining communities across Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am very familiar with the issues that Mr Brown raises, and I am grateful to him for the strong support that he has given to his constituents in Coalsnaughton as they have wrestled with the deeply distressing experience that they have had. I hope that it is of some reassurance to the members of the public who are affected that the Mining Remediation Authority has indicated that historical mine-working activity has led to the instability that has been experienced.

We are aware of further reports of other sites being examined. Yesterday, officials engaged further with the Mining Remediation Authority on that question. The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing will provide a written update to Keith Brown on the details of those discussions, but I assure him of the sustained engagement of the Government with the MRA on that important question.

Friedreich's Ataxia (Treatment)

Adam Harley (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD): I declare an interest as a former employee of Ataxia UK. Ella, aged 10, lives with the rare neurological condition Friedreich's ataxia, which affects movement and co-ordination and has a profound impact on daily life. For the next three years, Ella will receive a new medication—Skyclarys—as part of the BRAVE clinical trial in Germany. New gene therapies are also being developed that could potentially transform lives. However, without a clear pathway in Scotland, families are worried that they will miss out when those treatments become more widely available. Can the First Minister give Ella, and everyone with Friedreich's ataxia in Scotland, the assurance of clear pathways to accessing potentially life-changing treatments without having to fight the system to get them?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Our objective as clinical advances take place is to work to deploy them in Scotland when they are safe to be deployed. As Adam Harley has set out, clinical trials are under way. As we learn more information about the proceeds of those trials, and as the Scottish Medicines Consortium makes independent judgments about the availability and appropriateness of the use of those drugs, we must ensure that there are clinical pathways that will work effectively for members of the public in Scotland. That is the normal process of the delivery of interventions that will improve clinical care for individuals. I give Mr Harley the assurance that that approach will be applied as we look to hear the outcome of the clinical trials that are currently under way. I wish Ella and her family well in the undertaking of those clinical trials.

Care-Experienced People (Premature Deaths)

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD): A child who was six when Scotland announced its care review is now 16—in essence, that is a

childhood. Today, the independent oversight board has again warned that progress is still too slow but said that properly scrutinising premature deaths in the care-experienced community could improve outcomes. Last week's appalling drug deaths figures will include many care-experienced people. However, we cannot say how many, because the Scottish Government chooses not to track them. I ask the First Minister again—please—when will his Government start publishing the premature death rate for all care-experienced people?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I will explore the particular and specific issue that Duncan Dunlop has raised about the gathering of data. The Government gathers and publishes a huge amount of data. He commented on some of that data in relation to the drug deaths figures last week.

I accept his point that a proportion of those who lost their lives due to drugs will be people who were care-experienced. That is why the Government's approach to the Promise is not an isolated area of Government activity but is anchored in our commitment to whole-family support, to ensure that individuals have a rounded level of support in dealing with the challenges that they face.

I welcome the oversight board report that has been published. It indicates that progress has been made in a number of areas, not least in the legislative provisions in relation to the service redesign that is under way. We need to ensure that there is comprehensive focus on all those aspects of policy in all areas of the country, which is why the public service reform agenda is crucial to ensuring that we are able to make the progress that is envisaged in that agenda.

Antisocial Behaviour (Children and Young People)

Kate Campbell (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP): Yesterday, I met primary 6 and primary 7 pupils in the Burgh primary school in Musselburgh. Their number 1 issue was antisocial behaviour by teenagers. All of them had a story about when they had felt unsafe. What can the First Minister do to tackle ASB by a very small number of teenagers to ensure that all our children and young people feel safe in their communities?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Kate Campbell sets out the point in its proper context. It is a minority of young people who are undertaking antisocial behaviour.

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and I spent some time last Thursday with police officers in Leith in Edinburgh, alongside the display of the knife angel statue, which has been in Leith for the past few weeks. Part of the issue that we were discussing was the minority of young people who are inflicting antisocial behaviour on other members of their communities.

The Government takes a number of steps to tackle that behaviour by young people, whether it is through the intervention of the police or investment via measures such as cashback for communities and anti-violence programmes. A sustained part of the education programme in our schools is to ensure that young people are encouraged not to take part in antisocial behaviour. However, should such behaviour be prevalent, a criminal justice intervention is available to tackle it. The police have our full support in undertaking that work.

Rosyth to Dunkirk Ferry Service

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Last week, the First Minister told Parliament that the Government was committed to delivering a ferry service of the type proposed between Rosyth and Dunkirk. Will he update us on the Deputy First Minister's meeting with Forth Ports last week? Is that project going to happen, and when?

The First Minister (John Swinney): We are in ongoing discussions with Forth Ports about the issues relating to a direct ferry connection. Importantly, we need a private sector partner to anchor that development. The Government will be supportive of steps to take forward such a development, but it will require us to be engaged in further discussions with the relevant authorities to ensure that that is the case. The Deputy First Minister and others will be happy to keep Mr Ruskell and Parliament informed of the progress that is being made.

Springholm and Crocketford Bypass

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Local communities and businesses from across Dumfries and Galloway, and the United Kingdom, have waited many decades for the Springholm and Crocketford bypass, but progress is now being made. Will the First Minister or the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport commit to meeting local landowners and stakeholders who believe that a more affordable phased alternative could deliver the long-awaited bypass sooner and avoid the possibility that the current route assessment results in a preferred option becoming so expensive that it is never built?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I welcome Mr Carson's suggestion. It might be best if the transport secretary meets the local representatives, but if there is an appetite for me to be involved in that, I will consider it. However,

the transport secretary will be able to engage. Mr Carson raises interesting ideas that I am sure will be discussed in the communities that he represents.

I am very familiar with the developments in Crocketford. Safety benefits will arise out of that proposition. The Government will be happy to engage with Mr Carson and the communities that he represents on those suggestions.

Glasgow City Council (Homelessness)

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): What is the First Minister's response to the leader of Glasgow City Council, Councillor Ricky Bell, when he said that the city is

"carrying the burden of homelessness for the whole of Scotland",

and his controversial call on the Scottish Government to change the law to let the city move people out into neighbouring authorities such as North and South Lanarkshire?

The First Minister (John Swinney): We have gone through quite a number of those points already. My firm view is that we have an obligation, as a country, to provide safe refuge to individuals when it is judged appropriate for them to be located here. However, there must also be commensurate financial support from those who are taking those decisions to enable that to be the case. That is the simple answer to the issue that Councillor Bell raises. It is therefore for the Home Office to follow up its decisions about leave-to-remain status by putting in place the financial support to enable people to be properly supported in this country. I reiterate a demand that has been made repeatedly by this Government to the Home Office for that to be the case.

MCR Pathways (Support for Young People)

Martyn Day (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP): Last week, I met young people and mentors involved in MCR Pathways and heard what having a trusted adult in their corner has meant to them. Will the First Minister welcome the work of MCR Pathways and consider how the Scottish Government can help to deliver a trusted adult guarantee for young people across Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am very familiar with the work of MCR Pathways, which has done extraordinary and beneficial work for young people in providing the reliability of an adult mentor. The Government continues to support MCR Pathways' school-based mentoring programme for care-experienced and other disadvantaged young people, with £3 million of investment in the current financial year. We will sustain our dialogue with the organisation to ensure that the needs of young people are supported as effectively as it is possible for us to deliver.

Police Conduct Regulations

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Why is the First Minister ignoring the Angiolini review's recommendation to have a single set of police conduct regulations rather than one for senior ranks and one for everyone else? That is not the case in other forces in the United Kingdom, so why is he rejecting that part of the review?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I will have to take that issue away and explore the details of the point that Mr Kerr raises. The highest standards of conduct should be expected of all police officers of whatever rank. I will explore the issue that he raises and will write to him accordingly.

Spouse Visas

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): A constituent of mine is devastated that current immigration laws mean that her daughter must move to Germany with her new husband. They cannot meet the financial requirements of a spouse visa, so Argyll and Bute is losing a young couple to Germany's gain. Does the First Minister agree that current immigration laws do not reflect the needs of our rural communities?

If the United Kingdom Government will not make the changes that are needed, immigration laws should be devolved to Scotland to ensure that those who want to live here and contribute to their community are able to do so.

The First Minister (John Swinney): It is pretty clear that the approach to immigration policy by the UK Government is not meeting the needs of Scotland. We require to boost our adult working-age population in Scotland. That has been a long-term challenge and issue for our country. It is essential to enabling and fuelling economic growth in our society, but the UK Government turns its back on those practical proposals.

There has been a wide consensus in this Parliament that there would be advantages in Scotland being able to take a different approach to migration in a number of key areas, particularly in relation to strengthening the working-age population. I encourage the UK Government to engage constructively with us on taking forward such propositions, because they would benefit the economy and the sustainability of communities in Scotland, especially many of the rural communities that Jenny Minto represents in this Parliament.

The Presiding Officer: Talking of rural communities, Liam McArthur has the next question.

Kirkwall Post Office Closure

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Last Monday, the closure of Kirkwall post office was announced with no notice, no consultation and no confirmation of when or even where it might reopen. When the branch was franchised by Universal Office Equipment last year, assurances were given that the new model would provide long-term sustainability, but now, islanders are facing significant uncertainty.

The importance of the post office to the local community and small businesses across Orkney cannot be overstated. Will the First Minister engage with his United Kingdom counterparts to establish what steps can be taken to safeguard vital postal services across Orkney?

The First Minister (John Swinney): It is unacceptable that postal services of that nature, which I recognise are pivotal in communities such as those that Mr McArthur represents, are unavailable for people to use. We will make representations to the UK Government on that question.

It is vital that there is an effective and sustainable network of postal services around the country, and that most definitely includes in Kirkwall. We will take forward and make those representations.

Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill

Joe Long (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests in relation to my employment at Scottish Autism prior to election.

Last week, a group of charities, disabled people's organisations and MSPs from across the parties came together in Parliament to discuss the scrapping of the proposed learning disabilities, autism and neurodivergence bill. After sharing their expertise, their personal stories and their trauma in the development of the bill, those communities and organisations feel deeply let down.

Will the First Minister detail how the Scottish Government will maintain a strategic cross-sectoral focus on the rights and needs of neurodivergent people and people with learning disabilities, and will he explain how those communities' voices will guide that work, given the dissolution of the lived experience advisory panel and stakeholder groups?

The First Minister: I recognise the concerns that Mr Long raises, and I addressed those in my answer to Steven Bonnar on a previous occasion. The Government came to the judgment, having listened to the lived experience of individuals and all the learning that has been shared with us by different organisations and individuals, that it would be more effective if we took a number of practical steps to enhance the services and support available for neurodivergent individuals, and to support them more effectively with more effective services. We decided that that would deliver more significant and earlier improvement in the circumstances of those individuals than would focusing on legislation. The Government has made that choice and we will press ahead with the agenda to deliver those improvements.

With regard to Mr Long's point about dialogue and engagement, Maree Todd, the minister with responsibility in this area, has met with a range of organisations already and will continue to sustain that dialogue to ensure that we hear the voice of lived experience and that we are able to reflect that in the policy priorities that the Government takes forward.

Secretary of State for Scotland

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): On Sunday evening, the Labour conference held its annual Scots night, hosted by the Secretary of State for Scotland, Douglas Alexander. While Labour—unsurprisingly—sets aside just one night at conference for Scotland, can the First Minister point to what tangible difference the secretary of state has actually made for Scotland during the other 364 days of the year?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I will allow the Secretary of State for Scotland to justify himself; he does not need any encouragement from me to set out his rather poor report card.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes questions to the First Minister from back-bench members. A number of members had indicated, by sending questions to me, that they wanted to ask questions, but they either did not turn up on time or did not press their request-to-speak buttons. I remind members that both of those are essential if they are to be chosen.

Law Officers (Roles and Functions)

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is a statement by John Swinney on the roles and functions of Scotland's law officers. Questions will be taken at the end of the statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:01

The First Minister (John Swinney): The office of Lord Advocate is one of the oldest and most important institutions in Scotland's public life. The Lord Advocate is a Government minister whose principal responsibilities include being both the independent head of the systems of criminal prosecution and the investigation of deaths, and the principal legal adviser to the Scottish Government.

Together with the Solicitor General for Scotland, the Lord Advocate plays a vital role in upholding the rule of law, in the administration of justice and in protecting the public interest. For generations, holders of those offices have discharged those responsibilities with integrity, professionalism and independence. Their work in fulfilling the expectations of the office has been fundamental to the delivery of justice and the protection of rights at all times.

The current Lord Advocate and Solicitor General continue that tradition of outstanding public service. The reforms that they have put in place are designed to provide greater transparency about decision making and to be as open as possible about the sensitive judgments that have to be made while protecting the independence of their decision making.

Over the centuries, the roles of the law officers have not remained static. They have changed alongside Scotland's society, institutions and constitutional framework to meet the needs of the people whom they serve. The current system has ensured that Government policy is informed by expert legal advice and guided by the rule of law, while the Lord Advocate remains directly accountable to Parliament for the exercise of her prosecutorial functions.

However, no system, however long-standing, should be beyond examination. It is right that we consider whether the current arrangements continue to serve modern Scotland as effectively as they can.

In 2022, the Scottish Government commissioned Malcolm McMillan to carry out detailed research into the history and functions of the law officers. His "Report on the Roles and Functions of the Scottish Law Officers", which was published earlier this year, gave us an important foundation and a shared understanding of the roles in question. However, that exercise was not intended to answer the question of what Scotland should do in the future, and it did not address the detailed questions that would have to be considered in order to ensure that there could be assurance on the public expectations on the independence of decision making if the current arrangements were subject to change.

In June, I confirmed to Parliament that I would continue to engage on this matter. As I emphasised then, and continue to emphasise now, it is vitally important that we approach any reform of the law officers' roles in an open and thoughtful way, to ensure that the significant constitutional, legal and operational issues are thoroughly explored and that there is a clear understanding of the implications of any changes. Only then can Parliament have a fully informed discussion about whether any changes should be made to those roles.

With that in mind, I announce to Parliament that the Scottish Government will establish an independent review on the future functions and responsibilities of the Scottish law officers. The review will be independently chaired by Lord Boyd of Duncansby. Having served as both Lord Advocate and Solicitor General, and later as a senator of the College of Justice, Lord Boyd brings to this review extensive experience of Scotland's legal and constitutional framework.

It is essential that the review hears from a wide range of individuals and organisations, such as the judiciary, professional bodies, members of this Parliament and others with an interest in the future role of the law officers.

Lord Boyd will appoint a reference group to support his work, ensuring that the review benefits from a broad range of perspectives and expertise. I am confident that, as chair, Lord Boyd will engage widely and openly to ensure that all relevant views are heard.

The review will examine the advantages and disadvantages of making changes to the current arrangements. It will consider the strengths and weaknesses of alternative models, engage with the legal, constitutional and practical implications of reform, and make recommendations to Scottish ministers.

Crucially, the review will approach these issues with an open mind. It will follow the evidence where it leads, whether that is to reforms or to maintaining the status quo.

In accepting the appointment, Lord Boyd said:

"I am very pleased to have been asked by the First

Minister to conduct this review. The issues it will consider are of fundamental importance to the administration of justice in Scotland.

Any recommendations must safeguard the independence and integrity of the prosecution system, sustain public confidence, strengthen accountability, and ensure that Ministers continue to receive high-quality, professional legal advice.

I approach the task with an open mind and will consult widely before making my recommendations to Ministers in due course."

The Scottish Government will provide administrative support, but the review will work independently and its conclusions will be entirely its own. The review will begin work in the new year, and the current intention of the chair is for it to publish its final report in the latter part of 2027.

Once the review has reported, we will consider its recommendations carefully. If changes are recommended, those proposals may then form the basis of a public consultation and Parliament will have the opportunity to scrutinise any of our subsequent decisions on those reforms.

It has been widely established, including by United Kingdom Government ministers, that consideration of whether any changes should be made to the roles of the Scottish law officers is properly a matter for this Parliament to lead on. By establishing this independent expert review, we are ensuring that Scotland takes a careful, evidence-based and mature approach to an important constitutional question.

In closing, I would like to put on record my gratitude to the Lord Advocate and the Solicitor General for their support, leadership and constructive engagement as we have developed our plans for a review. They have welcomed the opportunity to improve understanding of their roles, while ensuring that any proposals for change are informed by a full and careful assessment of the options and their consequences.

I also welcomed the constructive tone in this chamber on the case for considering reform when the current law officers were nominated in June. I hope that parties across the chamber will engage with the work of the review and its recommendations in a similar spirit.

It is right that we debate the future of the law officers' roles. These long-standing roles have been crucial to establishing and sustaining a legal framework in Scotland that commands public confidence, provides dependable legal advice for Government and enables justice for all to be delivered. It is absolutely critical that, in any process of reform, those attributes are maintained.

In commissioning the review, the Government wants to ensure that the debate on this important issue is guided by the highest quality of evidence, analysis and consideration. I know that Lord Boyd will provide that approach and perspective. I encourage all interested parties throughout our country who wish to contribute to this process to approach the review in that spirit.

The Presiding Officer: Thank you, First Minister. We have 20 minutes or so for questions. Everyone who wishes to ask a question should press their request-to-speak button now, please. I ask for concise questions, because otherwise we will struggle to get all members in.

Amanda Bland (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): Why is it only now that the First Minister agrees that there is a problem that needs to be fixed? Until now, the Government has repeatedly praised the independence, integrity and effectiveness of the current Lord Advocate and Solicitor General. If ministers have confidence in the existing system, what problem is the review seeking to solve?

The First Minister: Let me make it clear that the Government's decision to conduct the review has absolutely nothing to do with our assessment of, or commentary on, the Lord Advocate and the Solicitor General, who carry out their functions to the highest standards of professionalism and independence in their decision making, as I narrated in my statement.

This is the Government acknowledging the fact that there has been widespread debate about whether the Lord Advocate should exercise the dual role of principal legal adviser to the Government and head of the prosecution system. That is not a new issue—it is an issue on which my party and other parties have commented before. As a consequence of those issues having been raised, and given the constitutional significance of the roles of the Lord Advocate and the Solicitor General, I feel that it is important that they are properly and fully examined. Lord Boyd will do that on our behalf.

The Presiding Officer: I call Pauline McNeill, who is dialling in remotely.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Can I have the First Minister's assurance that the review led by Lord Boyd will consider, as a matter of priority, how the Parliament will continue to hold the Lord Advocate and the Solicitor General to account? For example, during the Post Office scandal, it was vital that we heard directly from the Lord Advocate about what exactly happened in the prosecutions of postmasters. Does the First Minister agree that it is vitally important that we do not lose any accountability of our law officers to this Parliament in any changes that are made?

The First Minister: Pauline McNeill raises one of the most fundamental issues that we must

discuss. The current arrangements have served this country well, for the very reason that she sets out: Parliament is able to exercise an appropriate level of accountability in relation to our law officers on issues of significance and prosecutorial policy.

I do not want to see any diminution of that accountability. Indeed, many reforms that the current Lord Advocate has undertaken strengthen accountability, and taking that forward is one of her priorities.

The process that we are embarking on is designed to properly, dispassionately and calmly explore the very important issues that Pauline McNeill raises, because those aspects are fundamental to the role of this Parliament and the exercise of its responsibilities. I feel that that debate must be informed by considered input from Lord Boyd, who I think will help us to reach conclusions on whether there would be an advantage in changing the arrangements or, as Pauline McNeill indicates, whether there would be disadvantages if we do not get the arrangements for accountability right.

David Linden (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP): I welcome the First Minister's statement and the repeated references to the point that the independent review will be evidence led, which is so important in this case.

I want to press the First Minister on an issue. Will the review consider what the roles and responsibilities of the Lord Advocate would be if the position were decoupled?

The First Minister: That is at the heart of the exercise that Lord Boyd will undertake. The Lord Advocate's role is deeply woven into the fabric of Scots law and the way in which justice is exercised in Scotland. The issue that Pauline McNeill just raised about parliamentary accountability is important in providing a line of sight for the Parliament in those areas.

Those points will be material to the judgment that Lord Boyd has to consider and advise on, because none of these issues is straightforward. There is an enormous amount of complexity, at the heart of which is the importance of ensuring that principles of justice are maintained, independence of prosecutorial decisions is enhanced, the Government has access to the highest quality of independent legal advice and members of the public have confidence in that system. The issues that Mr Linden raised are central to the remit of the review that Lord Boyd will undertake.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green): I follow the First Minister in recognising the important contribution that the former Lord Advocate and current Lord Advocate have made to Scotland.

The review is ultimately about whether we should split the role. If that is the route that we go down, there will be a need for prosecutions to rightly be politically neutral, and there will be a need to maintain a system of policing and prosecuting by consent, whereby prosecutors are accountable to the Parliament and, by extension, the public. There will also be a need for unity between the two roles, if we choose to create them, in relation to decisions such as the establishment of the Thistle.

Is the First Minister confident that the review will consider all those practical implications, including the point on unity, to ensure that whatever model is chosen, accountability is maintained?

The First Minister: The Government could have decided to embark on a particular change to the arrangements for the Lord Advocate and the law officers' function. However, in my judgment, there is far too much complexity to be explored, an awful lot of which has been put on the record by Gillian Mackay—all of it legitimate—to enable us to come to an informed position about any particular change in this area.

I give the assurance that, this afternoon, members will be able to see the terms of reference that have been set out for Lord Boyd, which are comprehensive enough to enable all those issues to be addressed. I believe that the Parliament will benefit from having such a dispassionate and considered contribution from Lord Boyd.

I thank Gillian Mackay for her comments about the current and previous Lord Advocates, who, as I have maintained several times, have served Scotland with enormous distinction.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): The Scottish National Party manifesto promised a review of the Lord Advocate's dual role five years ago. The then Lord Advocate went on to back SNP plans to scrap jury trials, effectively decriminalise possession of heroin and crack cocaine and tip off John Swinney about Nicola Sturgeon's criminal husband. We really do not need another SNP review, so why will John Swinney not just end the Lord Advocate's dual role now?

The First Minister: I suppose that Scotland will be able to see the difference between Mr Findlay's approach and my approach, which is at the very heart of the point that I am making to the Parliament today. That is not a way to go about determining policy. The last way that we should go about determining policy is to be driven by political invective, insults and pathetic comments. [*Interruption*.] Conservative members can shout and stick their fingers up at me, but it is totally and utterly debasing to listen to these characters, who have just taken an absolute hammering in the

election and who come in here with a sense of entitlement—

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Come on!

The First Minister: They do not understand—

The Presiding Officer: Excuse me. Stephen Kerr, please let the First Minister speak.

The First Minister: The Conservative members are not prepared to contemplate the complexity that is involved in the issue. As I said in my response to Mr Linden and in my statement, we need to ensure that public confidence in our judicial system is maintained by whatever changes we make, that the Government is still able to get access to the highest quality legal advice, that we have accountability around the independence of prosecutorial decisions and that we have available to us a constitutional approach that is compatible with all the other statutory areas of activity in Scotland. That needs a careful, measured process of assessment; it does not need the invective of Russell Findlay.

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh North Western) (LD): Theatrics aside, in 2021, this Government recognised the urgent need for reform of Scotland's law officers. We do not need another review to tell us that. The solutions are staring us in the face. There is an inherent conflict of interest in the Lord Advocate's current dual role, and that is why the Liberal Democrats have long called for an independent director of public prosecutions. We also need a separate function and a complete overhaul of the fatal accident inquiry system, because right now, due to the backlog, there are hundreds of families waiting for answers on what happened to their loved ones. The First Minister was largely silent on such solutions in his statement, but, as he makes representations to the inquiry, will he lend support to solutions such as those proposed by the Liberal Democrats?

The First Minister: First, the Liberal Democrats have not long supported the separation of roles, because I can remember Jim Wallace being a strong advocate in the House of Commons for the maintenance of the arrangements that we have during the passage of the Scotland Act 1998. [*Interruption*.]

Alex Cole-Hamilton: That was a long time ago.

The First Minister: Some of us have been around for a long time and are able to remember some of the Liberal Democrat history, even if the Liberal Democrats have forgotten all about it. I will just leave that point where it is just now.

Mr Cole-Hamilton advances a point about a conflict of interest for the Lord Advocate. That is his opinion, not a demonstrable fact. All sorts of different procedural explanations, all of which are publicly accessible, demonstrate how the Lord Advocate applies independence of decision making in all circumstances, so I reject unreservedly the idea of a conflict of interest. The Lord Advocate takes an appropriate approach to the exercise of independent judgment that reflects those priorities.

I have sympathy with Mr Cole-Hamilton in relation to his point about fatal accident inquiries. One of the priorities of the Lord Advocate is to try to enhance the pace at which fatal accident inquiries can be considered in order to provide answers to the families who require those answers.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP): I very much welcome the statement and the announcement of this expert, comprehensive and independent review. It is important to determine what is most appropriate as well as what is most efficacious. Will the review consider whether separation of the roles might create additional bureaucracy and related disadvantages?

The First Minister: Consideration has to be given to these questions, because we are interested in the utilisation of resources—that is also relevant to the point raised by Alex Cole-Hamilton in relation to fatal accident inquiries—but we also have to be mindful, in all these approaches, of the question of accountability for decision making. There has to be absolute clarity about accountability for decision making. Those questions will be relevant to the review that Lord Boyd undertakes.

Mark Simpson (North East Scotland) (Reform): Reform UK has said that the dual role should end, and we voted that way in June. Can the First Minister explain the timings of the inquiry? Why are we waiting until 2027, and with what degree of certainty can the First Minister say that we will get the final report in 2027?

The First Minister: We are taking steps to prepare for the necessary support for the inquiry to commence in January. Lord Boyd has other commitments that are relevant in the short term. He will commence the work in the new year, and his very firm expectation and commitment to me is that the work will be undertaken during the course of 2027.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I note the First Minister's words on the "constitutional significance" of the dual role. Might the separation of the roles mean that there would always be a need for a political role in Cabinet?

The First Minister: For the duration of the SNP Government, the law officers have not been political appointments. Indeed, the most recent political appointment of a law officer was that of Lord Boyd. Colin Boyd was appointed as the Lord Advocate by the Labour Government in about 2001, if my memory serves me right—or it was something of that order.

The Lord Advocate and Solicitor General have been appointed in their capacity to provide independent legal advice to the Government and to lead the prosecutorial functions of the Crown Office. The Lord Advocate only ever participates in Cabinet in offering legal advice to the Government. For me, that is an absolutely fundamental necessity. From my experience in Cabinet over many years, having the law officers present to provide us with legal advice and to ensure that we act appropriately and within the law is fundamental to the exercise of good governance in Scotland. I pay tribute to all the Lord Advocates who have served round the Cabinet table for discharging that function in an independent and dispassionate way.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Given what the First Minister has said about conflict of interest, does he accept that there is considerable concern that the dual roles of head of prosecution and legal adviser to the Scottish Government are incompatible and that there is a perception of conflict of interest? Will that be included in the review's terms of reference as a substantial consideration?

Will the First Minister outline whether discussions have taken place with the UK Government about the review, including on the timetable for any potential legislation?

The First Minister: Katy Clark makes a point that is relevant and important to the decision that I am taking. I recognise the debate that is being aired about the dual role of the Lord Advocate, and it is important that that issue is solved and addressed in a considered fashion, because many complexities have to be worked through. Simple solutions have been offered to us, such as just adopting the English system, which apparently separates the functions. However, the Attorney General has involved functions in relation to prosecutorial decisions, so there is not a neat separation of roles in the English system. Some myths need to be explored to enable us to have an informed debate. I accept that the debate is happening, and it needs to be addressed in a dispassionate fashion. The remit and terms of reference of the review will accommodate all the issues that Katy Clark has raised with me.

In relation to the UK Government, I have written to the Secretary of State for Scotland to advise him of the statement that I am making. Obviously, we await the dialogue that comes out of the review that is to be undertaken by Lord Boyd to consider any issues about parliamentary timescales and legislative opportunities.

Kate Campbell (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP): I welcome the fact that the First Minister is encouraging broad engagement and contributions to the review, but what lessons does he think that Scotland can learn from jurisdictions that have separated prosecutorial and advisory functions?

The First Minister: It is vital for us to understand and appreciate that learning in undertaking the review. It is vital that we have an appreciation of the issues that are raised. As I mentioned in my answer to Katy Clark, there is a suggestion that there is a neat separation of responsibilities in England, but the situation is not nearly as simple as that. Those are some of the material questions that we have to consider. We need to think about what is appropriate for the judicial experience in Scotland, which runs over many centuries; about how our legal system has developed; and about whether such steps are the correct ones to take.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): The First Minister says that reform of the law officers is properly a matter for the Scottish Parliament to lead on. However, any changes to the roles of Lord Advocate and Solicitor General will involve reserved matters and therefore will need either UK Parliament legislation—a section 30 order or similar—or transfer of the power to make such changes to this Parliament. What discussion has the First Minister had with the UK Parliament on the issue, other than having written to the secretary of state? How will the First Minister ensure that this Parliament has the decisive role in determining any future model?

The First Minister: As I indicated in my statement, almost everyone—including UK ministers—has accepted that this Parliament should lead the consideration of these issues, hence the process that I am commencing today. Beyond what I said in my answer to Katy Clark, I have had no further dialogue with the UK Government on this question, but we will engage in such work as we hear from Lord Boyd in the fullness of time. However, to be crystal clear, I believe that this Parliament should determine any changes to the roles of the law officers in Scotland and that it should be responsible for legislating for such changes, should that be needed.

Colm Merrick (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): How can we sure that, if the dual role of the Lord Advocate were to be separated, a new model would preserve prosecutorial independence and effective Government legal advice?

The First Minister: How the arrangements that we take forward will enable those elements to be asserted and assured is the central question that must be considered. Those elements are central to the effective exercise of the Lord Advocate's functions, and the Government and the prosecutorial system depend on them. Therefore, those questions will be central to our consideration of all these issues.

Stephen Kerr: If there was an Olympic sport for kicking things into the long grass, the SNP would almost certainly win the gold at every Olympics. The First Minister and that lot over there might not like it, but it was in 2021 that the SNP said in its manifesto that it will consult on the separation of the roles. It is now 2026, and we are talking about the end of 2027, 2028 or 2029. There has been the McMillan report and there will now be the Boyd review. We are talking about taking a decade to consider something as simple as a generation, for heaven's sake. [*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Mr Kerr. We are all having a great time, but how about getting to a question?

Stephen Kerr: The First Minister is certainly not operating at pace. Has he really never spoken to a UK Government minister about this fundamental aspect of the constitution, which is reserved?

The First Minister: I have not spoken to UK ministers about this issue. I notified the Secretary of State for Scotland earlier this morning about the review, which was the courteous and responsible thing to do, and I am sure that there will be further conversations about it.

One can always rely on Stephen Kerr to put his foot right in it. We now know that, according to him, a generation is 10 years. That admission has been a long time coming; this is a beautiful moment and I am glad that we all witnessed it. We will hold Mr Kerr to his definition of a "generation".

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the ministerial statement on the roles and functions of Scotland's law officers.

Empowering Communities and Strengthening Local Democracy

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is a Scottish Government debate without motion on empowering communities and strengthening local democracy. Members who wish to speak in the debate should press their request-to-speak button now.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I call Ivan McKee to speak for up to 12 minutes.

15:34

The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service Reform (Ivan McKee): I am delighted to open the debate. Our public service reform agenda is focused on delivering the Christie principles of integration, prevention, efficiency and empowerment. Of those, to my mind, empowerment is of critical importance. Reform of Scotland's public services must empower communities and strengthen local democracy by supporting people to take decisions for their areas.

These are not questions for Government alone, which is why the Scottish Government has committed to a period of genuine and extensive engagement on public service reform to help to ensure that proposals deliver meaningful improvements. This debate is part of that process. It is about engaging positively and constructively on how, together, we can rewire the public sector in a way that supports people to take decisions for their communities.

Graham Simpson (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform): Will the cabinet secretary explain why the consultation on local government will last for only three months?

Ivan McKee: We feel that it is important that we move at pace on this important issue and, frankly, we want to make sure that we get minds focused on the change that is possible. The three-month period will allow us to engage extensively, and an awful lot has happened already. As we reach the end of the period, we will outline where agreement has been reached and where we will go next. I do not know whether the member is saying that we should take longer to do that and, if so, how long it would be before he started to complain that we were taking too long to do it, as we have heard in previous contributions from his party.

I want to hear what opportunities this work could bring for communities in members' constituencies and how we can help to reshape Scotland's public services together. Our communities are best placed to understand what is needed in their local areas. Development trusts, third sector organisations and a wide range of community

groups sit at the heart of our communities, and many volunteers give their time to serve their local areas and support our vibrant grass-roots democracy in Scotland.

The community development sector and workforce underpin so much of this activity, and they form a critical part of the infrastructure that builds communities, enabling people to know their rights, have a voice and make a change. We recognise that those who are closest to the challenges that communities face are also closest to the solutions. I look forward to hearing views from across Parliament.

This debate complements wider engagement that has already started. Recently, the Minister for Public Finance and I met Norway's Minister of Local Government and Regional Development to discuss Norway's model of local government and what learning might be shared in taking forward our reform programme. When the Deputy First Minister was in Shetland last week, she discussed the reform proposals with the council leader and chief executive. Scottish Government officials recently met representatives from all three Ayrshire councils and, separately, East Renfrewshire Council to discuss reform. A programme of bilateral meetings between ministers and local authority representatives will be in train over the autumn, and in the next few months we will engage with public bodies, national health service boards, trade unions and the third sector, as well as communities themselves, to ensure that proactive leadership and collaboration are central to our approach to public service reform.

The programme for government is clear that community empowerment, community wealth building and our democracy matters programme will be at the heart of our approach to public service reform and, in particular, to changes to local governance. It recognises that our model of governance and decision making for public services increasingly creates disparities and risks inconsistencies in delivery and in outcomes for the people we serve. The current model of local government has not been reviewed since devolution and the restoration of the Scottish Parliament in 1999.

The Government's starting point is to ensure that we have a stronger democracy and the organisational capacity and capability that we need at the right levels to unleash economic opportunities and achieve the ambitions of communities in all areas of Scotland.

Monica Lennon (Glasgow) (Lab): The minister mentioned organisational capacity, and he spoke about the importance of empowering communities. Does he understand why trade unions and workers are so concerned that up to 20,000 public sector workers could lose their jobs as part of the reform? Does he agree that it is hard to empower and have the right capacity if we could potentially lose that many workers?

Ivan McKee: The wider public service reform programme is all about getting the right workforce in the right place to ensure that we are delivering effectively for the people of Scotland. We firmly believe, as indeed Christie did, that by introducing prevention, joining up services, removing duplication and empowering communities and the workforce, we can end up in a place where public services are more effective and more efficient at the same time.

The programmes that we are taking forward will create new governance arrangements that are strategic and capable of enabling more local decision making, that identify where resources can be pooled to greatest effect and most efficiently, and that ensure that key services and outcomes are delivered consistently well in line with what communities want and need.

To support that dialogue, on 21 September, ministers published an initial set of proposals that describe our ambition for significant and transformative change and act as a starting point for discussion to help to shape engagement over the coming months. Our starting point for the discussion is simple: we need to reform local governance, not to preserve existing structures for their own sake, but to deliver better services, stronger economies and better outcomes for communities. We want more local decision making, not more bureaucracy.

Adam Harley (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD): The minister mentioned the importance of local democracy and local accountability. Many of my constituents in East Dunbartonshire are concerned that they will be subsumed into a much greater Glasgow authority and that they will lose local accountability in the process. Can the minister assure them that that is not going to happen?

Ivan McKee: The work is about strengthening local communities and giving them more power to deal with issues locally. In the member's constituency and in constituencies across the country, local communities should look at the reform agenda as an opportunity to have more say in the issues that directly affect their everyday lives.

Scotland has councils that are, for the most part, too large to be truly local and too small to operate strategically at the scale that is now required. We are therefore proposing a model that is built around a smaller number of strategic regional authorities alongside a much larger number of

community authorities, which will be able to operate closer to specific communities. We propose to have bespoke arrangements for island communities. The principle is that strategic decisions such as those on economic development, housing, transport and long-term planning should be taken regionally, where appropriate, while decisions that affect everyday community life should be taken much closer to local people. As we have set out in our paper, the potential number and range of community and regional authorities that could be established is intended to be illustrative of the scale of change that the Government envisages.

Monica Lennon: On the point about giving communities more say, is the Government prepared to look again at its position on equal rights of appeal for the planning system?

Ivan McKee: The planning system is outside the scope of this work, but I am sure that my colleague the Minister for Public Finance would be happy to take that up and comment on it in her closing remarks.

The key point is that some decisions should be made closer to the community to reflect each community's needs. That includes decisions such as those on how our local environment can be protected and preserved, how our local history, arts, culture and heritage can be promoted and enjoyed, how high streets could be renewed and further developed, and how local services can best be designed and delivered to meet the needs and circumstances of the people who use and rely on them.

As I said, the proposals are a starting point for debate, not an end point. They are intended to start a discussion that I hope members will continue to contribute to openly and constructively. The proposals and dialogue build on work that was taken forward during the previous parliamentary session through the local governance review and the democracy matters engagement. We heard from more than 4,000 people across the two phases of engagement. The number of people who took part in that conversation and the strength of feeling that was expressed through that engagement are a reminder that accessibility, not apathy, is the issue with local democracy.

The upcoming period of dialogue is an opportunity to discuss how we can design future governance structures; how we can reinforce and scale up community support and democratic infrastructure to achieve an approach to public sector decision making that is more inclusive and responsive to what people want and need; and how we can achieve a democracy that is better able to anchor our towns, villages and neighbourhoods. It also means supporting the growth of a vibrant and robust civil society across Scotland.

Tools to enable participation, such as citizens assemblies and participatory budgeting, have shown their value in bringing down barriers to playing a meaningful role in Scotland's democracy.

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): If, under the new two-tier structure, councillors would be expected to serve on both bodies, what would that mean for the role of a local councillor? Would they, in effect, become full-time politicians? What would that mean for the resourcing of those positions?

Ivan McKee: As the First Minister has already indicated, that issue will need to be considered as part of the consultation and our current discussions. However, I absolutely recognise the point that Murdo Fraser makes.

In the previous parliamentary session, we supported the Electoral Reform Society and Fife Council to deliver a citizens assembly in Dunfermline to enable deliberation on the future of Scotland's newest city. That work brought together people from all walks of life to consider the issues and the bonds that bind them. The outcome was a robust and ambitious plan for Dunfermline, and I commend Fife Council for committing £5 million towards the delivery of the citizens assembly's recommendations.

For more than a decade, we have championed participatory budgeting as a mechanism for empowering communities to decide how public money should be spent. We have worked with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to support more than half a million people to engage in participatory budgeting processes relating to more than £750 million of local authority budgets.

Although there is more to do, Scotland can already point to significant progress in empowering communities. Backed by the provision of more than £3 million, our strengthening communities programme is supporting 83 community anchor organisations. The programme, which is now in its 14th year, has empowered hundreds of organisations across the country to become more sustainable and resilient.

We recognise that our local areas and democracies differ widely across Scotland, and we recognise the importance of supporting the development of thriving rural and island communities. Scotland's communities have achieved great things, and if we want to have public services that are preventative, person centred and sustainable, we must move power closer to communities and create systems and joined-up services that are more responsive to

local circumstances, more accountable to local people, and more effective and efficient.

Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP): I agree with the points that the cabinet secretary is making. A point that is continually made to me by my constituents about local government—I put on the record that I am a serving councillor—is that it is not just the structure of local government that is not working; in too many instances, the culture within local government is not working, either. Does the cabinet secretary accept that point? How does he see progress being made on that issue as we move through the programme?

Ivan McKee: I would need another 12 minutes to explain the importance of culture change as part of the public service reform agenda. However, the member can rest assured that there is clear recognition that a change in culture and in how people perceive these processes and the engagement and empowerment agenda is central and critical to the work that we are taking forward. We believe that the structural work can encourage and engender a culture change that is, in many cases, necessary.

This debate arrives at an important moment. The challenges that communities are facing are significant, but so, too, are the opportunities. That is why we published a proposal for reform of our democracy and the governance of our public services last week. As I have already outlined, these questions are not for Government alone but for local government, the wider public and third sectors, community organisations, businesses, civil society and communities themselves. This debate will help to spark the first discussions about those ideas and how they can renew our democracy and further empower communities.

I look forward to contributions from colleagues from across the chamber, representing their constituencies, and I look forward to a constructive discussion that can bring fresh thinking, energy and support for this important ambition.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I remind members that, should they wish to speak, they must press their request-to-speak button.

15:48

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): I wish to declare, from my entry in the register of members' interests, that I am a sitting councillor on Fife Council.

I want to first express to the chamber that Reform UK is serious about fixing our broken council system in Scotland. I assure the public that, where good ideas are presented, we will genuinely support them and that, where consultation is needed from a fresh perspective, we are more than happy to provide it. On that point, I am happy to take an intervention from the cabinet secretary if he will confirm whether the Government is willing to collaborate with Reform UK and whether it is willing to meet our representatives in the spirit of co-operation.

Ivan McKee: The First Minister has made clear the Government's position with regard to engaging with Reform UK.

Julie MacDougall: I thank the cabinet secretary for being willing to co-operate with us—is that what I am to understand?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): This is not a debate—it is an opportunity for the member to make her speech.

Julie MacDougall: Oh.

I have already done the cabinet secretary a favour and have begun my own consultation with all of Scotland's council chief executives. I am sure that he will welcome honest and genuine feedback from an unfiltered perspective. In response to a question that I put to him last week on this subject, he said that he would

"engage with everyone who has an input to make"—[*Official Report*, 22 September; c 12-13.]

on local government reform. I am sure that this would make his boss unhappy, but if he makes a serious commitment today to accept our olive branch and work with us to get this right, it is our constituents, third sector volunteers and the vulnerable people who rely on essential council services who will be very happy instead. I do not know about the cabinet secretary, but that sounds like a perfect trade-off to me. Unfortunately, his Government will have to build back a lot of trust with both the public and the councils that it has badly let down for many years.

Three years ago, the SNP promised Scottish councils a more collaborative approach when it came to policy making and funding, via the Verity house agreement. It took barely a year for the SNP to go back on its word. One of its biggest betrayals came when Humza Yousaf announced his infamous council tax freeze—not even in Parliament, but at his party's conference in 2024. That gimmick—which is what it was—was cynically designed for only one reason: to bribe the public into supporting his failing Government. However, all that ended up happening was that councils were bullied into becoming even more financially unstable and the SNP suffered one of its greatest defeats at the 2024 general election. That should tell us all one thing: that local government is too important to be the plaything of any political party. It must be taken seriously, and all of us in this chamber should play our part in

positively contributing to seriously reforming our broken council system.

Unfortunately, I do not think that we have got off to a good start, given the way that the Government has decided to approach today's debate. The fact that it has not lodged a motion for debate not only represents an immense disrespect to this Parliament, by depriving it of a key vote, but also clearly proves something that I said when we returned from the summer recess. [*Interruption.*] The SNP has no plan, no clue and no intention to be held accountable for its complete mismanagement of our public services. Given that the few proposals that it has come up with look like they were written by a student trying to crunch a last-minute deadline, it is no wonder that it wants to avoid accountability.

In the absence of a ministerial statement, a motion or an actual proposition by the Government on its vision for local government, all that I can do is ask some questions, which I hope the Government will answer in its closing speeches today.

My first question is, why now? The timing of these discussions is utterly bizarre. There was no indication in the SNP's 2026 manifesto that it would embark on local government reform of this scale. Anyone who has been elected as a councillor, who has worked in a council or who has simply been paying attention would know that these reforms have been badly needed for many years. [*Interruption.*]

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

Julie MacDougall: I suppose that the reason why this has taken everyone by surprise is that we have all become accustomed to decades of SNP neglect—not to mention the fact that we have council elections next year, which could leave councillors making long-term decisions for a local authority that may not even exist in a few years' time.

My next question is, why do we have just three months in which to consult with stakeholders? The Local Government Information Unit described those arrangements as unworkable and unreasonable if the Scottish Government itself does not have a clear aim of where the reforms are heading.

On top of that, where are the numbers? We have no estimated costs, no savings estimates and no timescale for when the reforms will be implemented. The Deputy First Minister's fob-offs and improvised responses at the weekend are simply not good enough.

David Barratt (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Julie MacDougall: COSLA vice-president Steven Heddle thinks that a decision of this scale cannot be made without knowing what it will cost and whether it will work. Will the Government confirm whether scaling back the number of local councils will result in any redundancies from existing council jobs?

David Barratt: Will the member take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Mr Barratt, please sit down. It is clear that the member is not willing to take an intervention.

Julie MacDougall: On that point, is the actual number of councils really being reduced? Replacing 32 councils with more than 100 new bodies does not seem like streamlining.

I could go on, but it is clear to see that the SNP Government's position on local government reform is nonsensical. If its track record is anything to go by, we cannot take anything that it says at face value. Although I want to remain optimistic, I do not believe that the SNP has the best intentions for genuine reform of local government.

Ivan McKee: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Julie MacDougall: I offered one earlier.

It will be yet another gimmick to give the illusion that the Government has any ideas at all. I assure the public and members that, where the SNP is failing, Reform UK is here to step up and provide a real alternative. I look forward to working with anyone who cares about our public services as much as we do.

15:55

Joe Fagan (South Scotland) (Lab): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a serving councillor.

Progressive public service reform has the potential to modernise our services and drive social change: earlier intervention to prevent failure demand, driving improvement through transformation and building prosperity to liberate services from the costs of poverty and inequality—changing services and changing lives. Across Scotland's councils of all parties, there are examples of innovation and change that the Government can learn from, such as South Lanarkshire's family support hubs, Edinburgh's construction skills pathway, East Ayrshire's net zero accelerator, and many more. Despite the fact that local government's share of the Scottish Government's budget is falling, councils keep stepping up, as do the public servants who sustain them.

They could do so much more with fairer funding, a focused Government and a coherent approach to reform: invest-to-save funds that match the scale of the challenge, the long-awaited power of general competence, the rolling back of ring fencing and an alternative to years of underfunding, which the Scottish Fiscal Commission forecasts will continue with a reduction of almost £500 million in the local government portfolio—more than in any other. The risks to Scotland's public service reform ambitions are an absence of investment, an absence of understanding and an absence of coherence.

When the council map of Scotland was redrawn in the 1970s, that followed an independent royal commission and years of evidence gathering and development to build democracies at both district and regional levels. When the map was redrawn again in the 1990s—not in such a dignified process—it still followed independent reports and years of development. It is simply not credible—COSLA says that it is disingenuous—to imagine that a three-month consultation is a basis on which the Government can remake Scotland's councils, given that it has still not even replaced the council tax after 19 years, and it is not credible to imagine that reorganisation will balance the books. In its evidence to the Public Service Reform Committee, SURF—Scotland's Regeneration Forum—said:

"we can find no published evidence of a … large-scale public sector reform initiative … which … lowered expenditure"

while simultaneously

"improving outcomes"

and performance in Scotland. I say candidly to the Government that that is the credibility gap at the heart of the reform agenda, and it is not the only one.

When this country had regional and district councils, those were distinct entities with their own mandates, yet the Scottish Government's proposal is that

"The same overall regional administrative or corporate structures would support both regional and community authorities."

Are the community authorities distinct legal entities? District councils certainly were. If those bodies share the same corporate structure, how can they be autonomous?

Ivan McKee: Shared services.

Joe Fagan: I do not think that that is a resolution to a point about different democratic mandates.

The Government's paper says—and this is welcome—that

"there are functions within existing public bodies which could be brought within the regional or local democratic sphere as part of this reform."

However, that is not what the Deputy First Minister said to the Press Association last week. She said:

"No, what we are promising is we will reform local government."

So, which is it?

The First Minister said that councillors who are elected in May will serve a five-year term, but could not tell us whether the councils to which they are elected will still exist at the end of that. The First Minister also said—and the minister repeated it today—that

"some of our councils are too small to be strategic and some are too big to be local."—[*Official Report*, 1 September 2026; c 32.]

That is not an unreasonable position. Is the Government prepared to name the councils that it has in mind? The SNP leader of Glasgow City Council—Scotland's largest council—has said that it is too small. The SNP leader of Clackmannanshire Council—Scotland's smallest council—says that it is big enough. Who is right?

That is not all that has been said about the reforms. Unison, the biggest local government trade union, told the Scottish Government that it cannot reform democracy "on the cheap", and it warns of confusing reform with cuts. COSLA is clear that structural change should be secondary to outcomes. It says that the Government's paper gives rise to more questions than answers. Alex Neil, a former health secretary in this Government, says that it is

"ill thought out nonsense ... No preparatory research has been done to provide the evidence as to what works and what doesn't. We are being 'governed' by a bunch of amateurs".

Graham Simpson: I thank my good friend Joe Fagan for taking the intervention. During his distinguished time as a council leader in South Lanarkshire, were there ever times when he thought, "Oh, I wish we could do things differently. I wish we could be bigger. I wish we could have more powers in this area or that"?

Joe Fagan: There were, indeed, and I will speak about them in a moment.

The most perceptive reaction to the proposals came from the Local Government Information Unit. It said:

"Reorganisation is complex, difficult and expensive. It consumes attention and energy for years, to the detriment of everything else councils should be doing."

It went on to say:

"Local government in Scotland deserves a serious conversation about transformation. This is not it."

That is a serious point.

It was Michael Chisholm of the University of Cambridge who put a final cost on the structural reorganisation of local government in the 1990s. He found that the gross transition cost of the 1996 reorganisation in Scotland was £400 million at 1996 prices. The same exercise would cost more than £800 million today. Whatever the merits of redrawing the municipal map of Scotland, the Government has to be realistic. Restructuring is expensive when a Government is pushing for efficiency, and it is an impediment to real reform happening now. With the local governance review, work is already under way to empower communities and strengthen community councils—a tier of governance entirely overlooked by the Government's proposals. Local government has pushed through years of delay for the power to democratise bus services and rebalance power, not just away from the centre but away from the market. We should back councils that want to build municipal power and wealth.

Councils in Forth Valley, Falkirk, Stirling and Clackmannanshire are embarking on a programme of transformation through collaboration. Island authorities are already the driving force behind work to develop a single-authority model of unified governance. The Glasgow city region has the strongest and most developed proposal to embed joint working and devolve economic levers to the regional level. In Scottish Labour, we say that a new generation of devolution deals can redistribute power, wealth and opportunity across the country, with skills policy aligned to regional growth.

The administrative map of Scotland will change eventually, but, if the Government's intention now is to improve outcomes and transform services, this is no way to do it. The proposals risk more centralisation, not less.

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): There is a whole lot about what Labour is against, as per usual, but does Labour have any idea what it would change? I am hearing that we are going too fast or too slow, but I am not hearing anything about what those guys would do.

Joe Fagan: That sums up exactly what the problem is on the part of the Scottish Government and its supporters. They conflate the urgent need to drive improvements through service reform and outcomes with profound changes to the way that Scotland is governed. That will impede public service reform.

The proposals risk more centralisation, not less. They will pull power further away from communities, not closer to them. Without investment in change, the proposals simply mean more cuts. We will work with the Scottish Government if it is prepared to follow the evidence and take the time to get this right, but we will not allow our municipalism, our localism and our regionalism to be co-opted by a Government that does not share those instincts. Defending local services and local democracy, and using the power of devolution to change people's lives, is our priority and it must be the priority for the Scottish Parliament.

16:04

Lorna Slater (Edinburgh Central) (Green): As a Parliament, we have a challenge before us. In the programme for government, the Scottish Government set out its aim of putting more power in the hands of people and communities, as part of comprehensive public service reform. The Scottish Greens share that aim, and we want this reform to succeed. Local government reform is the first part of that work, and the Scottish Greens will support a return to two-tier local government as a key outcome for this session of Parliament. The principle that the Government and COSLA have already signed up to in the Verity house agreement is "local by default", and it should run through every part of the programme for government.

Joe Fagan: Does Lorna Slater agree that local government should be partners in any proposals that are developed and that no top-down reorganisation should be imposed on Scotland's democratically elected local authorities?

Lorna Slater: As I understand it, the process will be one of co-design, and it is moving at pace, so councillors and COSLA will need to hop on board, as the Scottish Greens have done by preparing a paper on what we think should be on the table.

We want a genuinely empowered local tier that holds as many powers as possible alongside a smaller number of regional authorities that take on strategic functions such as transport, economic strategy and health and care integration. Catchment-level planning on deer and invasive species management, nature restoration and flooding should also be considered when designing the regional layer.

We expect that the balance will look different in different places. A city region and an island community need different models. Genuine empowerment starts with a general power of competence. The Macintosh commission recommended one for Scottish councils in 1999, and councils in England have operated safely with one since 2012. It would replace today's narrower power to advance wellbeing, which has left councils facing legal uncertainty.

We also need to extend decriminalised civil enforcement such as on parking and bus lanes to those councils that do not yet have it. We need to

review how Crown Estate seabed leasing revenue is shared so that coastal and island communities see more of the benefit from the waters around them. We also need to give councils stronger powers to use procurement to support local businesses so that more public money stays in local economies.

Any local government reform bill must include an enabling power so that the council tax can finally be replaced. Council funding must be sustainable and sufficient to support the new responsibilities. Putting more power in the hands of people and communities cannot begin and end with local government, though; it also needs to run through the wider reform of our public bodies.

The fact that Historic Environment Scotland is able to barricade off Radical Road in Holyrood park indefinitely without community engagement or consultation under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979 is an excellent example of our public bodies making decisions without the consent and support of the people and communities who are affected by those decisions. That kind of heavy-handed, top-down, backroom decision making may have been acceptable in 1979, but it is not acceptable in 2026.

If we have the opportunity to revisit how our public services and public bodies function, let us ensure that the principle of community empowerment is built into all of it. Communities should not only be consulted on decisions but be able to make them. That means a defined share of local budgets being allocated directly by residents through participatory budgeting, building on what many councils already do. It means a stronger, faster right for communities and local authorities to take on land and buildings, such as halls, parks and green spaces, when they want to run them themselves, or to bring empty homes back into use.

Overhauling the process for compulsory purchase orders and implementing powers for compulsory sales orders and compulsory lease orders must be part of the programme to give communities and local authorities the powers that they need to build and to tackle the unique problems that they face.

Continued work on community wealth building and supporting co-operative and democratic business models are also parts of the jigsaw of getting more power into the hands of people, and the Scottish Government would do well to consider how that can be incorporated into local government reform and general public sector and public service reform.

There is one more piece of infrastructure that this reform depends on, but we rarely talk about it: information about land. In 2014, ministers set a target of completing Scotland's land register by 2024. Registers of Scotland has made real progress since, but well over a third of Scotland's land is still not on it. It is surprisingly hard for a community group, business or council to find out who owns a piece of land and what is being done with it. Whatever shape local government takes, councils will not be able to levy the kind of carbon land tax that the Scottish Greens have proposed, deliver regional transport strategies effectively or do a dozen other things without that information. Accurate, accessible information on who owns and uses land is public service infrastructure and we should treat it that way. It should be a priority to make information about Scotland's land ownership and use public and easily available.

Reform on this scale does not come around often. The Scottish Greens want it done well, and done with communities rather than to them. We will judge every proposal against a simple test: does it put more power in the hands of people and communities, and does it improve public services? We will work constructively with the Government, and across the chamber, to ensure that the answer is yes.

16:10

Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con): This debate is an important opportunity to discuss the SNP's proposals for local government reform. If there are opportunities to improve services, reduce duplication and deliver better value for taxpayers, such proposals deserve consideration. The Scottish Conservatives have long called for public service reform and have proposed changes in our own manifesto, but good reform starts with a democratic mandate, a clear process and a credible plan. Unfortunately, what we have before us today lacks all three.

Replacing 32 councils with up to 10 regional and 160 community bodies was not presented to voters at May's election, and neither were detailed proposals for replacing NHS boards, which will impact local authorities through both integration joint boards and health and social care partnerships. John Swinney appears to be making up local government reform as he goes along, failing to give clear answers about his plans. Reorganising local government and the services that it provides is too important to be taken forward with half-baked measures, and certainly not as some manoeuvre to outflank Labour's talk of devolution in England or to bring in a national care service through the back door.

What concerns me even more is the process. For context, the 1975 reforms followed the three-year Wheatley inquiry and a further 20 months of consultation, while the 1994 reforms had eight months of consultation, yet the SNP now believes

that the future of local government can be determined in a three-month conversation. Will that genuinely shape policy, or is it just another tick-box exercise?

Before ministers start redrawing boundaries, however, they must address the real challenge that councils face, which is chronic underfunding. The Deputy First Minister was right to say on Sunday that everyone wants their local services to improve. However, I can tell her, having knocked on doors in Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Stirling and Wick in recent weeks, that not one person mentioned restructuring councils. All of them, without exception, spoke of a lack of funding, because councils' share of the Scottish budget has fallen in the past 15 years from 39 per cent to 32 per cent, while ring fencing on the Scottish Government's objectives has risen to 70 per cent. Audit Scotland and COSLA show that local authorities have been forced to make £5 billion of savings since 2010 and still face a funding gap of £500 million this year.

Alex Kerr: Would the member take any ownership over the decade of austerity that has hollowed out the budget of the Scottish Government and, consequently, local authorities for the past decade? Would he accept any responsibility for the current structures of local government, which are widely viewed as a Conservative attempt to gerrymander the local government boundaries?

Alexander Burnett: If some of those measures had not been taken, we would be facing considerably worse now.

Council tax has increased this year by an average of nearly 8 per cent, which is more than three times the rate of inflation, yet street cleaning has been reduced by 34 per cent and spending on culture and leisure has been reduced by 26 per cent. It is no wonder that Scotland is looking in such a sorry state and much-needed social activities are disappearing. We should be focusing on how councils have the funding to deliver services that their communities need.

That all leads to the question of how much this will all cost. I ask that because the previous local government changes would cost £556 million in today's money—an amount that is larger than the cuts that councils are facing this year, and a sum that would be better directed to front-line services.

There are equally serious questions about workforce planning. Public sector staff have worked under immense pressure for many years. Many might see prolonged restructuring as the right moment to leave public service altogether, so the Government must explain its retention policy for this skilled workforce.

There are also significant democratic concerns. Councillors could be asked to sit on both regional and community bodies, yet it is not clear how political representation and democratic mandates would operate in practice with regard to those bodies. Councillors are already carrying substantial workloads, and asking them to serve across multiple tiers risks creating more professional politicians, making it harder for people to stand for election. If this debate is truly about empowering communities, why is there so little discussion of community councils?

Graham Simpson: Will the member take an intervention?

Alexander Burnett: I will not—thank you.

Across Scotland, volunteers give up countless hours supporting local representation, resilience planning and civic engagement, and resourcing those grass-roots institutions deserves attention, yet a motion at the upcoming SNP conference proposes ending community councils.

The SNP has a terrible track record of reforming public services, but the Scottish Conservatives believe that there is a better approach, which we set out in our manifesto. Communities want efficient services, local representation and proper accountability. They do not want years of uncertainty, endless restructuring and additional layers of bureaucracy.

Lloyd Melville: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The member should be bringing his remarks to a close rather than taking interventions.

Alexander Burnett: We should focus on stabilising council finances and improving the funding formula. Instead of increasing central control, we should give councils greater budget freedom and trust local communities to make decisions about local priorities. Scotland needs better government, not bigger government.

16:16

David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): As I said to members last week, for as long as this Parliament has existed, it has failed—across the parties—to push power out of this building and into the rural communities that I serve, so I genuinely welcome the debate. It matters because a one-size-fits-all approach to policy simply does not work, and my constituents have lived that. It is important to put on the record the closure of the Inverness control room, ever more patients having to travel outwith the Highlands for care, and rural fire stations being off the run.

Let me be clear that these reforms must not become code for ever greater centralisation. The litmus test must be whether power and resources are genuinely moving closer to people. If ministers are serious about that, powers must move down from the Scottish Government as well as moving between councils. It worries me, as it did Joe Fagan, that when the Deputy First Minister was asked whether ministers would devolve any of their own powers, the answer was simply no.

For rural and island communities, I hope that the Parliament will agree that one model will not fit all. Distance, population sparsity and access to services create particular challenges. Island communities should be able to lead the design of their own arrangements, but the same principle should apply to rural communities on the mainland, too.

In particular, the Government will know that Highland Council and NHS Highland are currently conducting a joint statutory consultation regarding the Highland partnership integration scheme, which governs how local adult and children's health and social care services are managed. I am deeply concerned that these reforms cut right across that work, so I encourage the Government not only to address those concerns in the summation today but to do so in writing to both Highland Council and NHS Highland. I echo the points that Joe Fagan made earlier about other processes happening simultaneously in Scotland.

I also urge the Government to be careful about creating structures so large that decisions become further removed from the people who are affected by them. If we take the example of planning and housing, it cannot be right that decisions about major development in a community such as Wick could ultimately involve councils representing communities hundreds of miles away. Although there are shared issues in the Highlands, there are also unique challenges in Caithness and Sutherland, for example. Both counties continue to grapple with depopulation, while Inverness, which remains within the same local authority, is an area that has experienced incredible growth. What is defined as local must therefore be spelled out and tested before lines on a map are drawn.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP): As a member for an urban area, I would like to show common cause in relation to planning. In my constituency, there is a massive amount of purpose-built student accommodation, which could be seen as strategic on a regional basis but which completely undermines the sustainability of existing communities. I want there to be more clarity about which planning decisions are taken locally and which ones are taken regionally. It is not just a rural issue; it is an urban issue, too.

David Green: I am glad that the member has put that on the record. Similarly, I look forward to hearing that point addressed in the summation.

As one constituent put it to me, there is little point in devolving power without the ability to generate or retain revenue. The Liberal Democrats are eager to see the management of, and revenues from, Crown Estate Scotland assets devolved to local authorities, as Lorna Slater mentioned.

We are eager to see control over transport and other levers of economic growth devolved. On the one hand, that means a new model of regional transport partnerships that is responsive to local people and determines when buses should and should not run. On the other hand, it means being strategic about economic development, business support and skills. In a Highland context, that would mean asking questions of the University of the Highlands and Islands and of Highlands and Islands Enterprise.

In addition, we have raised important concerns in this place on many occasions about restoring local accountability for police and fire services.

Before I close, I must also say that the plans have been met with a great deal of concern and uncertainty by community councils in my constituency. The proposed community authorities would currently have no separate mandate, no budget of their own and no staff of their own. Indeed, if the plans mean councils sitting on two authorities, as Murdo Fraser mentioned, would that then spell the end of voluntary-run community councils? As one constituent, who is the chair of a community council, put it to me, that would strip away the last tier of local government that is untouched by party politics.

The principles are straightforward: the best decisions are made when local people are empowered to make them, and communities should have the powers and resources to shape their own futures. If the reforms do not deliver that, we will simply be changing the names on the door rather than genuinely transferring power. If the reforms do not deliver that, both my party and my constituents will remain sceptical about the Government's intent.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): We move to the open debate, in which each speaker will have five minutes.

16:22

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): When I heard that this debate was to take place, I almost felt sorry for the cabinet secretary and the minister. They either get accused of speaking from the top and telling people exactly what to do or, when they

have an open discussion about it, they get accused of not having any plans. However, I am going to take them at their word, and I have hunners of ideas to suggest.

I remember back in 1993, when the then Secretary of State for Scotland, Ian Lang, said that Renfrewshire was back. Of course Renfrewshire was not back; it was a construct of what Renfrewshire was prior to that.

I will say something that some members in the chamber might be surprised at. Those of us from the west of Scotland are not all Weegies. We might sound similar, but I do not hear it myself. I say this with great affection for those from Glasgow, but, when we talk about the west of Scotland, there is a tendency to look at Glasgow as the centre of everything, when we all know that Paisley is the actual centre of the universe. The serious point here is that Paisley is the fifth most populous area in Scotland.

Michelle Campbell (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP): I refer to my entry in the register of members' interests, in that I am a serving councillor in Renfrewshire. In 2025, Renfrewshire Council was announced as council of the year at the United Kingdom-wide Association for Public Service Excellence awards. It is large enough to be strategic but small enough to be local.

Does the member agree that, when these issues are being examined, it should be considered that a city is not required for a region that serves Renfrewshire?

George Adam: It is as though the member has read my speech already, Presiding Officer. I agree with that, given that Paisley is the fifth most populous area in Scotland, behind our four main cities. I used to say that Renfrewshire included the largest town, but my son told me, "That means nothing, Dad." Referring to it as the fifth most populous place in Scotland means a lot more.

That is important, because when we start reorganising local government, we need to remember that people do not necessarily see the world through the boundaries that we draw on a map. They identify with their town and their community. They know where they live, where their kids go to school, where they work, where they shop and where they get their services. That matters. If we are going to reform local government, we should start with a very simple question: what actually makes services work better for the people who use them? What actually works?

People do not wake up in the morning thinking about council structures. They care about whether their bins get emptied; they do not care about what logo is on the bin. They think about whether their child is getting the educational support that they need. They care about whether they can get to work and whether their town centre is somewhere where they actually want to spend time.

That brings me back to geography, because people in Paisley do not see themselves as living in an extension of Glasgow, nor do people in Renfrew. People in Johnstone, Barrhead, Greenock, Gourock, Port Glasgow and Eastwood certainly do not see themselves that way. Those are communities with their own histories, identities and economies.

We can see that from something as simple as football. St Mirren and Greenock Morton have a rivalry that can get fairly lively because they see each other as being from Renfrewshire. They play in the Renfrewshire cup—which, incidentally, St Mirren wins all the time.

Renfrewshire is real, not a construct. However, that rivalry tells us something: people identify with their communities. We do not need to pretend that identities do not exist in order to create effective regional government. We should build a new system around such identities.

The Scottish Government's current proposal is for a smaller number of regional authorities for strategic decision making. The proposal currently envisages six to 10 regional authorities and 120 to 160 community authorities for towns and districts, with decisions being taken closer to home. I agree with that direction and put forward Renfrewshire, with the similar towns that I already mentioned. I am not simply referring to the current Renfrewshire council area; I am referring to the historical geography of Renfrewshire, which broadly included what are now Renfrewshire, East Renfrewshire and Inverclyde. I am saying, "Make Renfrewshire great again", but I am not proposing that we turn back the clock. I propose that we look at whether the geography makes economic and service delivery sense in 2026.

We have so much in Renfrewshire and the wider county as it is. We have the advanced manufacturing innovation district Scotland in Glasgow airport. We have Greenock ocean terminal. We have Scotland's largest town. We have urban communities, coastal communities and the River Clyde. We have communities that need strength in order to work together to make things better for everyone.

Bigger government should not mean distant government. I have already said how we can break the larger Renfrewshire area down into its constituent parts—the towns and boroughs. I say to everyone in the chamber that, if we are really looking at these reforms, look at Renfrewshire. We do not need to be part of a greater Glasgow. I am

not being negative about Glasgow itself, and we can work with it on other things, but we do not need to become a city region. We already have Renfrewshire, which is an area that people identify with. Let us make Renfrewshire great again.

16:27

Emma Roddick (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): I have often said that a two-tier local government system is the way to go, but I admit to having been of the opinion that it was a post-independence job. I figured that we had enough layers of government as it is, and I took a view that SNP politicians are often criticised for: I thought, "We will get to that after independence."

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Am I right in thinking that in the previous parliamentary session, Emma Roddick called for local authority reform? Perhaps she was before her time.

Emma Roddick: My whips are on it today. I have been in favour of it for a long time, and in the previous parliamentary session, I was pulled up for my very strong opinions, which I am about to get into.

I am very excited that John Swinney now thinks that it will be possible to deliver local government reform pre-independence. I sincerely believe that, wherever that is the case, we should do what we can with the powers that we have. When announcing his intentions, our First Minister said:

> "some of our councils are too small to be strategic and some are too big to be local."—[*Official Report*, 1 September 2026; c 32.]

Nowhere fits the latter description like Highland Council, which is not only by far the largest local authority by land mass but the seventh largest by population, for which I cannot see a justification.

I have been a Highland councillor, and I appreciate that there are as many opinions on this issue as there are Highland councillors—74, incidentally—and many of my party colleagues in the area do not agree with my position. However, just as my being in this place and serving in the Government solidified my views on the necessity of independence, serving the Inverness Central ward made it very clear to me how much Inverness needs a city council.

I am not from Inverness but from the other side of the Kessock bridge. I grew up in Alness, where I was raised by a mother who was a Caley Thistle supporter, to the ire of some of our neighbours.

I became an Invernessian by choice, rather than by birth, although my football team seems to be a result of both nature and nurture, so I am not coming at this from a perspective of not caring about the rest of the Highlands, not understanding other council wards or having no stake in the success of our other Highland communities—I absolutely do. However, I do not think that the perennial parochial palaver that we go through in the Highlands best serves any of those communities.

Again in parallel to the national argument, that does not mean hating non-Inverness towns and villages or not working with the rest of the Highlands on shared priorities, and I think that a two-tier system would allow for that. Every community I know feels that too much power or support goes to "that place down the road"—in Papa Stour, Lerwick gets everything; in Barra, Uist gets everything; in Uist, Stornoway gets everything; and, in the Highlands, Inverness gets everything. As a result, we often see that the majority non-Inverness elected members deprive Inverness of investment and the attention that it deserves and that is normal for any city.

One of the worst examples of that is the allocation of Crown estate funds. Various allocation models were on the table at the Highland Council, and councillors voted through the model that ensured that Inverness received as little of the funds as possible, even when that meant less money going to their own wards.

Historic Environment Scotland invested a large sum of money into Inverness town house only for the council to then agree, this term, to move its offices out of the building, removing a key income stream for the Inverness common good fund. More recently, money was allocated through the city region deal to the Longman interchange before being reallocated to the Corran ferry, which is another project that irrefutably required investment, but it is frustratingly easy, from my point of view, for the council to agree that Inverness is where that funding should be moved from.

We could debate the ins and outs of those decisions and the factors that led to them, but there is a pattern and it is not, as constituents often used to complain to me, a pattern of Inverness getting everything. All investment has to be justified by promised ripple effects or is subject to last-minute reprioritisation; all events have to prove that they are benefiting the wider Highland communities; and all progress seems to come with an apology and a healthy dose of Inverness cringe.

Last year, a constituent was complaining to me about local recycling services. I pointed to recent investment in the Inverness waste transfer station and he of course said that Inverness gets everything. I pointed out that, in this case, we were talking about everyone else's rubbish. Eventually, he conceded that that was a fair point and that

maybe his village did not really want to be the destination of the Highlands waste.

I recently submitted a question for First Minister's question time that was not selected. I am not accusing the Presiding Officer of anti-Inverness sentiment, but I submitted the question because, that Monday, I read on the front page of *The Press and Journal* that Labour MP Torcuil Crichton was calling for Inverness to be cut out of future Highlands and Islands development plans. He said that Inverness should be carved out of plans to boost the Highlands. I am sure that that will go down well with his voters; it does not go down well with me, but it does helpfully make my case today.

What I would have put to the First Minister in the light of those comments is that serious consideration must be given to creating a new city council that would allow Inverness, like most other cities, to govern itself and take advantage of local opportunities—an argument that I am sure sounds very familiar to my SNP colleagues and an opportunity that I hope the cabinet secretary will take.

16:33

Katie Hagmann (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests, in that I am a serving councillor. Front-line essential services are what I think of when I think of local government, and I am incredibly proud that, for nine years, I have worked in and for local government. Yes, there have been challenges, but it has also been the most incredible privilege to advocate for and help those who need it the most, while simultaneously navigating strategic decisions, ensuring best value and delivering for my community.

I have seen the incredible results and life-changing opportunities that youth work has delivered. I have had influence in the delivery of improved waste and kerbside recycling and I have seen and supported community ambition through place planning and investment.

My experience does not just remain within my local authority. I have had the unique opportunity to sit in a national role. Appointed as spokesperson for resources, I have seen at first hand the wonderful diversity across our local councils and I have celebrated incredible achievements at the COSLA excellence awards, including seeing my own local team win a top award for our work on community asset transfers, levering in £27 million of external investment to the region.

I have also seen that local government and the Scottish Government can work really well together. In developing the local government fiscal framework, I heard directly from officials on both sides that the open and collaborative working was hugely beneficial and, importantly, helped to develop a deeper understanding of the challenges that were faced on both sides. Collaboration was key to success there, as it always is. I welcome the openness of the cabinet secretary's approach and the fact that the Government is entering the dialogue with an open mind. Importantly, I welcome the fact that COSLA supports ambitious reform.

Change can be unsettling and can lead to fear, and the unknown can be daunting. However, if we can agree to focus on the outcomes that we are seeking to deliver, that fear can be diminished. If we can agree to work in a genuinely collaborative way, trust can be built. If we can agree that people must come before structures, the foundations of empowering our communities and strengthening local democracy will be laid. I have seen from the Scottish Government a desire for intensive engagement with local government. How that has progressed is important. The structures in local government are for dialogue at a national level, but how we involve the more than 1,200 councillors across the country is another question.

Monica Lennon: Katie Hagmann has made important points about putting people before structures. Given the timescales that the Government has suggested, and knowing the barriers that many of our communities face, does she agree that more might have to be done to make sure that people can participate and have their say? The timescale sounds quite short.

Katie Hagmann: I agree that three months is a short timescale, but I think that that is the opening—I believe that it is the starter for this exciting opportunity.

I was just about to come on to the point that there will be an important role in the national dialogue for the workforce and for the third sector, our community partners and, of course, the public. Today, however, we are talking about that starting conversation, which is important to acknowledge.

It is also important, especially as we enter this period, to acknowledge and thank our local councillors. They are democratically elected, serving each and every day in and for our communities, and they are valued by us all. Furthermore, it is important to reiterate what has already been said: that anyone who is elected in May next year will serve their full five-year term. I hope that people are excited to stand for election to the role, and I especially encourage women to stand, as currently only 35 per cent of councillors are women.

Graham Simpson: I think that the member is a councillor in Dumfries and Galloway. Does she

have any thoughts on how things might change there? I am genuinely interested, because we have heard different views from members already.

Katie Hagmann: I am a serving councillor—there are many of us in the chamber today. There was a debate just last week at full council in Dumfries and Galloway, and all councillors were able to take that forward. A view has been established, and that will be captured and taken forward by the leader to further discussions via COSLA. Of course, there are other conversations, and the chief executive also has a responsibility to ensure, within those structures, that the views of all elected members are captured. I absolutely welcome that everybody should be able to feed into the process.

Although there are many benefits to working more strategically at a regional level, I am excited by what could be done at a local level. Ensuring that decisions are taken as close to the community as possible is an exciting opportunity. With some communities in remote rural areas already feeling disempowered, I am keen to ensure that that is addressed, especially across my constituency in Ayrshire and other areas of South Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Could the member come to a conclusion?

Katie Hagmann: I will.

We are entering a brave and bold space, but let us ensure that people, not structures, remain at the heart of the work. Let us commit to working collaboratively and with respect, and let us focus on the outcomes that we all want to achieve: a fair, healthy and modern local democracy, with community at the heart of all that we do, delivering for Scotland and her people.

16:40

Paul McLennan (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this debate. Before taking part, I spoke to the SNP group leader in East Lothian Council, Lyn Jardine, as well as to other councillors in East Lothian. I have also offered to speak to all councillors in East Lothian, no matter which party they represent.

The most important thing—this theme has come through in the debate—is that the conversation does not become primarily about structures or maps. It is not only about how many authorities there should be, where their boundaries might lie or which existing councils might sit together. Those questions will come, but they are not the starting point. Instead, the starting point must be to ask where power should sit, what strategic decisions will require strategic scale, what decisions are better taken closer to communities and whether reform will actually improve people's experiences of public services, which is what we are here to do. We must ask ourselves honestly whether we are genuinely moving power closer to people or simply moving administration from one structure to another.

I say that based on my experience of being a councillor for 15 years and a council leader, and I was also a community councillor for 10 years. From that experience, I know that being administratively closer to something is not the same thing as communities having greater influence over it. If community empowerment is genuinely at the core of reform, the test must be whether people will have more agency over the decisions that affect their lives and communities.

There is an important distinction between participation and representation that can sometimes get lost—they are not the same thing. We know who tends to participate; we hear from community councils, campaign groups, organised interest groups and those who have the time, confidence and knowledge to engage with council processes. Those voices matter, but they are not necessarily representative of the whole community.

Graham Simpson: To build on the point that was just made about people feeling empowered, is there a risk that creating several large regions could cause that feeling of empowerment to be lost?

Paul McLennan: The devil will be in the detail there. Strategically, we need to look into regions, but, locally, communities will be the crux of the matter. The consultation will consider that issue.

To return to the point about having a genuinely stronger local democracy, we should be better at hearing people who do not normally participate. That includes people who experience poverty or inequality, people who have caring responsibilities, people who work several jobs, younger people or people who have simply stopped believing that engaging makes any difference—we all saw that to a certain degree during the election.

So often, people who have the least opportunity to participate are among those who are the most affected by decisions about public services. That is where the roles of elected councillors and MSPs remain vital. A councillor represents a whole ward and carries a responsibility beyond it, including to those who never attend a meeting, complete a consultation or contact us as councillors or MSPs. Representative democracy and participative democracy should not be considered as alternatives; done properly, they strengthen each other.

We also need to think carefully about place. Emma Roddick spoke about Inverness, and I will talk a bit about East Lothian, which is a good example of why place matters. Musselburgh, Tranent, Haddington, North Berwick, Dunbar and all our rural communities have distinct identities, circumstances and priorities. There may well be functions, such as economic development, infrastructure or other services, for which operating across a larger regional footprint will give greater strategic capacity. However, there must be genuine localism on the other side of that bargain. If decisions move upwards for strategic reasons without other meaningful decisions moving downwards towards communities, people could experience reform as government becoming more remote rather than less.

There is a strong connection with the wider agenda of public service reform and prevention. People do not live their lives according to the organisational structures that we have created. Someone does not wake up with a housing problem on Monday, an employability problem on Tuesday, a health problem on Wednesday and a family-support problem on Thursday; those problems all interact. If reform will enable us to organise more services around people and places rather than institutions and organisational boundaries, that will create much better opportunities for prevention and earlier intervention.

That is where the issue becomes more than a local government restructuring exercise, because accountability must also come with capacity. There is little democratic benefit in making somebody locally accountable for a decision if they do not have access to the people, expertise or resources that are required to do anything—we heard from the minister on that point.

The proposal that regional corporate structures could support both regional and community authorities are therefore important. That will potentially allow us to gain strategic capacity without recreating a complete bureaucracy at community level.

We should be confident that the proposals are not finished. That is not a weakness. The engagement will be ongoing. If we are talking about strengthening democracy and community empowerment, it would be contradictory for Government to announce a final structure before communities, councillors, public bodies and the third sector had properly shaped it. We heard from Ivan McKee how important that is.

The engagement phase must be substantive and it must not involve consultation on a predetermined answer. It is important that councillors' voices are heard in that process, because they sit at the point where representative democracy, communities and public service delivery already meet. That principle applies whether we are talking about a country, a community or an individual. Self-determination ultimately means having agency.

If I was to boil the matter down to one thought, it would be that the success of the reform will ultimately be measured not by how many authorities Scotland has but by whether people feel that they have more agency over their communities, whether services respond better to their lives and whether they know who is accountable when services do not respond in that way. That is the test that we should set ourselves.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): We have a very quiet chamber today, so I ask members who are having conversations across the chamber to take them to the back or out of the room.

16:46

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I think that most people will judge changes to local government in a very simple way. They are going to ask, "Will this make things better where I live?" When somebody contacts my office about a pothole, a library that they are worried will close, a day service that their disabled family member relies on, or sheltered housing closures affecting someone that they love, they are not thinking about types or structures of government—they just want it sorted, and they want their service delivered.

We have to be honest about how disillusioned people are and how far that has impacted our local communities. I have heard that on the doorsteps when I have been out campaigning. I was previously a councillor but, as an MSP, a lot of my casework is still council focused. As MSP for Banffshire and Buchan Coast, I see that local knowledge matters but that we also need a wider strategic view.

Nine data zones in Aberdeenshire are included in the most deprived 20 per cent in Scotland, and every one of them is in Fraserburgh or Peterhead. The Banff and Buchan area accounts for about 48 per cent of children and young people living in poverty across Aberdeenshire. Aberdeenshire also has 149 data zones in Scotland's most deprived 20 per cent for access to services. When we cross into Moray, we see that Buckie central east is one of only two local outcome improvement priority areas.

We should consider those figures alongside what communities have had to fight for. There have been changes to sheltered housing. Day opportunities for people with learning disabilities

have been affected. Communities have been fighting for their libraries. Street lighting columns have been removed or chopped in half just to make savings, with local councillors warning that some areas could be left in complete darkness. For a woman walking home at night, or for an older person or somebody who is vulnerable, that is not just a saving on a spreadsheet; it changes how safe their community feels to them.

I have been critical of both Aberdeenshire and Moray Councils when I think that my constituents are being let down. However, we now have a chance to ask a bigger question: where is the structure poor, and where could we do something radically better? The Government has made it clear that the local government reform proposals are a starting point and that today's debate is part of a wider national conversation. I welcome that, because some decisions need a wider strategic view while others should sit closer to the people who are affected by them.

Our school communities are worth looking at. Our academies and their cluster primaries already connect families across towns, villages and rural areas. People know those communities and they grow around children, parents and relationships that already exist. I am not saying that every boundary should follow a school cluster, but if we are asking what a real community looks like, why would we not start with places that people already know and belong to?

Whatever shape we end up with, I do not want my communities to be empowered in name only. I want them to have a meaningful voice and a fair share of the resources that are needed to deliver change. When resourcing more localised Government structures, I ask that we look at needs, not just at the population on a map. We need to look at deprivation, public transport and access to services. Areas with greater needs should not have to fight harder for less.

For me, it is clear that power should sit with those who live in the area. I do not just mean local government; I support Scottish independence for the same reason. I want Scotland to have the full powers of an independent country because prevention is better than cure. I am glad that the Government wants public services to focus more on outcomes and vital prevention work. That is exactly the lens that I would hope to be using. We have to stop waiting until people reach crisis point and then we end up spending more to try to put things back together. Our councils should be part of preventing that crisis by working with schools, health services, the third sector and communities. This cannot just be another mapping exercise or another corporate structure that people feel distant from.

Joe Fagan: Does the member think that reorganisation at this point will help or hinder the vital work to shift towards prevention, which we are happy to work with the Government on?

Karen Adam: Reorganisation would be beneficial; we need to change the structure. Having spoken to my constituents on the doorstep, I know that they are really fed up and they do not see that the current structures serve them. We have a duty to listen to calls from our constituents and to see where we can work together to provide for them and serve them.

This is a chance to help to make local government feel local by putting valuable resources closer to targeted needs. It is a chance to let the communities of Scotland, such as mine in Banffshire and Buchan Coast, see as well as feel the difference. I, for one, am excited about the possibilities and I have hope that we will put humanity at the heart of it all.

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

16:52

David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): I start with reflections from members across the chamber about the timing and pace of the reforms. The three-month time period gives me a lot of cause for nervousness and concern. I do not have faith that we will be able to deliver at the scale that is required, or that we can properly involve communities across Scotland, which all operate at a different pace and scale.

I agree with Joe Fagan about the history of previous restructuring programmes, which have involved independent commissions. I recognise how difficult it will be to ensure that everyone is adequately heard. I know that Alexander Burnett made similar comments to that effect. I seek the Government's assurances on that. If it is not able to reach some consensus by the end of the year, we need to think about pushing the process further down the track.

I echo some of Monica Lennon's comments about our 20,000 public sector workers and the concerns that have been raised by trade unions. I am glad that she put those on the record. Many of those workers will be looking for assurances from the Government.

Lorna Slater and the Greens made a number of points and suggestions for local government reform. They spoke about devolving aspects of wellbeing and procurement, and I commend the points that were made about council tax. I welcome their contribution and there was a lot of shared territory, but I struggle to see how we will be able to co-design effectively in three months. I

am sure that we will have more conversations to that effect.

I enjoyed the contributions from Government back benchers. Mr Paisley—George Adam—said, "Let's make Renfrewshire great again", but I did not realise that it was not great any more. As I come from a rural constituency, I appreciated the perspective that he put on the record.

Emma Roddick and I are both Highland MSPs. We disagree on serious issues, not least that I am a Ross County fan and she is a Inverness Caledonian Thistle fan. Although we have different perspectives on Inverness and her calls for its independence, the independent-minded nature of her contribution was helpful. I welcome the opportunity to engage with her further so that we can find some common ground for our part of the world.

Emma Roddick: Can I just clarify that the member is supporting said call for independence for Inverness?

David Green: I think that there are a lot of opportunities to pool and share resources. The communities that I represent in Caithness and Sutherland are looking for more control of their own areas. I welcome people in Inverness having more of a say in theirs, too.

A number of points have been made in the debate by Government back-bench members about ensuring that people are put before structures, and I would certainly welcome that happening. I have some serious concerns about points that have been raised by others about the funding settlement and the lack of clarity around it. We are having this debate in a vacuum, and until we get a bit of clarity on those issues, I do not think that we will be able to find consensus.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I advise members that we have no time in hand. Interventions will have to be absorbed within the speaker's allocated time.

16:55

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Like David Green, I think that this has been a really interesting debate and I have enjoyed a lot of the contributions. Emma Roddick made a very interesting contribution about the situation in the Highlands. It is clear that there is a lot of interest in how we restructure local government to make it work better and ensure that communities are better represented.

The difficulty with all this, which we have heard about throughout the debate, is the timescale in which we are being asked to reach conclusions. We are now nearly a month on from a bombshell being dropped in the programme for government, where the Scottish Government came up with the idea of there being, potentially, as few as six super-regional councils and as many as 160 community authorities.

Jackie Dunbar: The member points to the timescale. What timescale does he think would be acceptable?

Murdo Fraser: The point that I am going to make is that we are already a month into the three-month period. In effect, we have nine weeks left to draw up a detailed blueprint to reform local government in Scotland. I just do not think that that is possible in nine weeks, even if we just had to deal with all the issues that we have heard discussed in the chamber over the past couple of hours.

David Barratt: I appreciate the member taking my intervention; I know that he is strapped for time.

Fife Council, where I am a councillor, is the third-largest local authority, and too many decisions are being made in Glenrothes. Fife already has seven area committees making decisions on transport budgets, grounds maintenance and, previously, on planning. Are those committees not a template for community authorities, and is that therefore not an opportunity to be grasped? I am certain that the member's colleague Councillor Dempsey, as convener of one of those committees, would agree.

Murdo Fraser: I do not disagree with anything that Mr Barratt said, and what is happening in Fife makes a lot of sense. Of course, what people in Fife are worried about in these proposals is being absorbed into a bigger region, such as one that includes Edinburgh, in which decisions that affect Fife are taken in Edinburgh. That is why the proposals need more consideration.

That takes us back to the basic point that I am trying to make: we have nine weeks to redraw the entire map of local government in Scotland. My colleague Alex Burnett described the SNP's plans as "half-baked", and I think he was being generous. Never mind the proposals being half-baked—the SNP has not even turned the oven on yet.

There has been opposition, as one would expect. There is opposition from COSLA, as we have heard. Just last week, at an emergency meeting at Perth and Kinross Council, a joint Conservative-Labour motion was agreed that condemned the SNP's proposals. It is striking in its wording, arguing that local decisions should be made as close to the residents as possible, and saying that the Scottish Government's proposals could mean that decisions on core issues such as education, housing and social care would be likely

to be made further away from the people who are affected by them.

The big concern in Perth and Kinross is that it ends up getting lumped in with the city of Dundee, when the two communities historically have had very little in common, and that Perth and Kinross will be overwhelmed by decisions being taken in Dundee rather than in a more rural area.

The motion also criticises the Scottish Government for underfunding local authorities since 2007, and health and social care partnerships. It notes the huge disruption that local government reorganisation would cause, plus the costs involved. It goes on to condemn the Scottish Government for not engaging in meaningful consultation with councils, saying that the Government's approach is "impractical and disrespectful".

What is interesting is that the motion was agreed by the council unanimously. Each and every one of the SNP councillors, who are part of the minority administration in Perth and Kinross, agreed to it. That is in the First Minister's own backyard, and it is his own local councillors who are using such strident language. It must be deeply humiliating for him that that is happening in Perth and Kinross.

Further, what is happening in Perth and Kinross—where people are concerned about being absorbed into a greater Dundee—is reflected elsewhere. We have heard some of that in the debate this afternoon. Large rural areas such as the Borders do not want to be absorbed into Edinburgh. We heard from Adam Harley that his constituents in East Dunbartonshire do not necessarily want to be absorbed into Glasgow. There are similar concerns elsewhere.

I know that I am short on time, but I want to make one more point about money. We know that public service reform has to deliver cost savings. However, we have had nothing from the Government about what cost savings might be delivered from this; indeed, creating whole new structures and going through a whole process of reform is likely to cost more money, at least in the short term. We need to get some figures attached to all this.

We are not against change. We think that there is appetite for reform, if it brings decisions closer to the people. However, we need proper time to discuss these issues.

17:01

Kristopher Leask (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I declare an interest as a member of Orkney Islands Council. It is that experience that shapes how I approach this debate.

In conversations with councils, community groups and public bodies across the Highlands and Islands and beyond, I have heard a common message: we need to give communities real power over the services and decisions that affect them.

I come to the debate from a perhaps unusual position, as a member of an islands council. In many ways, island authorities already operate in a way that looks closer to what our Scandinavian neighbours do. They are rooted in place, close to communities and responsible for a wide range of local services, be they ferries and airfields or quarries and community infrastructure. With the work ahead of us, we have an opportunity to build on that even further.

The Scottish Greens believe that Scotland should move towards a model that gives every community more local power and responsibility. David Green and Emma Roddick made good points in making the case for that. Of the places that I have been, nowhere was there more of an appetite for localism and greater autonomy and decision making than in Caithness.

I am pleased that the Minister for Public Finance, Hannah Mary Goodlad, will close the debate, as I believe that we share a vision for empowering communities to act, as we see in our communities of Orkney and Shetland. I look forward to continuing to work on that agenda with her, the cabinet secretary and the DFM.

Too often, as a councillor, I have seen the public sector working at odds with itself. National legislation, statutory duties and separate public bodies can interfere in ways that make it harder, not easier, to respond to local need. Councils are then left trying to join the pieces together through clunky multi-partner projects or community planning partnerships that, if we are honest with ourselves, have not delivered on the ambition in the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. Their role too often goes beyond simply convening. Increasingly, councils are asked to fill gaps when other public bodies are scaling back. That is neither sustainable nor fair to communities or to local government.

Likewise, having sat on the Highlands and Islands Regional Economic Partnership for two years, I know at first hand that that model is not how we drive forward regional economic strategy. Alongside lots of great people doing good work, we tried to make progress in relation to the substance of that model. However, that experience has led me to firmly believe that we need regional governments that are empowered to drive forward regional economic strategy. We also need local government that is laser focused on local needs, local high streets and local opportunities.

We must also look honestly at community councils. As the cabinet secretary mentioned, which I welcome, community development trusts can bring people together around benefit funds, buildings, assets, projects and local priorities. They deliver change, draw in funding and take direct action. By contrast, too many community councils are burdened by statutory consultation, inconsistent support and a quasi-official role that I have seen disempower rather than empower.

If we want people to feel agency, participation must be meaningful and lead to outcomes. This Parliament must deliver real, lasting empowerment for local places and local government. That must also mean sustainably funded councils, drawing from a more diverse range of sources, including a long-overdue replacement for the council tax.

Budgets, too, must become less dependent on annual decisions made in Edinburgh and London. The need is urgent and clear. Councils across Scotland face financial pressures so severe that the savings required on paper simply cannot be found without a transformational scaling back of public services, which we cannot allow to happen.

We must also respond to the loss of public confidence. The Scottish Government statistics on that, which were published on 17 September, were alarming. Fewer than 40 per cent of respondents thought that their council provided high-quality services, and fewer than 30 per cent thought that their council was addressing the key issues that affect the quality of life in their local neighbourhood.

That is a case not for lambasting councils but for honesty. Councils are delivering more complex services and meeting rising demand under tighter financial conditions. They cannot keep absorbing pressures without serious consequences for services and communities. What we see locally is not a sudden collapse in quality but the cumulative effect of 15 years or more of financial pressure on councils and on the Scottish Government. The situation was never sustainable. The question was only when the limit would be reached. That limit is no longer on the horizon but squarely in front of us.

Even more worrying is the lack of confidence that engagement in local democracy makes a difference. The same Government statistics found that only slightly more than a third of respondents said that they would like to be more involved in council decisions that affect their local area. What is deeply worrying is that only 17 per cent felt that they could influence decisions that affect their local area. Paul McLennan made a good point on participation versus representation.

That should sound alarm bells for us. If only 17 per cent of people feel that they can influence local decisions, local democracy is not working as it should.

Ivan McKee: I reinforce that point. To those who say that there is no need for change, does that not in and of itself absolutely demonstrate, apart from anything else, the need for urgent change?

Kristopher Leask: I agree. That is why I am glad that we are engaged in the process together, so that we can chart how we reinvigorate that faith in local democracy and local agency.

True local democracy must mean shifting power, resources and responsibility closer to people, and trusting communities to shape the places in which they live. Our task is clear: to move decisions about those services as close as possible to the communities that are affected by them, so that local people can shape the services that they rely on. For that to be successful, we must reform local government funding, support community-led organisations and consider how to take a disparate public sector into a more locally democratically accountable space.

If we are serious about empowering communities, we must also be serious about empowering local government. We cannot ask communities to take responsibility while stripping away the tools, funding and confidence that are needed to act. Scotland needs a more local, more democratic and more trusted system of local government. That is the work that we must take forward together.

17:07

Monica Lennon (Glasgow) (Lab): The cabinet secretary opened the debate by underlining the critical importance of empowering communities across Scotland. I think that we can all agree on that aspiration. He then rhymed off almost a wish list of what he wants for communities—that they are strengthened and empowered, have more say, and are sustainable and more resilient—I may have missed out a few things. Again, I think that we can all agree that those things are important.

However, today's conversation is about how we map the route—how we get there. I do not say that we all have the same vision, because I am not sure that we have. However, I think that there is a lot of agreement across parties that we all want the best for our communities. That is a good place to start in any discussion.

It is also really important that we make sure that the good intentions that we have heard about today are not lost in the process. I have heard colleagues including Katie Hagmann say that it has to be about people before structures, and my colleague Joe Fagan opened the debate for Scottish Labour by talking about changing

services to change lives. If we want the process to be truly person centred—which was also on Ivan McKee's wish list—we have to make sure that as many people as possible can be part of the conversation.

That is why I tried to intervene on George Adam, although he was very excited and in full flow—because he touched on something really important about his constituents who are going about their business, living busy lives, being worried about their children and having a lot of stress.

It is a genuine question: how do we make sure that people can genuinely participate in the process? As Murdo Fraser said, we have only nine weeks left, and I imagine that people will start to prepare for Christmas. How do we make sure that we are not just an elite bunch of serving and former councillors who are all very passionate about this? I include myself in that exclusive club.

How do we ensure that our constituents hear about those conversations and can be part of them? It will not be any surprise to colleagues that, for Scottish Labour, it is about ensuring that there is the correct funding and investment in our communities. We want to improve lives, we want fair work for all our workers across local government and public services and we want vibrant communities.

However, genuine concerns have been raised. Alexander Burnett warned against a tick-box exercise, while we heard from David Green that our communities are all very different, so we have to ensure that we do not end up with a one-size-fits-all approach. I was going to intervene on Mr Green and ask if we are going to get a referendum for Inverness, but maybe I will just not bother asking about that.

What does modern local democracy look like? We are hearing that, in many of our communities, people feel disillusioned and frustrated. Karen Adam touched on that. I wrote it down somewhere—perhaps Karen Adam will remind me, but I think that her question was, "Does it make it better where I live?" That is the fundamental question. I see that the minister agrees, so perhaps we will hear more about that in the closing speech. We can debate structures, process and who gets to decide, but, at the end of the day, there is a lot that we need to improve for people where they live.

I will set out one of my frustrations since leaving local government. Initially, I worked for the council, then I became a local councillor. I was in Parliament for 10 years—although I have had a break—and, when I sat in committees, I often heard about excellent practice and good achievements, but when other MSPs and I asked councillors and council officials, "Why is that not happening elsewhere?", the response was often that they did not have time to share it. There was no capacity to cascade that learning. How, then, do we build capacity and more resilient communities?

Over the coming weeks and, hopefully, months, I want to hear more from the Government about how reform will reduce child poverty. How will it reduce inequality and tackle the housing emergency? How will it combat drug and alcohol deaths and make our communities safer? Those are the things that people really care about.

What we have heard today from MSPs is a real connection with our communities—we all have that passion. I was surprised to learn that SNP colleagues are very excited about this agenda. I would gently say to them, "Where is the excitement about council tax reform?", because that comes up on the doorsteps and was a flagship policy of the SNP almost 20 years ago. It would be good to channel the excitement that we have heard today into discussions about council tax reform, because, for too many years, that issue has been in the "too difficult" box. A few colleagues at the back are looking at me in disbelief. If they want to intervene, I am happy to take an intervention.

Alex Kerr: What should the cabinet secretary—or the minister—take note of to avoid, given that the Labour Government's local government review in England had to be shelved because it was so shambolic?

Monica Lennon: The most important thing is to listen to our communities. That is why I want the debate to leave the chamber, get into communities and look honestly at where our services are threadbare. Alex Kerr knows, because he is my MSP, that we are relying on volunteers in the third sector to fill in the gaps. We have to be honest about funding.

I close by referring to Roz Foyer, the general secretary of the STUC, who warned that reform

> "must not be a mere smokescreen for brutal cuts cosplaying as progress. Real progress means ending the £3 billion outsourcing within the public sector, delivering sectoral bargaining within social care and properly funding our public services through progressive taxation that builds, not bulldozes, our local government and public services."

That is a good note to end on. I hope that we can all find a way forward, but, if we want real progress, let us get the debate out of this chamber and into our communities.

17:14

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): I have really enjoyed the debate. Perhaps because there is nothing to

vote on at the end, members have felt freer to give their own opinions, which has been refreshing.

I thank Monica Lennon for reminding us that the consultation will end at the end of December. I was reflecting—in fact, I was sniggering to myself—that perhaps it would be Ivan McKee's Christmas present to the nation, when he finally wields his axe on councils, but it might be the sort of present that people want to hand back.

I hope that Mr McKee will reflect on the tone of the debate. Several members have said that the three-month consultation period is too short, including members of his own party. After the programme for government—

Jackie Dunbar: Will the member take an intervention?

Graham Simpson: Yes, of course.

Jackie Dunbar: This is a genuine question, which Murdo Fraser did not answer earlier. How long should the consultation be for if three months is not long enough? That is not a party-political question; it is a genuine question.

Graham Simpson: I thank Jackie Dunbar for her intervention. The issue should not be party political, as we have seen in today's debate. The cabinet secretary ought to reach out to all parties. I know that he does not want to speak to Reform, but my hand of friendship is constantly extended to Mr McKee, and he knows that.

In answer to the question, I feel that three months is too short. The most recent reorganisation took five years, so three months is too short.

Ivan McKee: Give us a number.

Graham Simpson: I am not going to put a number on it.

The First Minister told us that

"some of our councils are too small to be strategic and some are too big to be local."—[*Official Report*, 1 September 2026; c 32.]

He did not say which councils fit into which category, but Mr McKee, the man tasked with wielding the axe to the behemoths of the public sector, said that

"practically all local authorities—there are some exceptions—fit into both categories."—[*Official Report, Social Justice, Housing and Local Government Committee*, 16 September 2026; c 45.]

Presiding Officer, if that leaves you more confused than ever, you are not alone.

So, we had a vague proposal for reform of local government but no idea what the Government's thinking was, until last week when it told us as an opening gambit that we could have a smaller number, between six and 10, of regional councils, and a substantial number—120 to 160—of community authorities focused on local decision making, whatever that means. It also said:

"While there may be a general model in most cases, recognising their unique status and needs, our proposition is that this would sit alongside bespoke solutions for island communities."

Needless to say, Scotland's existing 32 councils are extremely sceptical. Joe Fagan made the excellent point that councils are already co-operating across boundaries. They work together—that is happening.

The previous reorganisation in 1996, under the Major Government, when Scotland's powerful regional authorities were broken up, was a political decision. This also feels like a political decision. The previous reorganisation took five years from first consulting on it to delivery, which begs the question, what is the rush here? The three-month consultation feels rather hasty.

Joe Fagan: I wonder about two things. First, did Graham Simpson also receive the very nice letter that I did from the cabinet secretary and the Minister for Public Finance asking us to share our ideas with them about community empowerment?

Secondly, on the exact point that he has just made, does he think that it is worth taking our time on reorganising the map, because there is a much greater urgency around the need to reform the actual services that are provided?

Graham Simpson: I have not received any such letter. I never receive any letters from the Government these days.

Members: Aw.

Graham Simpson: Joe Fagan knows that I am full of helpful ideas. If only my good friend Mr McKee would talk to me more than he does at the moment. He could repent, and perhaps we will get somewhere with this agenda.

Funding is the big issue facing councils, not how big or small they are. My view of my own council, South Lanarkshire Council, is shaped by a few basics. Do the bins get emptied? They do. Are the streets cleaned? Mostly, although littering is a problem. Are the roads and pavements in good nick? No, but some parts of Scotland are a lot worse. Are the schools good? Generally. Do our town centres need help? Yes, they do.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Graham Simpson: I will, if the Presiding Officer will give me the time back.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): A very quick intervention and a very quick answer, please.

Keith Brown: Will the member correct the record? The process never took five years—it started in 1992, and the councillors were all elected by 1996. We had councillors who served on three different bodies at the same time, despite what Alexander Burnett said. Last time, the process was about gerrymandering—the creation of East Renfrewshire and Stirling councils was about trying to create Tory enclaves.

Here is the main point: the member has just mentioned funding. Is he going to break the record of what he did as a Tory MSP and actually vote to give more money to local government in the budget? Is he going to bring that forward?

Graham Simpson: Do you know what? I would love to see more money for local government, but local government has, ever since my time as a councillor, year after year, had to make cuts as a result of budgets that Keith Brown—disgracefully—voted for.

Let us not kid ourselves that any new structures will bring decision making closer to the people. That is not how local government works. Power rests with unelected officials, and woe betide you if you criticise them—that will not change. I can also pretty much guarantee that the change will not save money—it will cost money, as Alexander Burnett pointed out, and I think that Ivan McKee knows that.

Ministers should take heed of the fact that the European Charter of Local Self-Government (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2026 comes into force next month. Article 5 of the European charter of local self-government, on "Protection of local authority boundaries", states:

> "Changes in local authority boundaries shall not be made without prior consultation of the local communities concerned, possibly by means of a referendum where this is permitted by statute."

Maybe Inverness will get its wish—the Government is keen on calling for referendums when it suits, and here could be its big chance to offer referendums across the country. Let us see what Mr McKee has to say about that.

I will end where I started. What is this process all about? What is it for? I do not think that we have really answered that today. Until Mr McKee does so, he needs to take a bit longer and consider it more.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I call the minister, Hannah Mary Goodlad, to wind up the debate.

17:22

The Minister for Public Finance (Hannah Mary Goodlad): The phrase, "Too small to be strategic and too large to be local", is one that we hear again and again. It is short, simple, effective and spot on.

The Highland Council area is the size of Belgium. The island of Barra is run by councillors six isles to the north. From the mountain village of Crianlarich, you can climb the Munros and look over to the wild Atlantic foam, and yet it is governed by a council that is almost lapped by the North Sea. Leith, which could be one of the largest towns in Scotland, is just another part of the City of Edinburgh Council area.

I think that we can do better—I know that we can. From today's debate, it is clear that there is agreement around the chamber that we can do better. I thank every member who has contributed this afternoon. The discussions that we have had have moved the conversation forward, and we are keen to see more of that.

As Monica Lennon rightly said, it must become a national conversation—a conversation that gets folks excited and engaged about what local democracy could look like; who represents them at a local and regional level; what local democracy means for the place that they call home; and where decisions are made.

Lorna Slater of the Greens made a really good point in her contribution: reform like this does not come around often, so we should grab hold of it with both hands.

There will be different needs for different communities across the country. The Borders are different from the west coast, the islands are different from the north-east, and the central belt is a different beast in and of itself. There will be different needs and different requirements right across the country, because this is about a consultation process and the starting of negotiations to take this work forward.

Jackie Dunbar: Will the minister take an intervention?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: Certainly.

Jackie Dunbar: I hope that this will be a case of third time lucky. Earlier, I put this question to members who said that three months was not long enough for the consultation. Has anyone been in touch with the minister to suggest how long the consultation should be?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: I really commend Jackie Dunbar's tenacity in pursuing the issue, because it is the third time that she has asked the question. It is indeed the case that we have not heard how long the consultation should be.

Certainly, from my experience in the world of business, a quarter of a year is fairly enough time to get things going. This is the start of a consultation period that will lay the blueprint and the foundation, and then we will continue to hold conversations and dialogue post-Christmas.

Monica Lennon: The minister will have heard today that people want reassurance that communities will be able to participate. Some experience more barriers than others, so the issue is not so much about how many weeks the consultation lasts for, but about how we open the doors to everyone. If this is a starting point, will those further conversations be part of the formal consultation? COSLA is saying that it wants us to follow the evidence.

Hannah Mary Goodlad: When we come to talk about evidence, I have a number of stats, which my colleague Kristopher Leask outlined well. Seventeen per cent of our communities across Scotland feel that they can influence decisions—that is simply not good enough. When we were having the conversation with Bjørnar Selnes Skjæran, the minister for local government in Norway, it was very clear that our Norwegian and Scandinavian neighbours have a level of democratic engagement that we just do not have here. Having worked across the Nordics and the Baltics, I have seen that. Again, the evidence holds up: the Nordics have 80 to 85 per cent turnout in their local elections; the Baltics have 50 to 65 per cent; and we have 30 to 40 per cent. That is not good enough—I will come on to talk about that further in my speech, as well as about Ms Lennon's point about how we can engage with people by looking at citizens assemblies. Our door is open. In my closing remarks, I will look at participatory—that is a very hard word to say—budgets.

I must give a moment to the comments from Julie MacDougall about gimmicks. Reform members are very well versed in those—for example, only two weeks ago, we saw their conga. They talk about disrespect, but the language that they use to describe our fellow humans—"strangers", "men of fighting age", "imports" and "home-grown Scots"—is some of the most disrespectful language that I have ever heard.

Julie MacDougall: I thank the minister for her comments, which I fully disagree with. Does she agree that she is talking about including people in this democratic process, yet Reform UK is not being included in the discussion about much-needed and very important local democracy decisions?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: My heart bleeds. When Reform members talk about inclusion, they would be well advised to take a mirror and look at how the 17 members in their ranks include people across our country.

This Government is committed to fundamentally changing how power is shared and ensuring that communities are genuine partners in decision making. Local democracy and empowerment will be central to our work moving forward. We recognise that barriers can prevent people from engaging fully in democratic life.

Julie MacDougall: Will the member take an intervention?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: I will make progress.

If we are serious about strengthening local democracy, we must ensure that everyone has the opportunity to have their voice heard. That means learning from successful approaches such as citizens assemblies. My door is open and our colleagues' doors are open. We are engaging across different Government structures across our country and are learning from our neighbours as well.

Scotland has, of course, already taken significant steps towards community empowerment, and many examples have been highlighted, including the importance of asset ownership, regeneration, support for our island and rural communities, and community wealth building.

We will now go further and push power out and across.

David Green: Will the minister take an intervention?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: I will happily take an intervention from David Green, who I have enjoyed working alongside on this.

David Green: We are revealing to members in the chamber that we are friends now.

The minister represents an island constituency, and I represent a very rural constituency. She will forgive me for raising the same point again, because this is a debate about empowerment. Almost 10 years ago, the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 introduced island communities impact assessments. Does the minister not recognise that rural communities deserve a similar approach?

Hannah Mary Goodlad: I absolutely identify with that. It is a two-way conversation, and a new social contract needs to be developed from local to regional and national levels.

As I said in my previous answer, the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 is a transformative piece of legislation that is there to be used, yet not a single island authority has deployed that tool and asked for more powers. I put that point back out there.

At the start of today's sitting, I was very interested to hear the point that Frank Strang made at time for reflection about trust and the four words on the parliamentary mace to which many of us consistently return. Trust is at the heart of this debate: trusting communities to know what is best for their own places, trusting local people to shape local priorities, and ensuring that government at every level works alongside communities rather than simply acting on their behalf.

The Nordics get that right. The Baltics get that right. In those countries, there is a social contract between Governments and society. That two-way contract is one that respects, listens to and owns its own mistakes as well as its successes. It is a contract that has the politics of humility and humanity at its core, which Karen Adam so gracefully highlighted and thoughtfully included in her remarks.

It is time for us and the Scottish Government to write a new contract on this side of the North Sea, with local, regional and national layers, and with trust and respect woven throughout it. If we get this right, we have a huge opportunity to change our country for the better. When I look at Scotland today, I see a country that is not entirely at peace with itself. Racial tension, the rise of the far right and violence against women are all factors that pull us apart. We should all be concerned about that tension. It certainly keeps me awake at night.

I strongly believe that a significant way of challenging and addressing that is by democratising our country. We need to make sure that people care. We need to push power out across the country into communities, making folk feel that they matter, that their voices matter and that decisions are being made with them, not to them. We need to put folk at the heart of decision making.

This will be the largest change to local government that we have seen since the creation of this Parliament. We are setting our sights high. This is about being bold and having the ambition to match.

Empowerment, self-determination and confidence must become principles for everyday life in this country, not just for independence referendums. If we in this chamber believe in the people of Scotland, we must trust them with more than our votes. We must trust people with decisions, trust them to shape the priorities that, in turn, mould their lives, and trust communities to know what their places need.

Again, I thank members for their valuable contributions. My door is open and my colleagues' doors are open.

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): That concludes the debate on empowering communities and strengthening local democracy.

Decision Time

17:34

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): There are no questions to be put as a result of today's business. That therefore concludes decision time.

Breast Cancer Now's Wear It Pink Day 2026

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S7M-00708, in the name of Clare Adamson, on Breast Cancer Now's wear it pink day 2026. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises Breast Cancer Now's Wear It Pink Day 2026, which takes place on 23 October, and commends the vital work of Breast Cancer Now, the UK's leading breast cancer research and support charity; acknowledges the success of the Wear It Pink campaign, which has raised over £45 million since its inception in 2002 for lifesaving breast cancer research and care; notes the calls encouraging people across Scotland to wear pink and fundraise on the day; pays special tribute to the late Christina McKelvie MSP, a dear friend and colleague, whose commitment to breast cancer awareness, equality and compassion continues to inspire; understands that around 4,800 people in Scotland are diagnosed with breast cancer each year, and that early detection, timely treatment and ongoing support are vital to improving outcomes and helping achieve the charity's goal that, by 2050, everyone with breast cancer will live and live well; notes the view that there is a need for continued investment in research, improved access to care and increasing awareness of secondary breast cancer, for which, it understands, there is currently no cure, and believes that campaigns such as Wear It Pink can make a real difference to those affected by breast cancer, now and in the future.

17:36

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I am honoured to speak in support of, and to recognise, Breast Cancer Now's wear it pink campaign, which celebrates its 25th anniversary this year. I welcome Breast Cancer Now staff and researchers to the public gallery, and I especially welcome the many women living with breast cancer or secondary breast cancer who have joined us and shared their stories—and, more importantly, their asks of the Government—today.

For 25 years, the wear it pink campaign has brought people together across Scotland and the United Kingdom to raise money, raise awareness and show support for everyone who is affected by breast cancer. Since the campaign began in 2001, it has raised more than £45 million for research and support. That is an incredible achievement. However, wear it pink is about more than wearing pink for one day of the year. It is about showing people who are affected by cancer that they are not alone; about supporting families, friends and loved ones; and about helping to build a future where everyone who is diagnosed with breast cancer can live, and live well.

Breast cancer remains the most common cancer affecting women in Scotland, with around 5,300

women and 40 men diagnosed every year—that is around 102 people every single week. The number of people living with, or beyond, breast cancer is expected to increase from around 81,000 in 2025 to 118,000 by 2045. Those figures remind us just how many people across Scotland are affected by the disease and that, although we have made huge progress in treatment and survival, there is always more that we can do.

One area that deserves particular attention is metastatic breast cancer, where the cancer spreads to another part of the body. Around 975 people die from breast cancer in Scotland each year, and metastatic breast cancer is responsible for most breast cancer deaths. For people who are living with metastatic breast cancer, treatment can help to control the disease, slow its progress and support a good quality of life. That is why we have to make sure that people have access to the right treatment and support at the right time, and one of the ways that we can do that is through gathering better information.

At present, metastatic breast cancer is not consistently recorded across Scotland. We do not have a complete picture of how many people are living with the disease, nor where they are, how their cancer developed or what treatments they are receiving. That makes it much harder to plan the services and support that people will need in the future. Data collection would help us to understand where the pressures are; to plan our cancer services and workforce; and to make sure that people have access to the support that they need.

The "Cancer Action Plan for Scotland 2023-2026" committed to improving how we collect that information, focusing initially on metastatic breast cancer, and that commitment now needs to become a reality. The next cancer action plan should set out a clear path for data collection and the funding and resources that will be needed to deliver it. That is not about statistics—it is about understanding the experiences of people who are living with breast cancer and making sure that our services are designed around their needs.

We have seen exciting developments in the treatments that are available to people. Earlier this month, the Scottish Medicines Consortium recommended two new treatments for some people with incurable metastatic breast cancer. That is very welcome news and could benefit hundreds of people. However, we need to make sure that people can access those treatments. Some of the new medicines require a test to identify whether they are suitable for a particular patient at that time, but those tests are not routinely available through NHS Scotland. If a treatment has been recommended, patients should not have to wait for months because the test that is needed to access it is not available. We need an interim solution to make sure people can access those tests now, alongside a long-term plan to ensure that Scotland has the testing capacity that is needed as new treatments—thankfully—become available. That is what precision medicine can be all about: the right treatment reaching the right person at the right time.

Breast Cancer Now continues to fund vital research across Scotland. It has supported 88 research projects here, worth around £17.7 million, including research at the University of Glasgow and the University of Edinburgh looking at areas such as triple-negative breast cancer, preventing the spread of cancer and predicting how it may progress.

Every person who takes part in the wear it pink campaign and supports research into breast cancer is probably inspired by a loved one: someone they know who has suffered from the disease. We have our own very special colleague, Christina McKelvie, to inspire us. Christina was never afraid to make her voice heard. I still remember her standing in the chamber on international women's day in 2017, wearing her pussy hat and proudly declaring her solidarity with women around the world. It was classic Christina: passionate, determined and never afraid to make a statement, nor to break the rules—but you will be pleased to know, Presiding Officer, that I will not be breaking that rule this evening.

Our great friend and Christina's former office manager, Martha, crocheted some pussy hats, and I was one of those who were very pleased to wear one; I wore it at the photo shoot today. Christina's legacy has carried on. I am sure that we will hear more about the Christina McKelvie celebration ball and the fundraising that has gone on, and about our own Parliament barista, Kirsty Rafferty, who is taking part in the Supernova Forth road bridge challenge.

My other inspiration in this area is my big sister, Eileen. Along with her friend Lorraine Trenfield, she took part in a brave the shave challenge this year to raise money for cancer research, following my sister's own experience of breast cancer diagnosis, which followed her experience of suffering for most of her adult life with multiple sclerosis.

What we see in all this is that people are not alone—we stand with them as they are struggling with this disease. I am sure that when we come together, we can make the lives of people in Scotland better. [*Applause*.]

17:43

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): I am very grateful to Clare

Adamson for lodging the motion to bring the debate to the chamber, and in particular for the very generous words that it contains about Christina. I suspect that members will understand that the debate is a very personal one for me, as it is for Clare Adamson, but it is also personal for Jack McKelvie, Christina McKelvie's son, who is in the gallery today, as it will be for her other son Lewis, who is not here; for Dionne, who is here; and for Alex Kerr, who worked for Christina.

I think that all of us who knew Christina would know exactly where she would be today, if she were still here. She would be down at the front, wearing a lot of pink, smiling at everybody regardless of party, encouraging and applauding them and, afterwards, giving them a hug or, if they were lucky, a kiss. That is just the way that she was.

The wear it pink campaign was something that Christina cared deeply about. She supported the campaign in the Parliament for many years, long before breast cancer became a part of her own life. That was typical of Christina, as was the way that she undertook to drag a succession of First Ministers and cabinet secretaries down to wear ridiculous costumes when they otherwise would not have done so. In the same way, Christina managed to get a lot of cabinet secretaries, who I am sure felt quite uncomfortable, to attend a Pride rally, because she had insisted that they go. That is just how she was. She did not need something to affect her personally before she cared about it. If she saw an injustice or people who needed a voice, or a cause that could make people's lives better, she threw herself into it.

When she was diagnosed with breast cancer, that commitment became even stronger. She used her own experience to encourage women to check themselves and attend screening appointments. In fact, she was instrumental in the campaign to bring down the automatic screening age to 50 and, when she contracted secondary breast cancer, to try to bring it down further, because she realised that, even with the age at 50, someone could still be 52 or 53 before they had their first check. Christina, like many women, found that she had breast cancer from that very first check.

Crucially, she encouraged women to speak about secondary breast cancer and highlighted the need—as we heard about from Clare Adamson—for better data, treatment and support. We really should have better data on this—it was clear to me during Christina's treatment that we do not have that. I would also like to see data collected that details when sepsis, rather than breast cancer itself, is the cause of death; I think that there is a big story to be told there. We can improve the treatment only if we are aware of all the circumstances of people who have breast cancer.

Breast Cancer Now has said that

"Christina supported … wear it pink in the Scottish Parliament for more than a decade"

and described her as

"a strong advocate for women regularly checking their breasts and attending … screening appointments".

I know how much that work meant to her, but I also know, from our own experience, what lies behind some of the statistics that we talk about in debates such as this. We can talk about thousands of people being diagnosed with breast cancer in Scotland each year, and about research, treatments, screening and survival rates. All those things are enormously important, of course, but behind every one of those stats is a person, and around that person there are partners, parents, friends and colleagues whose lives are also changed by breast cancer.

For our family, secondary breast cancer stopped being something that happened to other people. I welcome in particular the reference in the motion to secondary breast cancer, not least for the reasons that I have mentioned. There is currently no cure for secondary breast cancer—that is a stark fact. It is why research matters so much, and why access to new treatments matters. I remember that Christina managed to access the Enhertu drug, which was available in Scotland; it has only just become available in England. There were hopes that went with that, which of course went unrealised for Christina, but those new developments give hope to many women who contract breast cancer. We also need to understand much better the number of people who are living with secondary breast cancer and the care and support that they need.

Earlier this year, Christina's family—Jack and others—and friends came together to organise the Christina McKelvie celebration ball. I am sure that Jack will not mind me saying that, while he and I were the emotional support group, all the work was done by women who knew Christina, and there was a huge amount of work involved. We wanted it to be a celebration of Christina rather than simply a memorial, because anyone who knew Christina will know that she would have had very little interest in an evening of people sitting around being sombre. We tried to make it an evening that reflected her warm, noisy, colourful and inclusive—and above all, fun—personality, and I think that we managed that. We also raised around £26,000 for two organisations that meant a great deal to Christina: Breast Cancer Now and the Maggie's charity. On Monday, the family and I were at the Maggie's centre in Glasgow, where we presented cheques to those two charities. I thank everyone who helped to organise that evening,

everyone who attended and everyone who donated.

Perhaps more importantly, however, I want us to continue the work that Christina cared about. The wear it pink campaign is fun, and Christina certainly enjoyed persuading some fairly reluctant politicians to cover themselves in pink every year, but there is a very serious purpose behind it. Since 2002, as we heard from Clare Adamson, the campaign has raised more than £45 million for breast cancer research and support. That money helps to fund the research that can lead to earlier diagnosis and better treatments and, ultimately, to longer lives.

I have spoken recently in the chamber about some of my fears around artificial intelligence, but I also have hopes for AI, and I think that breast cancer could be one of the areas in which AI could lead to some leaps forward in saving people's lives.

Breast Cancer Now also helps to ensure that people who are going through breast cancer do not have to face it alone. I would obviously give anything that I could for Christina still to be here, but I know exactly what she would want us to do. She would want us to keep talking about breast cancer, and she would want women to check themselves and attend their screening appointments. She would want us to fight for better treatment and support for people who are living with secondary breast cancer, and she would absolutely want people in the Parliament to continue wearing pink, raising money and making a bit of noise about the issue.

I hope that, on 23 October, people across Scotland will wear it pink—I certainly will, and I will do so remembering Christina, not simply because breast cancer took her from us, but because of the enormous energy, compassion and determination that she brought to try to make things better for everyone who came after. That is a legacy worth fighting for. [*Applause*.]

17:50

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): I thank Clare Adamson for bringing the debate to the chamber, and I congratulate Breast Cancer Now on raising more than £45 million through the wear it pink campaign. I add my name to the tributes to Christina McKelvie, who died after treatment for secondary cancer. Although I did not know her, I knew her reputation. Being open about her diagnosis, as other well-known figures have been, helped to raise awareness alongside the wear it pink campaign.

We need that awareness to lead to better diagnosis and better care. A total of 30 per cent of all cancer cases in women are breast cancer, and in Scotland, as has been said, more than 5,000 women are diagnosed each year and 1,000 are dying each year from metastatic breast cancer. Breast cancer is on the increase, although luckily it is increasing more slowly than it was for a period previously. However, it is increasing in young women by 2 per cent each year, and that is a real worry. There are many factors involved that lie beyond the scope of this debate, but we need to look into that, and that is one reason why research is essential. For young women, it is worth noting that breastfeeding reduces their risk, so that is another reason for them to breastfeed if they can.

The fact is, however, that the mortality and five-year survival rates are worse in Scotland than in similar countries, and that suggests that we need to take a detailed look at differences between countries and do more research. Are those countries doing something that we are not doing, is the situation the result of later diagnosis or is there another factor? We should make no mistake about it—this is a women's health inequalities issue. Are the funds that are being spent by the Government commensurate with the level of potentially fatal illness? I support Breast Cancer Now's call for the target covering the time from referral to full diagnosis, and its call for a specific pathway.

As we have heard, there is currently no cure for metastatic breast cancer, but we need to know how many women are getting it and, critically, how many meet the five-year survival milestone. We need those women to be recorded and to continue to be known and followed up. The Scottish Government committed to that in 2016, and its pledge was repeated in the 2023-26 cancer action plan. I agree with Clare Adamson that that needs to happen. It is surely a matter of requesting the relevant clinics to record the number of patients on their lists. There has been a pattern of missed pledges. Audit Scotland has referred to waiting-time targets being missed for one in five people, and we need to work on that further.

However, awareness is not enough. We need standards, transparency and accountability, and it is essential that national protocols are evidence based and followed throughout the national health service. There was an incident with NHS Tayside chemotherapy dosing being reduced to "lower than standard" doses for three years between 2016 and 2019—a review found that that was done "without a clear rationale" and called for stronger governance. The good news is that NHS Tayside had restored all its breast oncology services by November 2023.

There is an issue with rural areas. Women in areas such as Perthshire, Kinross-shire, Stirling, Clackmannanshire and other rural areas depend on mobile breast screening units, which do not

come round that often because of the cost and the number of units that we have in Scotland. Women also have long journeys to Dundee or Edinburgh for treatment. There is a discussion to be had, in these changing times, about whether such units are the best way to reach women; I am sure that the Scottish Government will look at that.

It remains to be seen whether the reorganisation of the NHS will direct resources to the front line. The major risk is that a hurried and unplanned reorganisation might not achieve the required result, so we must all provide as much input as possible to the reorganisation, sharing the lived-experience stories with which we have been entrusted. We need to look at game changers such as the new treatments that have been mentioned. We need more research; that may be the answer to change the numbers and bring them down. I am sure that we all agree that a shift to prevention is needed, and early diagnosis is an essential part of that.

We must also remember that breast cancer has an impact on our economy. The figures given by Breast Cancer Now show that, in 2025, it was estimated that up to £300 million was lost, so addressing the issue is a win-win—we just have to do it. Meanwhile, the volunteers and fundraisers for Breast Cancer Now and the other cancer charities that are working hard to fill the funding gap are to be commended, and I thank them for those services.

17:55

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I thank Clare Adamson for bringing this incredibly important debate to the chamber. To Keith Brown, I say that, sadly, I came into the Parliament too late to really know Christina McKelvie, but she sounds like a fantastic lady who did some amazing work to support the wear it pink campaign and Breast Cancer Now.

I commend all the work that goes on behind the scenes. Last week, we debated childhood cancer. It makes issues feel very real when we come together to talk about things that affect people's lives in such significant ways. That is why I wanted to speak today. Last year, I was contacted by a constituent, a young mother of three who had gone to the doctor, having found a lump, and had been immediately referred on to the consultant. Unfortunately, it took 166 days to get from the discovery of the initial symptoms to the consultant appointment, which was obviously before treatment had even started. I remember getting emails about her anguish and her concern about what her future looked like during that period of time. In such situations, it is easy for MSPs to write letters demanding action and to talk to the cabinet secretary about the issue, but the response need not always be about going on the attack in that way; it can involve picking up on that emotion from a constituent during times of real uncertainty.

My constituent has now been treated, which is fantastic. The NHS did an amazing job, and she now wants to go out and tell others to do whatever they can to catch symptoms early, whether that involves checking themselves, going to screenings or whatever. I commend her for dealing so well with what she has been through. As has been said by Clare Adamson, Keith Brown and others, we need to do more to make sure that we give the best possible treatment to people in Scotland who find themselves with breast cancer.

The final thing that I want to point out is that rurality creates its own problems for treatment and travel—Helen McDade has already made that point, but I will take every opportunity to do so during this session of Parliament. There is a lot more that we can still do to make sure that people in rural areas, which account for a large chunk of Scotland, can access treatment fairly and easily.

17:58

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): I thank Clare Adamson for bringing this motion to the chamber, and Frances Logan from the wear it pink campaign for organising the event today, which allowed me the pleasure of speaking to folk who have been affected by breast cancer. I also put on record that Dionne Hossack, who was mentioned by Keith Brown and was the chair of the committee that hosted the event earlier this week, is also going to be running the London marathon for Breast Cancer Now—she is a braver person than me—and I urge members to donate to her.

Pink, glam, sparkles, glitz and glamour, kindness, fearlessness, loving, hugs—if you asked anyone who knew the late Christina McKelvie, those are exactly the kind of words that they would use to describe her. Christina was a dedicated public servant, an MSP, a friend, a mentor to me, and someone who had an extraordinary ability to make people feel welcomed, valued and cared for. There is so much to talk about regarding my former boss from her career of almost two decades of public service, but there is not enough time for that now, so I want to remember one particular part of Christina's legacy—one that was very close to her heart.

Every year, Christina was the champion and sponsor of Breast Cancer Now's wear it pink event in the Scottish Parliament. Christina championed that long before her own diagnosis, as Keith Brown has pointed out. She would bring together MSPs from across the chamber and encourage them to put aside their usual colours and instead embrace

something much pinker. As the years went on, we saw pink hats, pink scarves, pink glasses and pink tennis rackets. I had on some of those fashionable accessories earlier today—members will be disappointed to hear that I will not be incorporating the pink furry hat into my regular outfits in Parliament.

Christina knew that the laughter and joy that the event inspired was the perfect engine to achieve a larger goal. It was about awareness, promoting research and treatments, and supporting people living with breast cancer and their families. Ultimately, it was about saving lives. I was happy to see so many people across the Parliament—MSPs, staff and others—decked out in pink today and to meet those affected by breast cancer in the Parliament made me happy, as I could see that Christina's legacy continues to live on.

We know that breast cancer is the most common cancer affecting women in Scotland. Around 5,310 people are diagnosed with breast cancer in Scotland each year. For too many people, a breast cancer diagnosis does not end with treatment. Metastatic breast cancer, also known as secondary breast cancer, is breast cancer that spreads to another part of the body. It can occur months or years after an initial diagnosis. For some people, it is diagnosed at the same time as their primary cancer or even before that cancer is discovered. It is currently incurable, although it can be treated. Treatment aims to control and slow the progression of the disease, in order to give the person the best possible quality of life. That matters because, as has been touched on by other speakers, behind every statistic is a person—a mother, a daughter, a sister, a partner, a friend, a colleague—who has plans for the future and wants more time to make memories with the people they love.

The impact reaches far beyond the person who receives the diagnosis. It changes the lives of families, friends and loved ones too. Yet there remains a significant gap in what we know. Indeed, that relates to one of the key asks of those I spoke to today. Data on secondary breast cancer is not yet routinely and consistently collected across Scotland. The Scottish cancer registry estimates that 4,200 people were recorded as living with secondary breast cancer in Scotland at the end of 2023, but Breast Cancer Now makes it clear that that figure does not capture everyone living with the condition, particularly people whose cancers spread or returned following an earlier diagnosis. If we do not know the full scale of the problem, how can we make sure that the right support, services and resources are there for everyone who needs them? Improving the collection of data is not simply about numbers. It is about ensuring that people, including those living with the condition, are seen and counted.

Breast Cancer Now has already made an enormous contribution to research in Scotland, supporting groundbreaking science and working to improve the lives of people affected by breast cancer. The wear it pink campaign has been a huge part of that work. This year marks 25 years of the campaign. Since it began, it has raised more than £45 million to support life-changing research and help for people affected. That is an extraordinary legacy, and I know that Christina was proud to have played her part in helping to build that campaign.

When I wear it pink this October, it will be Christina I will be remembering. I will remember her compassion, her kindness, her hugs, her laughter, her sparkle and, of course, her love of pink. I will remember and I will miss what she was in all of our lives: a woman who cared deeply about those in the most need, a woman who used her voice for the voiceless, a woman who wanted to make a difference where it mattered the most and a woman who, even during the most difficult time in her own life, continued to think about others.

Let us keep Christina's spirit alive. Let us raise some money. Let us raise awareness. Let us support research and improve data. Let us wear it pink.

18:03

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I thank Clare Adamson for bringing this debate to the chamber. Breast cancer is one of those things that most of us only think that we understand the importance of until, suddenly, it feels very close. I am over 50 now and, in the middle of July, I went for my first routine breast screening as part of the over-50s programme. I have Christina McKelvie's activism to thank for that.

The big mobile unit was parked outside my doctor's surgery, so I went along and had the mammogram. I did not think too much more about it until, at the beginning of August, I was called to the hospital to follow up with another mammogram. Within 10 minutes, I was taken through for an ultrasound. The doctor saw something that he felt that he should investigate and asked whether I would be comfortable having a biopsy there and then. Of course, although a bit flustered, I said yes. I have to say that the care that I received was absolutely incredible. Within a very short space of time, I had been seen, scanned, examined and had the biopsy taken.

Then came the waiting. I was told to come back in two weeks—not very long—for the results, and to bring somebody with me to celebrate if it was

good news or to be there to support me if it was not. I am a chronic overthinker at the best of times, so, during those two weeks, I considered just about every possible outcome. I thought about my children. I thought about treatment. I thought about my job. I thought about what I would need to organise if the news was bad.

Then, in the middle of August, on the morning that I was getting ready to go to the hospital for my appointment, I got a phone call. There was no need to come in: everything was clear. There was enormous relief, of course, but there was something else, too. My stomach flipped, playing out the worst-case scenario, knowing that, on that same morning, another woman would be getting ready and walking into the hospital to hear the news that I had spent two weeks fearing and that her world would be turned upside down.

That experience really struck me. It is one of the reasons why I wanted to speak today. If there is one thing that I would say to women listening, it is this: please go and get your mammogram; please check your breasts and get to know what is normal for you; if something changes, get it checked; and do not put it off because you are frightened of what might be found. I understand that fear now, but screening saves lives and early diagnosis matters.

That is why the work of Breast Cancer Now really matters. As has been said, since 2002 the wear It pink campaign has raised more than £45 million for research and support, while also raising awareness of secondary breast cancer, for which there is still no cure.

Today, we also remember our dear friend and colleague, Christina McKelvie. The first time I met Christina in person, she gave me the biggest hug before we even introduced ourselves properly. She brought warmth, compassion and humanity to this Parliament, and her commitment to raising awareness continues to matter today and always. The wear it pink day raises money, but it also makes people talk. It makes someone check themselves, it may make them book an appointment that they have been putting off, and it can make someone feel a little less alone.

I was lucky—I know that—and I will never forget the relief that I felt when that phone call came. I am also incredibly grateful that I went for that mammogram in the first place. So, yes, let us wear it pink, but more than that, let us use the day to remind the women we love and ourselves to check, to go when the letter arrives and not to ignore something because we are frightened, because being checked really can save your life.

18:07

Monica Lennon (Glasgow) (Lab): I wish that I had brought some tissues to the chamber, because the contributions have been so personal and powerful. That is the way that Christina would have wanted it, and it has got all of us thinking about our radical hope for the future.

Today is about hope. We have had briefings from Breast Cancer Now, and we have had a chance to chat with visitors and colleagues today. A lot of progress has been made, but there is still a lot more to do, and I think that today is about making sure that those in the public gallery and those who have come to Parliament today feel that something will change as a result of this debate.

Like others, I also want to pay tribute to our much-missed colleague and friend Christina McKelvie, who thrived on days like today, particularly when we could wear lots of pink and enjoy all the props. That willingness to have a bit of fun and lighten the mood is important, but there has always been a serious message underlying that. We have learned over the past 25 years of the wear it pink campaign that the visibility and awareness that it brings are really important. They help to raise funds and they help women to remember to check themselves, but they also make sure that Governments, health boards and others act.

Today, I want to take a moment to put on record my thanks to our extremely committed health professionals who support patients every day. Sometimes they give hugs too, which is important. What I am hearing from colleagues is the importance of compassion and of understanding that people come at this issue from different places.

The hope is that, by 2050, everyone with breast cancer will live and will live well. As we have heard from Keith Brown, there is a range of organisations, including Maggie's, that do a great deal to help people who are living with breast cancer. It is important that all MSPs know that we can signpost our constituents to those fantastic organisations.

I turn to the briefing from Breast Cancer Now, which colleagues have mentioned. Clearly, there is a need to do more to support those who are living with secondary breast cancer. I know that the cabinet secretary will address that in closing, but the points that have been made on data collection are important, because the Government has made some important commitments that have not yet been fully delivered.

I will also mention health inequalities, because we know that breast cancer can affect anyone but does not affect everyone equally. I have a real concern for women who live in our most deprived communities, because they have the poorest survival outcomes and are less likely to access the important screening programmes that Karen

Adam mentioned. It would therefore be good to hear what additional work the Government is doing to improve on that.

Like Karen Adam, I have had my own health scares in recent times. Maybe that is why I was so emotional when I got to my feet. I have learned a lot over the past year about the importance of supporting the workforce, because without them we cannot provide that fantastic care to everyone. They have more time to care and to truly listen to people. That is how we get patient-centred care. Again, I would love to hear in the cabinet secretary's closing contribution what more will be done on that. There are important commitments in the Scottish cancer action plan, not just on data collection, albeit that that is clearly a big ask by Breast Cancer Now for this debate; unless we empower the workforce to do the job that they love, the improvements and outcomes that we want will not happen.

I pay tribute to everyone who has been raising funds, raising their voices and raising awareness. However, for me, it is about how we ensure that we have more compassion in our health service, build in time for more hugs and—all of us—have real hope, because breast cancer will touch someone that we know and love, and it is important that we have the right support and the right hope in our hearts for them.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): Due to the number of members who wish to speak, I am minded to accept a motion without notice, under rule 8.14.3, to extend the debate by up to 30 minutes. I invite Clare Adamson to move such a motion.

Motion moved,

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

Motion agreed to.

18:12

Amanda Bland (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform): I thank Clare Adamson for bringing the motion to the chamber and I thank the NHS staff, charities and all organisations that support people who are affected by breast cancer.

I will start with two names: Michelle and Wendy. Michelle was my sister. She lived with breast cancer for 10 years before she died at 45 years of age. Wendy, a dear friend, died, aged 36, of breast cancer. Those were two young women, two lives cut far too short, two families left with a void that can never be filled and two reminders that behind every statistic is a person.

I was diagnosed with breast cancer at 30 years of age. I survived. I am here today because treatment worked for me, but I know that I was one of the fortunate ones. I know what it means to hear the words, "You have cancer." Michelle and Wendy knew the words, "Your cancer has spread and is no longer curable."

Breast cancer is complex and, as Clare Adamson stated, on Monday 7 September, two new, targeted treatments were recommended by the Scottish Medicines Consortium for use by the NHS in Scotland for people with hormone receptor positive and human epidermal growth factor receptor 2 negative, incurable metastatic breast cancer with gene alterations. That is a great step forward. However, the genomic tests that establish whether someone is suitable to receive the treatment are not routinely available in the NHS in Scotland. The Scottish Government must implement an interim genomic testing solution to ensure that no one is left waiting for the treatment that they so desperately need.

I know how much timely treatment can matter. People who have been diagnosed with breast cancer know the suffering and the fear that waiting for treatment brings, and that is why this debate matters. Yes, survival has improved—more people are living longer after diagnosis. However, progress cannot be an excuse for complacency. People are still waiting too long for diagnosis and treatment; there are still unacceptable regional variations in access and waiting times; and women are still facing years-long waits for breast reconstruction following mastectomy. We need to be clear about what that means: a target is not simply a number on a spreadsheet; a missed target means that a person is waiting; a delay means a family living with uncertainty; and sometimes, delay can change the outcome of a person's life. Therefore, when targets are missed, there must be accountability.

We need transparency about where the failures are; we need action to address them; and we need to know when that action will deliver results. Patients should not have to accept that their postcode determines the speed or quality of their care. Early diagnosis, timely treatment and specialist care matter, and they should not be a question of luck.

I urge the Scottish Government to ensure that every person with metastatic breast cancer is counted and receives the best care and support. Agreement on the best method of data collection is needed now for metastatic breast cancer. Further funding and resourcing are must-haves in the next iteration of the cancer action plan. In 2016, the Scottish Government promised to improve data collection, and we are still waiting.

I stand here for Michelle, Wendy and every person who has heard the words, "You have

cancer.” Their lives and deaths matter, and their stories must drive us to demand better.

We have made progress, but we cannot stop there. We must never forget the people behind the statistics. For Christina, Michelle, Wendy and all those whose voices can no longer be heard, we must and can do better, and this Government must be held accountable for doing better.

18:17

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I thank Clare Adamson for bringing this motion to the chamber and for the work that she does as a champion for this issue in this Parliament. I was relieved and pleased to hear that Karen Adam’s experience had a happy ending, and I was also deeply moved by Amanda Bland’s comments and the detail with which she constructed her speech.

I am pleased to support wear it pink, the breast cancer awareness campaign. For me, as for many other members of this Parliament, this is not a theoretical thing—it is a personal thing. My wife Yvonne has faced the reality of a breast cancer diagnosis, and anyone who has sat beside someone they love, when that word is spoken, knows what it does. Cancer is still a dreaded word, and it lands with a force that is hard to describe.

However, the good news is that breast cancer is not what it once was—it is not an automatic sentence of hopelessness. Thankfully, the science and treatment for this particular cancer have moved forward. In fact, the progress in a relatively short period has been extraordinary, and we should take hope from that.

I stand to pay tribute to everyone who works in our breast cancer services. Their work is highly skilled, but the thing that I will always remember—and which I am most impressed with—is that it is deeply human. They meet people and families when they are frightened and uncertain, and they somehow bring reassurance, calm and compassion.

I pay special tribute to the Beatson west of Scotland cancer centre. Families across Scotland know what the Beatson means. It means expertise, of course, but it also means reassurance, kindness and dignity when people need them most.

Keith Brown: Stephen Kerr is talking about the Beatson centre, where I spent many hours, and about the staff there, and it occurs to me that on one occasion, when I was there with Christina, the tea trolley came round, and the person who was pushing the tea trolley was Jeane Freeman, the former health secretary. Of course, she had her own battles, but the commitment to volunteer is huge, and there are many people like that at the Beatson and elsewhere.

Stephen Kerr: I am delighted that Keith Brown has made that point. I pay tribute to the many volunteers who staff not only the Beatson but many of our hospitals. They provide an incredible humanitarian service on all of our behalves.

My wife Yvonne was also fortunate. Her cancer was picked up through scanning and, as Amanda Bland has said, that really does matter. The cancer screening system is critical, and we must do everything possible to encourage eligible women to attend screening appointments. We in this chamber should say plainly to women: do not delay, do not put it off, do not talk yourself out of seeking help and do not think that you are making a fuss; if something is not right, please get advice. Yes, there are issues around getting a GP appointment, but no woman should allow difficulty in the system to make her hesitate, because, as we all know, time matters. If you notice a lump, a change in shape, skin changes or unusual pain, get it checked. The wear it pink campaign matters because awareness saves lives. Screening saves lives. Early diagnosis saves lives.

I want to speak about families, because when one person is diagnosed with cancer, the whole family is hit by it. The patient carries the treatment, the appointments, the fear and the uncertainty, but those who love them carry something, too. It is hard to support someone through cancer because love creates its own sense of helplessness. You would do anything to take it away, and you cannot. Keith Brown alluded to that. You want to fix it, but you cannot. You want to carry it, but you cannot. Support for family members also matters. Practical advice matters, as does emotional support. People need help to know how to listen, how to encourage and how to be strong without pretending that everything is fine.

We must also be honest about secondary breast cancer. A lot has been said about that, and I want to endorse what has been said. People who live with it must not be invisible in the system. We need proper national data, broken down by health boards. Services need to be planned, and they need to be planned around real patients and real needs. I ask the minister to address that point directly today and to set out what we will do in Scotland that will finally create the database that is needed to provide proper support and treatment.

We should celebrate progress in breast cancer treatment, but optimism must never become complacency. Wear it pink is a call to action. Our message, I think, collectively, is for people to come forward, get checked, take symptoms seriously, support the person you love and keep pushing for

cancer services that match the hope that science now gives us.

18:23

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): If members will just bear with me a moment, I will gather my thoughts and my papers to respond to the many points that have been raised this afternoon.

I start by thanking my friend and colleague, Clare Adamson, for lodging this important motion and for providing us all with the opportunity to recognise Breast Cancer Now's wear it pink day 2026. Of course, we all pay tribute to Breast Cancer Now and to the dedicated staff the length and breadth of Scotland, and, as others have done, I highlight the importance of volunteers.

I want to acknowledge the many contributions that we have heard tonight. Clare Adamson, Keith Brown and Amanda Bland all brought to the chamber very personal stories of loss as well as hope. Karen Adam, Stephen Kerr and Monica Lennon all spoke very powerfully of the worries that people can have for their own health or that of their loved ones.

In the time that I have, I will endeavour to address the issues that were raised in relation to data collection, and access to new treatments. I will also address the points about equality and those about families and young people.

I am pleased to acknowledge the motion's recognition of the work of Breast Cancer Now. As we have heard, the charity makes an invaluable contribution to people who are affected by breast cancer through its research, campaigning and support services while amplifying the voices of patients and their families. I also recognise the vital contribution of Scotland's third sector.

The success of the wear it pink campaign for more than two decades demonstrates the generosity of people across Scotland and the wider UK. Since 2002, the campaign has raised more than £40 million to support research and care while raising awareness of breast cancer.

As other members have done, I acknowledge the tribute paid in the motion to our late friend and colleague Christina McKelvie. I am wearing some beads that Christina gave me for my 40th birthday, which was not yesterday. Like Karen Adam, I am well on the wrong side of 50, and I feel very blessed that that is the case. Christina was a passionate advocate for women's health, who encouraged women to be aware of breast cancer symptoms and to attend screening when invited. We have heard that message over and over again tonight—that screening saves lives. Her commitment to improving the lives of women across Scotland continues to inspire many of us.

As we have also heard, breast cancer remains one of the most common cancers in Scotland, with more than 5,000 people diagnosed each year. That is why it continues to be a national priority for the Government and for NHS Scotland.

There are reasons to be hopeful. Outcomes continue to improve, and the latest data from Public Health Scotland shows that 86.7 per cent of women who were diagnosed with breast cancer between 2018 and 2022 are expected to survive for at least five years after diagnosis. Our "Cancer Strategy for Scotland 2023-2033" and the accompanying cancer action plan set out a clear vision to improve prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care. We also continue to improve breast cancer services through national clinical management pathways and quality performance indicators. The breast cancer clinical management pathway helps to ensure that patients receive consistent, high-quality, evidence-based care from diagnosis through to treatment and follow-up.

Early diagnosis is absolutely critical. Scotland's national breast screening programme plays a key role in detecting breast cancer before symptoms develop. Eligible women who are aged 50 to 70 are invited for screening every three years. Work is under way to modernise the service following the reporting of the breast screening modernisation report. Update and equity of the service remain a priority while that work takes place, particularly for women who live in our most deprived communities. That is why all NHS boards have implemented equity strategies for screening, which is supported by £1 million of Scottish Government investment. We are also empowering people in our most deprived communities to get checked early through the be the early bird marketing campaign and various roadshows.

The other point about equity that many members have raised relates to location, geography and rurality. We want as many people as possible to be treated as close to home as possible, and we continue to work with health boards when, for example, there is a need to travel. For some of the specialist services, we know that people will have to travel when it is clinically appropriate. When travel is appropriate, I very much expect health boards to work collaboratively and to make arrangements that are person centred in order to make things as easy as possible.

To ensure that women in Scotland feel valued, supported and are aware of the important health information that they need to live longer and healthier lives, a card will be sent to every woman resident in Scotland around their 50th birthday, and it will be known as the Christina card in honour

of our friend Christina McKelvie. It is intended that the card will include helpful health information such as how to access menopause support, information on eligibility for various screening and testing programmes and information on checking for lumps and bumps.

Clare Adamson and many other colleagues spoke about the importance of data collection. I very much recognise that improving data collection has been a long-standing priority for Breast Cancer Now and for patients. Having high-quality data is essential if we are to understand patient experiences better, plan services effectively and continue to improve outcomes.

I confirm that, for the first time, the methodology for collecting metastatic breast cancer data in Scotland has been agreed and that we are on track to meet that commitment before the end of 2027. That is built on the work undertaken by Jenni Minto, who agreed a methodology for the collection with Public Health Scotland just prior to the election. Public Health Scotland is now working hard to launch that over the coming months.

Keith Brown raised important points on the collection of data on sepsis and on secondary breast cancer, which I will take away and consider.

We know that there is always much more to do, but I hope that I have been able to demonstrate our commitment to improving care and outcomes for patients. At a time of sustained pressure on our NHS, any clinical time devoted to data collection or audit must deliver meaningful information that can help to improve services and patient outcomes. I hope that I have demonstrated that we are moving forward with data collection.

Members have spoken powerfully about new and innovative treatments. Clare Adamson spoke about the necessity of getting the right treatment at the right time. Recent advances in precision medicine, including elacestrant, which was recently approved by the Scottish Medicines Consortium, are creating new treatment options for some patients living with advanced breast cancer. However, access to some of those medicines depends on genomic testing being available to identify the patients who are most likely to benefit from it.

I advise members that rapid planning is under way to secure access to the necessary testing, which will be provided via the INTEGRATE circulating tumour DNA—ctDNA—platform study, which has been set up at the west of Scotland innovation hub. Sites will be opened across Scotland, with initial testing being sent away to accredited laboratories in the NHS. I am happy to provide any member with further information. I underscore the point that we are working hard with industry and partners in the NHS, in recognition that everybody deserves access to the best treatment at the right time.

I will take a moment to acknowledge the powerful points that have been made about the importance of families. We have the children's action plan, and we are committed to implementing Isla's principles, which are based on the experience of a young woman—a teenager—who died of breast cancer. That work involves raising awareness based on the best evidence on unusual and persistent symptoms.

I again thank Clare Adamson for securing the debate. I recognise the continued contribution of the NHS, the third sector and patients themselves. By continuing to invest in awareness, screening, treatment, research, innovation and patient support, we can continue to improve outcomes for people affected by breast cancer across Scotland, ensuring that they receive the very highest possible standard of care.

Dionne Hossack is doing the London marathon, and our own barista, Kirsty Rafferty, is completing the Supernova challenge. I am sure that they are both looking for our support to raise funds—if I am allowed to say that. I am not sure if I am abusing my position by mentioning that but, if I am, I will just take six of the belt.

Once again, I thank everybody for their contribution, and I thank you, Presiding Officer, for your patience, as I have gone way over time.

Meeting closed at 18:36.

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