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Thursday 8 October 2026

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 8 October 2026

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

General Question Time

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

Vehicles Seized by the Police

1. **David Barratt (Cowdenbeath) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to ensure that vehicles seized by the police in connection with criminal or antisocial use are disposed of in a way that prevents them from re-entering circulation and being involved in further offending. (S7O-00367)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): I agree that arrangements for seized vehicles should support our efforts to tackle that type of offending. I understand that Police Scotland has disposed of seized electronic transporters through an accredited recycling process in which some vehicles were auctioned, with the proceeds returned to the police.

However, I have been informed that Police Scotland took steps last week to stop such sales of seized electronic transporters and to dispose of them, so that they cannot re-enter circulation. The same approach has been applied to off-road motorcycles and quad bikes that are powered by internal combustion engines, ensuring that those vehicles are likewise prevented from returning to circulation.

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice has met Police Scotland to discuss how we can strengthen powers to seize vehicles. In addition, we will continue to urge the United Kingdom Government, which holds powers on registration and licensing of off-road vehicles, to take decisive action.

David Barratt: At a recent public meeting on the illegal use of off-road bikes in my constituency, concerns were raised that bikes that were seized by police were being auctioned and then reaching the communities and offenders that they had been seized from. I welcome the minister's words on that, and I am somewhat reassured.

An organisation called Kingdom Off Road Motorcycle Club in my constituency has offered to take such bikes off the police and use them in a more productive way. Will the minister encourage more action like that and encourage the police to look further at that option?

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful to Mr Barratt for his continued focus on this area, including his focus on community and partnership work. The work that he is doing on behalf of his constituents to make communities safer is a positive example to us all. I welcome any opportunity for further partnership working such as that which he has described, including with Kingdom Off Road. I would be happy to meet him to discuss any further opportunities in that area.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Front-line officers tell me that they lack two things: enough officers available for operational deployment and sufficient powers to search vehicles involved in criminality. Will the minister and the cabinet secretary demand funding in the forthcoming budget to increase the number of available operational police officers and commit to strengthening vehicle stop-and-search powers in Scotland?

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful to Mr Kerr for his interest in this area. As I have said to him previously, there has been a record funding settlement for Police Scotland in the current year and there are more officers per head of population in Scotland than there are in England and Wales. Furthermore, there is a healthy pipeline of officer recruitment.

Although I am happy to discuss the details of ideas that Mr Kerr might wish to bring to the table, a lot of the things that he is looking at are operational decisions for the chief constable, and we need to be mindful of that.

Hospice Care (National Funding Framework)

2. **Sanne Dijkstra-Downie (Edinburgh Northern) (LD):** To ask the Scottish Government what progress it has made in developing a new national funding framework for hospice care. (S7O-00368)

The Minister for Community Care (Alison Thewliss): This week marks hospice care week 2026. On Tuesday evening, I was delighted to speak at the reception that was hosted by Hospice UK and the Scottish hospice leadership group, and I know that lots of colleagues were there in support of their local hospices. It was really good to hear from hospice staff, volunteers and patients at that reception.

The Scottish National Party Government remains committed to the development of a new national framework to support more effective planning and commissioning of the palliative care that is provided by independent hospices. I met the Scottish hospice leadership group and Hospice UK just last month, and we plan to work closely

with them to develop terms of reference for that work. We will engage with key partners in the statutory sector to take that work forward, recognising that integration joint boards remain legally responsible for the planning and commissioning of palliative care services, including independent hospices, to meet the needs of our local communities.

Sanne Dijkstra-Downie: I am pleased to hear that those conversations are taking place with the sector. St Columba's hospice in north Edinburgh provides vital compassionate care at a critical time for families, but, as it is an independent hospice, only 21 per cent of its funding comes from the Government, with the remainder being raised through fundraising and partnerships. With costs and demand rising, that is simply not sustainable.

Funding top-ups through yearly budgets are welcome but do not give the long-term financial sustainability that the sector needs. When will the minister be able to give clarity on the long-term fair funding that the sector is asking for?

Alison Thewliss: As I set out, those conversations continue. We hope to get to a conclusion on the matter as soon as we can, because those services cannot wait and they need certainty. I reassure the member that we have confirmed that £9.4 million will be provided for independent hospices in our 2026-27 budget to ensure that they are supported to pay their staff in line with their national health service counterparts. I am pleased to confirm that that resource is in the process of being allocated to NHS boards for immediate onward payment to those hospices.

Cara McKee (West Scotland) (Green): Hospice organisations are essential in allowing people and their families to focus on living right to the end. Does the minister agree that reliable, long-term and sustainable funding for the hospice sector not only enables staff and services to fully deliver their life-changing work but frees up NHS capacity, which provides vital savings, and enables family carers to continue to work and live their own lives, thereby contributing to the local economy generally?

Alison Thewliss: I very much agree with those statements. Hospices provide vital support. It was good to hear at the reception the other night the difference that that makes to families, not just when their loved one is going through hospice care but through the support that they receive from hospices even after their loved one has passed away. Hospices make an incredible difference.

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): I attended the Kilbride hospice annual general meeting last week. It was great to hear from the minister about some of the support that will be offered to that hospice.

Children's Hospices Across Scotland, which recently celebrated its 21st birthday, supported 126 children across Scotland last year. *[Alex Kerr has corrected this contribution. See end of report.]* Will the minister join me in wishing CHAS a happy birthday, and will she set out what support the Government is giving to ensure that it can continue to deliver its vital services?

Alison Thewliss: I commend Kilbride hospice for the work that it does in Mr Kerr's constituency.

CHAS works throughout Scotland to support young people and their families. I was delighted to meet the charity twice in September, and I wish it a happy birthday.

We are committed to supporting, and working in partnership with, CHAS as we deliver our five-year palliative care strategy. In 2025-26, we facilitated through health boards additional funding for CHAS, which totalled £2.6 million on top of the £7 million that it receives annually. Funding to ensure that its hospice staff are paid in line with their NHS counterparts has also been forthcoming. That has brought CHAS's total funding to more than £10 million.

Joe Long (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Hospice care sits within a wider ecosystem of palliative care. Marie Curie estimates that one Scot in three who dies has unmet palliative care needs. How will the Scottish Government ensure that palliative care is available to all who need it, particularly those in areas of socioeconomic deprivation?

Alison Thewliss: Through the negotiations that we are undertaking, we hope to make hospice care available to all who need it. It is important to put on the record that not all care that hospices provide takes place in hospice buildings. A huge amount of care goes on in our communities. That work is at the forefront of that care, given how important it can be to people. Many people do not want to be in a hospice, as nice and as good an environment as that can be, and prefer to be in their homes, which is possible increasingly often due to the support that hospices have had.

The Presiding Officer: The member who was to ask question 3 was not here for the start of this item of business. Therefore, we move to question 4.

National Treatment Centre

4. **Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government when the national treatment centre at Perth royal infirmary, which it committed to in 2021, will open. (S7O-00370)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): The Scottish Government's

infrastructure delivery pipeline sets out the infrastructure projects and programmes that the Scottish Government will fund over the next four financial years. The Government is working with all health boards to develop a whole-system infrastructure plan to identify investment priorities across NHS Scotland. Projects that had begun the business case process but were then paused, such as the remaining national treatment centres, will be considered as part of that work.

Murdo Fraser: As the cabinet secretary knows, a new national treatment centre at Perth royal infirmary was promised in 2021. It was due to open for patients in 2023, but not one penny has been committed and not one brick has been laid. That promise has been broken.

Now Perth residents read in the local press that there has been discussion in NHS Tayside about closing the emergency department at Perth royal infirmary, either in whole or in part, and moving that resource to Ninewells hospital. Can the cabinet secretary provide a cast-iron guarantee that that will not happen?

Angela Constance: I well understand why Mr Fraser is an advocate for national treatment centres. They work, they are very productive and they are effective at reducing waiting lists. I reassure him that the remaining national treatment centres will be considered as part of that whole-system infrastructure planning.

I remind Mr Fraser about the financial context in relation to the real-terms cuts to the block grant by the previous United Kingdom Government and the real-terms reduction in capital funding under the current UK Government.

I will write to Mr Fraser with full details on his point about emergency departments. It is an important issue, because any such move would be a significant service delivery change. National health service boards, through their functions and authorities, have to consider how best to facilitate the right care at the right time, but it is worth putting on the record that there needs to be much further engagement on and exploration of those matters.

Cardiology Waiting Times (Impact on Patient Care and Outcomes)

5. **Victor Currie (Highlands and Islands) (Reform):** I declare an interest as an employee of the national health service. To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the impact of cardiology waiting times on unscheduled care and patient outcomes, including any action it can take to reduce diagnostic and treatment delays and avoidable hospital admissions. (S7O-00371)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): Timely access to cardiology services is important for improving patient outcomes and reducing pressure on urgent and unscheduled care services. We very much recognise that delays in diagnosis or treatment can result in some patients experiencing deterioration in their condition and might increase the likelihood of an avoidable hospital admission.

That is why we are investing in planned care, diagnostics and treatment capacity across NHS Scotland. This year, we have invested £100 million through the NHS Scotland operational improvement plan, alongside a further £90 million package that is targeted at reducing the longest waits and increasing planned care capacity.

Victor Currie: I welcomed the initiative that the Scottish Government showed in its heart disease action plan for 2021 to 2026, but the stark reality is that, today, more than 24,000 Scots are trapped on cardiology out-patient lists, with a further 26,000 waiting for a vital echocardiogram.

Given the direct link between diagnostic delays and the crisis in unscheduled care, what plans does the Government have for a successor national cardiology transformation plan to build on the current framework? Will the cabinet secretary commit to producing such a plan?

Angela Constance: I would wish to keep the Parliament informed of all plans as we move forward in this important area, given that cardiovascular and respiratory conditions are a leading cause of ill health in this country.

Mr Currie is quite right to point to the fact that cardiology services across Scotland continue to experience significant demand. However, more recent data indicates that more patients are being removed from NHS Scotland out-patient waiting lists than are being added, and that timely access to diagnostic investigations remains a key component of cardiology pathways. Waiting lists for the eight key diagnostic tests are at their lowest level since 2021. I point to the Scottish Government's important work with the British Society of Echocardiography to pilot science-led clinics at two sites in Scotland. I will be happy to keep Mr Currie fully informed of our work.

Andrew Baxter (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD): Last week, I made a 190-mile round trip from home to Raigmore hospital for an angiogram. For many Highland patients, the wait for diagnosis and treatment is compounded by even longer journeys, often by public transport. What action will the Government take to expand access to cardiac diagnostics closer to home, in NHS Highland and across Scotland?

Angela Constance: Mr Baxter makes a fair and reasonable point. That is why the Government's support of mobile MRI and CT scanners is

important. As part of our community first approach, we need to shift more testing and diagnostic work into communities. That will benefit all of Scotland, not least the communities that Mr Baxter represents.

Premium Night Bus Services (Glasgow)

6. **Holly Bruce (Glasgow Southside) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government what discussions Transport Scotland has had with bus operators regarding night services that are categorised as "premium", including what consideration has been given to adapting the £2 bus fare cap to help ensure that people requiring access to evening services in Glasgow have access to safe and affordable travel. (S7O-00372)

The Minister for Business and Fair Work (Tom Arthur): Night bus services in Scotland provide essential late-night mobility, which supports local economies, enhances personal safety and improves access to shift work and social activities.

Only a small number of services are excluded from the £2 fare cap and our national concessionary travel schemes. Those include tour buses and premium-fare night buses. Commercial bus operators are responsible for setting their own fares and deciding whether a service will operate at a premium fare. I confirm, however, that the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport has asked Transport Scotland to engage with bus operators on the issue and on the £2 bus fare cap that has been delivered by the Government.

Holly Bruce: I welcome the speedy change to business after my question was published last Wednesday, as McGill's U-turned on the Friday.

Free bus travel for under-22s and disabled people in Scotland is still exclusive of night services, despite the Government's claim earlier this year that disabled people can travel free. Many under-22s work in hospitality, and young women need safe transport home after a night out. Will the Scottish Government commit to free night bus travel for under-22s and disabled people, so that safe transport is accessible to all who need it and is not seen as a premium service?

Tom Arthur: Given the influence that Holly Bruce seems to wield with bus operators in Scotland, perhaps the issue will be addressed by the end of today's session.

In all seriousness, she makes important points and I am happy to take them away and have dialogue with the cabinet secretary on those matters.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): Glasgow's night bus network has contracted continuously in recent years, from a seven-day service down to operating only on Friday and Saturday nights. Late-running buses are regularly cancelled due to poor fleet maintenance, and even when workers manage to finish their shifts early to catch the last bus, cancellations mean that they often find themselves stranded without an appropriate and affordable way home. Can the minister confirm that the franchising frameworks proposed in the better buses legislation will ensure that high standards of fleet maintenance and availability are explicitly included in the specifications for potential franchisees, with penalties for cancellations?

Tom Arthur: Paul Sweeney raises several important points about dialogue and engagement in relation to the work that we are undertaking on better buses legislation. All those matters can be considered as part of that process. He has put them on the record.

Child Contact (Grandparents)

7. **Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government when it expects to commence the remaining provisions of the Children (Scotland) Act 2020 relating to child contact cases, including those that can address delays affecting grandparents seeking to maintain contact with their grandchildren. (S7O-00373)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): The Scottish Government remains absolutely committed to implementing the Children (Scotland) Act 2020 in full. The legislation is ambitious, and implementing it involves a variety of detailed implementation tasks, each with its own set of challenges and interdependencies.

The act does not create any specific rights for grandparents. However, many of its provisions are designed to improve the handling of child contact cases in general, which may include cases in which grandparents seek contact with their grandchildren. For example, the act adds additional factors that require courts, when they are considering the effect of an order, to consider the involvement of parents in the child's upbringing and the child's important relationships with other people. Those could, of course, include relationships with grandparents. We intend to include those in the next set of commencement regulations, which we are planning in the next 12 months.

Dawn Black: One of my constituents has not seen her grandchildren for almost three years due to a communication breakdown with her daughter. Previous attempts at mediation have been unsuccessful. Given that sections 23 and 24 of the act are still being piloted, what practical difference will the reforms make for grandparents in such situations?

Kirsten Oswald: I appreciate the impact that prolonged family disputes can have on grandparents and children alike.

Sections 23 and 24 of the Children (Scotland) Act 2020 are not yet in force, and they only mandate that ministers carry out a pilot of compulsory information sessions about the availability of alternatives and set up a scheme to pay for alternative dispute resolution procedures where individuals elect to use them. Mediation and other forms of resolution outside court can play a valuable role in helping to resolve family disputes where it is safe and appropriate to do so. However, it is a basic principle that such processes must be entered into voluntarily by all parties.

Defence Technical Excellence Colleges

8. **Joe Long (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will match the United Kingdom Government's £10 million commitment for defence technical excellence colleges, to create the possibility of two such hubs in Scotland to support skills and economic development. (S7O-00374)

The Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education (Alyn Smith): In principle, yes. Defence technical excellence colleges could be an interesting model for other colleges in other specialisations in other places and for joint work in other areas. However, it is difficult to consider such possibilities without any information on that having been provided by the UK Government.

Stephen Flynn and I have written to the United Kingdom Government requesting a meeting to discuss the DTEC proposal further, and I have committed to it, but we require further details so that we can find a mutually acceptable way forward that supports Scotland's skills and economic development priorities. The information currently available, which has been given to us, is insufficient to make that commitment, and I am not going to sign a blank cheque.

Joe Long: I thank the minister for the warm signal of a direction of travel. Forth Valley College's Alloa campus faces an uncertain future, and the commitment could provide financial stability for Fife College and Forth Valley College through a DTEC hub, ensuring that young people get good skills and jobs close to home. Does the minister recognise that we risk falling behind DTEC hubs elsewhere in the UK if we do not get this sorted with some urgency?

Alyn Smith: I am glad to hear that the member and I are in an obvious furious agreement on this. I want to see the DTECs move forward. I will meet the Secretary of State for Defence any time, any place, anywhere to thrash out the details. The Alloa campus of Forth Valley College is close to my heart, and this could be an important part in its recovery. I will keep in touch with the member on that.

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): I believe that the location of those programmes is as important as the amount of money that is committed to them. For instance, I welcome the £59 million investment as part of the Fife industrial innovation investment programme—known as Fife i3—which aims to revitalise the many post-industrial areas of central and southern Fife. Can the minister assure Parliament that the areas that have been deprived of opportunities for many years will be the primary beneficiaries of such programmes?

Alyn Smith: I can give general assurance, but the whole point of the DTECs is that they are a network of colleges focused on one area but involving lots of other places. That is the point; that is why they are innovative. However, the member made a fair point, and I agree with the sentiment.

Measles (NHS Grampian)

9. **Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of NHS Grampian's preparedness to respond to any further cases of measles. (S7O-00375)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): National health service boards are responsible for ensuring that appropriate arrangements are in place to respond to infectious diseases, including measles. We work closely with Public Health Scotland and NHS boards to monitor measles activity across Scotland. Established local and national public health arrangements are in place for the management of suspected and confirmed measles cases.

In relation to the cases that were identified in Grampian earlier this year, appropriate public health actions were undertaken, including contact tracing and follow-up of identified contacts.

Liam Kerr: The post-incident debrief that NHS Grampian carried out in March identified various risks and learning outcomes from the measles cases. In August, I asked the Government to convene a dedicated north-east measles preparedness meeting to ensure that those outcomes were implemented but, regrettably, the minister refused, while acknowledging a lack of data. Will the minister tell us whether every single one of the learning outcomes in the debrief has been implemented? If not, or if she cannot, will she reconsider her refusal to convene the meeting that I suggested?

Maree Todd: I am more than happy to look into the issue that the member raises and to get back

to him in writing. The Scottish Government did not undertake a separate formal assessment of NHS Grampian's preparedness, because assurance is provided through established national health service and public health governance arrangements. NHS Grampian responded through well-established local and national procedures, working closely with Public Health Scotland.

Appropriate public health measures, including contact tracing and the following up of contacts, were undertaken in line with national guidance and, crucially, there has been no evidence of any sustained community transmission associated with those cases, while numbers of measles cases across Scotland remain low. That demonstrates the value of the surveillance and response arrangements that are already in place.

Better Buses Legislation

10. **Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government what decisions it has made regarding the timing and content of its proposed better buses legislation. (S7O-00376)

The Minister for Business and Fair Work (Tom Arthur): Our prospective better buses legislation aims to help enhance the delivery of bus services across Scotland. We are keen to ensure that future legislative provision supports timely and effective interventions. There is a range of approaches that could achieve that, including primary and secondary legislation, and work is ongoing to consider the most appropriate measures.

The Scottish Government welcomes engagement with members from across Parliament on the matter. Over the coming months, we will undertake further engagement and discussion regarding potential options before decisions on next steps are taken.

Patrick Harvie: The commitment to better buses legislation was made at the start of September in the programme for government, but, barely a week later, the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport told Parliament that he did not have the first clue whether there would be one bill, multiple bills or no bills, nor what would be in them.

I suggest to the minister that he could go back to his office today and instruct his officials to start drafting legislative clauses to speed up franchising by removing the panel stage; to put duties on ministers to financially support the use of those franchising powers; and to give a statutory basis for the bus fare cap and to a timetable. If the cabinet secretary has not made up his mind, will the minister just go ahead and instruct the drafting of that legislation?

Tom Arthur: We would not want to be pre-emptive before having a full opportunity to consider all of Mr Harvie's views and those of members from across the chamber.

I very much welcome his contribution. On his point about a legislative basis for the cap and review of the panel, those things can be considered as part of the process. I know that, like me, the cabinet secretary welcomes the views of Mr Harvie and other members as we proceed with the engagement process.

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): Private bus operators were invited to the Scottish Government's first round-table meeting on the better buses bill, but trade unions were excluded. Will the minister confirm that trade unions will be involved in those discussions and that the interests of passengers and workers, rather than those of private bus operators, will shape the content of the bill?

Tom Arthur: I am happy to do so. The round-table meeting that took place in late August was just the first in a process of engagement, and I am happy to confirm to the member that the cabinet secretary has written to trade unions to offer a meeting to ensure that they are fully engaged in the process.

Adam Harley (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD): The powers for bus franchising have existed in Scotland for seven years but we still do not have a franchised bus service in operation, and the Government's plans for better buses legislation are pretty vague. Can the minister confirm when that legislation will be introduced and whether it will make franchising easier and quicker so that communities such as those in Twechar, Lennoxtown and Torrance in my constituency can have a better and more reliable service?

Tom Arthur: I do not want to repeat the points that I made earlier, but I make it absolutely clear to the member that reviewing the franchising model is part of the process and that that process includes potential amendments to the model. I hope that that reassures the member that there will be an opportunity to address the issues that he raises as part of that process.

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): Can the minister elaborate on any Scottish Government plans for the role of councils in any new legislation concerning bus services?

Tom Arthur: The member will be aware of the statutory duties that are placed on local authorities by the Transport Act 1985. We are working on a wider programme of public service reform so, whether through the better buses legislation or that wider PSR process, there is an opportunity for

members and wider society to feed into our deliberations.

First Minister's Question Time

Party Leaders

13:59

Homelessness

1. **Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab):** Two years, four months and 23 days ago, this Parliament voted to declare a housing emergency. Today, a report from the homelessness charity Crisis warns that, without change, Scotland's level of homelessness will remain at the same appalling level for the next 15 years. Core homelessness has more than doubled in the past six years, but those academics say that, with the right interventions, homelessness could be cut in half in the next two years. What are we waiting for?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I welcome the latest report of the homelessness monitor, which provides the insight that supports the agenda that the Government is taking forward. A range of different interventions have been made by the Government, which involve ensuring that we are constructing more housing, bringing more housing into use, supporting individuals who are at risk of homelessness at the earliest possible opportunity to ensure that we avoid homelessness occurring in the first place, and undertaking sustained actions to reduce the use of temporary accommodation. However, I recognise the scale of the challenge, which is why the Government has committed in its budget record sums of investment in housing to address the issue.

Michael Marra: Despite the housing emergency action plan, it is clear that things are getting worse. Crisis tells us that the number of children in Scotland who are living in temporary accommodation has doubled in the past six years to more than 10,000. Homelessness is one of the big reasons why so many Scottish children live in poverty.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation had to sound the alarm this week that Scotland is due to miss our legally binding child poverty target by a mile. These problems are urgent, which I made clear to the First Minister when I met him on Tuesday. I believe that we need cross-party talks to agree how we get back on track—not for one budget but to meet the requirements of the child poverty law across years. The First Minister committed to considering that, so what does he think the next steps are?

John Swinney: I welcome the discussions that have already taken place between me and Mr Marra, and I know that further discussions will be scheduled.

I made two points to Mr Marra on Tuesday that I think are very relevant to this discussion. The first is the absolute priority that the Government attaches to eradicating child poverty. That is at the heart of the programme for government, and the sustained actions that we are taking are in line with the recommendations and the points advanced by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

There will be issues that exacerbate housing and poverty challenges in Scotland that are outwith the hands of this Government. For example, the implications of the local housing allowance freeze that has been applied by the United Kingdom Government significantly increase the levels of poverty in Scotland. The challenges relating to energy costs, which are outwith the control of this Parliament, are further factors. There is a range of measures that we can take in the Parliament to address those issues, and I am absolutely committed to doing so.

The second point that I made to Mr Marra on Tuesday that is relevant here is that our discussions about child poverty and the priority that we attach to addressing it must be linked to our discussions about the budget. That is the invitation that I extended to Mr Marra on Tuesday, and I extend the invitation publicly here in the Parliament, to make sure that we have a focused discussion that links our measures on child poverty to decisions on the budget. He will find that I and the Deputy First Minister are very happy to engage on that basis.

Michael Marra: The First Minister knows that I set out to him on Tuesday—and I do so again now—that it is not a question of one budget; it is a question of multiple years, and we need a plan that is agreed across the Parliament to get us back on track. I think that that should be done with all parties coming around the table and getting together.

The First Minister says that this is an absolute priority, but the Government is not consumed by these urgent issues. Instead, it is setting out, without a clear purpose, plan or process, to upend the whole of our national health service, our social work system, all of our schools and the entirety of local government, all at the same time.

The sheer scale of the confusion really matters when it comes to the housing emergency action plan. The then housing secretary, Màiri McAllan, told the Parliament that she needed the full focus of councils as

"the folks whom I am relying on to deliver the plan".—[*Official Report*, *Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee*, 7 October 2025; c 15.]

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation specifically warned this week that the public service reform programme risks distracting everyone from the child poverty mission. This is what the JRF meant. Far from pulling everyone together, the First Minister is planning to spend years and untold amounts of money pulling things apart, with no clarity of reason and no plan as to how. Nobody I meet—including the First Minister—can explain any of that. Scotland risks a decade of distraction unless the First Minister sets out a purpose and a plan. Will he do so now?

The First Minister: I am trying to be as helpful as I can be, but I have to point out some pretty obvious things to Mr Marra. Mr Marra campaigned on a manifesto to reduce the number of health boards from the current number to three. I am proposing to have two. Members of the public will be utterly bewildered. Indeed, the very few people who voted Labour in Scotland at the election will be bewildered that Mr Marra fought an election saying that we had to reduce the number of health boards but then, after the election, when he gets defeated very heavily, he comes here and criticises me for advancing with health board rationalisation measures.

There is an opportunity here—and I do not want to get distracted by this political conflict, as I am anxious to make progress with Mr Marra. I noticed in the media this morning that the Liberal Democrat leader was suggesting that the Liberal Democrats were

"the most … powerful group in the parliament."

Those were Mr Cole-Hamilton's words, not mine, I hasten to add—and he has expressed that with the usual modesty that characterises all his contributions to Parliament.

I simply invite Mr Marra to give Mr Cole-Hamilton some competition about who might deal constructively with the Government to make progress for the people of Scotland.

Zionism

2. **Malcolm Offord (West Scotland) (Reform):** Last week, the Green Party of England and Wales passed a despicable motion characterising Zionism as racism. This week, not to be outdone, the Scottish Greens' co-leader, Ross Greer, went further, describing Zionism as being founded on genocide. Let it be said loud and clear in this chamber: Zionism is neither racist nor genocidal. Zionism is a legitimate right of the Jewish people to a homeland in Palestine, which is enshrined in international law and recognised by the United Nations since 1949. Under international law, Israel has the legal right to defend herself after the barbaric and medieval attack launched by Hamas on 7 October 2023.

Will the First Minister agree with me that there was no established international, historical, political or legal basis for Ross Greer's provocative

claim that the state of Israel was founded in 1948 through an act of genocide against the Palestinian people?

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): That is not really a devolved matter, but I will allow the First Minister to answer if he so wishes.

The First Minister (John Swinney): As I made clear in my remarks at the beginning of the week, I do not agree with the conclusion that was arrived at by the conference of the Green Party of England and Wales. I believe that there should be a two-state solution to the issues and conflict in the middle east. I believe that that is the only route to deliver peace and stability, although I accept that, at this moment, the challenges of doing so are particularly acute.

On Monday, I hosted representatives of the Jewish community in Bute house to mark the anniversary of the 7 October attack. I reassured the community of my concern, as First Minister, for their safety and security in Scotland, and I reiterate that in Parliament today. Parliament will be very familiar with the points that I have made on the response of the Israeli Government to the attack on 7 October, which has unleashed intolerable suffering on the people of Palestine, leading to an extraordinary level of suffering as a consequence. I reiterate those comments in Parliament today.

Malcolm Offord: I appreciate the First Minister's candour on the matter and, indeed, the fact that he has met the Jewish community. There are 7,300 Jews in Scotland and 313,000 across the United Kingdom. The community is living under fear, anxiety and trauma every day, which is intolerable in modern Scotland.

Indeed, when the First Minister met the members of the Jewish community, he will have heard at first hand about the intimidation, violence and racism that they experience as they go about their own peaceful lives in Scotland. Dr Sue Siegel of the Jewish Council of Scotland recently spoke of the anguish in her community, citing fear of physical violence for wearing a star of David necklace, young boys avoiding wearing skullcaps and families being scared to worship in their local synagogue. How can there be such daily intimidation in Scotland just for being Jewish?

The First Minister has recognised that he has a responsibility to the Jewish community in Scotland to make them feel safe. Surely, therefore, he must start with condemning the racist rhetoric and blatant antisemitism of the Green Party.

The First Minister: I addressed that point in my first answer by saying that I do not agree with the conclusions of the Green Party conference.

Dr Siegel is one of the members of the Jewish community who came to Bute house on Monday. She is a lady whom I respect, and I value her counsel at all times.

My duty as First Minister is to make sure that every community in our country feels safe and protected—every community. That applies to the Jewish community, and I acknowledge that. That is why I invited the Jewish community to Bute house to meet me and remember the atrocities together, and so that I could express my solidarity. That extends to all communities in Scotland.

I do not think that, on a day when Thomas Kerr is going to lead a members' business debate in this chamber demanding that women be forbidden from wearing the burqa in our country, Malcolm Offord is in any position to lecture me or invite me to stand on behalf of all communities. As First Minister of Scotland, I will always defend the safety of every single community in our country, and I deplore the content of the debate that we are going to hear tonight. [*Interruption*.]

The Presiding Officer: Thank you. Let us hear Mr Offord.

Malcolm Offord: True to form, the First Minister tries to divert and dodge the question. This is a very serious issue, so let me try again, one last time.

Last month, an amendment was lodged to a Scottish Parliament motion on middle east boycotts that, first, explicitly condemned

"the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel on 7 October 2023";

secondly, recognised

"Israel as a democratic state";

thirdly, affirmed

"Israel's right to defend itself";

and, fourthly, opposed

"blanket boycotts".

That amendment was defeated, with 54 SNP MSPs voting against it.

Last week, SNP minister Hannah Mary Goodlad attacked Kim Schmulian in this chamber for supporting the only democracy in the middle east, claiming that Israel was perpetrating genocide in Gaza. Meanwhile, Palestinian flags fly from municipal buildings across Scotland, with the Israeli flag banned from this very building. The International Court of Justice has not made any judicial ruling that Israel has committed genocide in Palestine.

Will the First Minister unequivocally condemn the racism being whipped up against Israel in this chamber? Will he now expel his friends in the racist Green Party from sharing his platform at the SNP conference in Aberdeen next week?

The First Minister: It is utterly beyond parody that Malcolm Offord invites me to take action on racism when he leads a party that has brought racism into this parliamentary chamber. I have served in this Parliament since 1999 and I have answered questions for many years from this podium. Not once have I previously been asked to ban the burqa or to divide communities in our country, but I have been invited to do so since May, since that lot came into this Parliament. That speaks for itself.

Data Centres (Communities' Views)

3. **Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Green):** The Scottish Government has said that no decision on applications for huge data centre developments should be made until new guidance is in place. However, since that statement, Dumfries and Galloway has seen an application for one of the largest data centres in the world. It would be a monstrosity that would use the same amount of electricity as more than 2.2 million Scottish homes. Five thousand people have objected to it already, but Chapelcross now joins Larbert, Greenock, Auchtertool and 21 other communities across Scotland that are waiting to see whether they will be blighted by huge data centres. What reassurance can the First Minister give those communities that their views will be listened to?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The best reassurance that I can give is to repeat the commitment that I have given to Parliament on previous occasions, which is that we do not anticipate that any applications will be determined by planning authorities before our planning guidance is issued later this year. I am very confident about the authority of that statement.

Gillian Mackay: The First Minister's Government has acknowledged that tech giants are marking their own homework when it comes to applications. In this chamber, he previously referred to an Edinburgh hyperscale data centre as "green", but the Government later confirmed to us that the reference to it being green was taken directly from the description provided by the applicant. That comes after investigative journalists at *The Ferret* found that the Scottish Government had been lobbied by industry to use the phrase "green data centre". Will he now make a concrete commitment to listen to the views of communities, as well as lobbyists, by carrying out a full public consultation on the draft guidance before any planning decisions are made?

The First Minister: The Government engages with a range of interested parties, and the Government would be criticised if it did not do so.

Those parties include members of the community. If my memory is correct, we have called in the application for Edinburgh, and we have indicated that further guidance will be issued. In preparing that guidance, the Government is of course engaging with a variety of different opinions. If we were to undertake a full-scale public consultation of the scale that is determined by, or requested by, legislation, that would significantly extend the amount of time until the guidance could be made available. That might compromise the commitment that I gave to Parliament, because of the timescales involved.

I will consider the issue that Gillian Mackay has raised, but I have to ensure that we take our decisions in an orderly fashion and give guidance to the planning authorities that have legitimate statutory obligations to address in relation to determining those applications.

Gillian Mackay: I appreciate the statutory duty that local authorities have, but giving that time would also give the time that would enable communities to have their say on the planning guidance that comes forward.

I know from my constituents that the uncertainty around those centres is causing genuine and profound concern. Communities simply do not know what is going to come along. Councils across the country do not know what is going to come along, and local businesses do not know either. For example, the determination date for the Larbert application lapsed on 4 October. I appreciate what the First Minister says about not anticipating any decisions being made, but that leaves the Larbert community in my region in limbo.

Has the First Minister instructed the chief planner to issue directives to councils telling them to pause applications until the Government guidance is in place? If not, when will he do so, to give those communities that certainty?

The First Minister: The Government engages actively with local authorities to provide advice and guidance on the consideration of applications. What I and my ministers say in Parliament will be reflected in the communication and interventions of the chief planner, operating within the statutory framework that is appropriate for such decisions. We have a number of statutory obligations to be mindful of, not least those in the contents of national planning framework 4, which has been approved by Parliament on a statutory basis. The Government cannot just ignore the contents of that planning framework. I assure Gillian Mackay that what I am saying in Parliament is being communicated and conveyed by the chief planner to planning authorities.

Benefits Fraud

4. **Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con):** I am not allowed to call the First Minister a liar. However, last week he told me that Scots would "lose our pensions". His statement was false and he knows it, but because it is John Swinney, he refuses to correct the record. We see the same culture of dishonesty and evasion at the heart of the Scottish National Party's light-touch benefits system. It is wide open to abuse. Can John Swinney explain why he is okay with chancers and crooks stealing benefits from Scotland's hard-working taxpayers?

The First Minister: I cannot police the remarks and accusations that Russell Findlay makes in the chamber. It is the same style of comment that was made by that distinguished parliamentarian Douglas Ross, whom even the Tories wanted to get rid of because they could not stomach his contributions in Parliament.

I was struck by the introduction that Russell Findlay got on "The Sunday Show" at the weekend. He was introduced as the man who had taken the Conservatives from second to fifth place, and the programme wanted to know what his plans would be next—further decline comes to mind, from what he has got to say.

In relation to the social security system, the issue that he raises sums up why the Tory party is in fifth place in Scottish politics today. In 2018, the Parliament unanimously passed the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018. The Conservatives voted for it, and some of their members were part of committees that strengthened the approach that we took and demanded that we anchor the system in the principles of fairness, dignity and respect. Now, Russell Findlay comes to the Parliament and badmouths vulnerable individuals in our society—that sums up the Scottish Conservative party.

Russell Findlay: He cannot police my remarks, but he can take some responsibility for his own. The reality is that the Scottish National Party's benefits bill is already sky high, and it is soon about to top more than £9 billion every single year. We value the safety net for those in need, but fraud has become rife. We have found some new evidence. Over the past three years, 23,000 fraud allegations were made to Social Security Scotland, but just 42 of those were reported to the Crown Office.

We know that cheats can only be asked to return money they are not entitled to and tick a box to keep getting benefits. My party's proposed benefit fraud bill would restore fairness for taxpayers by forcing repayments and ending the tick-box claims. Will John Swinney back the cheats, or will he back Scottish taxpayers?

The First Minister: Social Security Scotland has the powers to recover overpayments through voluntary or enforced deductions for claims ongoing in the system and, where entitlement has ended, through the courts. Social Security Scotland is committed to ensuring that public money reaches those who are entitled to it, while actively deterring, preventing, detecting and investigating instances of fraud.

I want social security payments to reach the people who need them. I do not want them to reach people who do not need them. Social Security Scotland was established to make that distinction, not to terrorise vulnerable people and not to come to Parliament and badmouth them all the time. Social Security Scotland was set up with all-party agreement to deliver fairness, dignity and respect, and I am proud that it is doing so.

Violence in Schools

5. **Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh North Western) (LD):** First, I offer the solidarity of the Scottish Liberal Democrats to Scotland's Jewish community and Jews around the world as we commemorate yesterday's anniversary of the horrific atrocity of October 7 by Hamas and rededicate ourselves to peace in the middle east and a two-state solution.

I declare an interest, as my wife is a teacher. This week, Scotland's schools break up for the October holidays, and many teachers will be at their wits' end. New Scottish Liberal Democrat research, which has been published today, shows that there were 44,000 violent incidents in our schools last year. In primary schools, it is the worst that it has ever been. In Fife, violence in those schools has more than quadrupled since 2018. What does the First Minister have to say to those teachers and pupils who are going back to school in a couple of weeks' time, some of whom will be absolutely petrified at what is waiting for them there?

The First Minister (John Swinney): What I would say is that poor and violent behaviour is not to be tolerated in our schools, and we must address it through the various intervention mechanisms that are available to us. The Government regularly engages with our local authority partners and the teaching trade unions to devise behaviour codes for our schools and to ensure that they are applied. The Government is taking steps to ensure that that is the case and that the resources are in place to implement those codes. The Government takes a variety of interventions, and we will continue to work with our local authority partners to ensure that they are applied in the schools of Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Adam, will you sit down, please? Thank you.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: We have been listening to answers like that from the First Minister and his ministers for years, but the situation is getting worse. Police recorded the presence of knives in schools 127 times last year alone. The Educational Institute of Scotland has said that safety in our schools is

"the ticking time bomb in Scottish education that is just waiting to go boom."

I fear that that is already happening.

Pupils and teachers are struggling, which is why they need more classroom assistants, more behavioural experts in schools and more access to youth work. Liberal Democrats have been talking about the rising level of violence in our schools for years. We have offered solutions, yet the situation is still getting worse. Can the First Minister not see that what he is doing just is not working?

The First Minister: Some of the steps that Mr Cole-Hamilton has suggested are steps that we took as a consequence of agreement with the Liberal Democrats on the contents of the Government's budget last year. The extra resources that were put in place—which, if my memory serves me right, amounted to about £29 million—were allocated to increase the number of additional support needs assistants in our schools. That money was allocated to our local authorities. We have also provided £8 million of investment to support the implementation of the violence prevention framework since its publication in May 2023.

The behaviour codes are in place, and, of course, the Government is taking forward bans on mobile phones in schools—voluntary bans, initially, so that speedy progress can be made, but we will move to a legislative position at the earliest possible opportunity. Mr Cole-Hamilton will appreciate that it will take us time to legislate on that issue.

Mr Cole-Hamilton's question raises the significance of the dialogue that will take place in the next few weeks on the budget. To be serious, the points that he is making reflect what he said in the article and interview in this morning's *The Herald*.

I have made it abundantly clear to Parliament that I need to work with others to enable the Government's policy programme and its budget to be passed. That is very obvious from the parliamentary arithmetic. I look forward to discussing concrete practical proposals that will enable us to pass a budget that will help to address the issues that Mr Cole-Hamilton has raised with me, if Parliament decides that that is the course of action that it wishes to take.

Mr Cole-Hamilton, the Liberal Democrats and other parties in Parliament can rely on my willingness and that of my Government to engage to do the best that we can to improve the lives of people in Scotland, including schoolteachers and pupils in the schools of our country.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's question time for party leaders.

Winter Planning and Hospital Flow

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The next item of business is a statement by Angela Constance on planning for winter and improving hospital flow. Questions will be taken at the end of the statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

14:29

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): Every year, winter brings significant pressures for our health and social care services, and I want to be clear and transparent that we are facing a difficult period. Our health and care services continue to face significant pressure. It is not a uniquely Scottish issue, but it is important that we take all the steps that we can to prepare for the challenges ahead. That is why I want to update the Parliament today on the actions that are being taken across Scotland to prepare for winter and to ensure that people continue to receive safe and compassionate care.

We know that demand will increase, that our health and care services will face additional pressures and that many people, particularly older people and those with complex conditions, are more vulnerable during winter. We are not and have not been waiting for those pressures to emerge. Preparations have been under way for months. National and local partners are strengthening resilience, supporting capacity and preparing for increased demand.

Our preparations are not simply about plans. They are about people. They are about those who want to get home after a hospital stay. They are about those living with long-term conditions who want to receive care as close to home as possible. They are about families seeking reassurance that their loved ones will receive the right care in the right place at the right time. They are about our dedicated staff across the health and social care services who work tirelessly every day to provide excellent care.

Our approach is already improving how people access and move through health and social care services. This morning, I wrote to the Health, Care and Sport Committee to set out how the £90 million of additional funding that was announced in July will be targeted to drive down long waits for planned appointments and treatment. That includes extra funding to maximise and maintain planned care activity throughout the year, including over winter.

Flow works best when people receive care more quickly, spend less time waiting for treatment and are able to return home when it is safe to do so. In August, we published the “Health and Social Care Improving Flow Plan 2026-2031”, which sets out actions to improve access to care, support timely discharge and reduce avoidable delays across the system. That includes expanding hospital at home services, improving discharge planning from the earliest stages of a hospital stay, introducing new integrated navigation arrangements and strengthening performance oversight to support delivery and improvement across Scotland. We are already progressing those actions, which will help to make a difference this winter.

Fundamentally, we must continue moving towards a system in which more people receive care outside hospital whenever that is appropriate. That is why we continue to expand hospital at home services, allowing more people to receive hospital-level care in their own homes and aiming to have more than 10,000 people benefiting this winter. We are strengthening rehabilitation, recovery and community services, which help people to avoid unnecessary admission, regain independence sooner and return home more quickly. New initiatives such as the enhanced rehabilitation service in Edinburgh are transforming how care is delivered by bringing intensive rehabilitation into people’s homes and reducing the time that people need to spend in hospital. Improving outcomes for patients will release hospital capacity.

Our aim is simple: a community-first approach to help people to receive care earlier, closer to home and in settings that meet their needs. We are already strengthening services in the community, including through initiatives such as the community glaucoma service, to allow people to access care closer to home, which can improve outcomes, prevent problems from escalating and reduce the need for hospital. The approach will be set out in the primary care and community health route map, which will be published later this autumn.

Although progress is being made, challenges remain with delayed discharge. It is unacceptable for anyone to remain in hospital longer than necessary once they are clinically ready for discharge. Although 97 per cent of discharges happen without delay, I am troubled by the current levels, and I am acutely aware of the impact that delayed discharge can have on those who are affected. For many people, home is the best place to recover. Remaining in hospital longer than necessary can affect independence, wellbeing and recovery. It also reduces hospital capacity, causing issues at the front door. Reducing delayed discharge is just one vital component of the picture.

Support begins at the start of the hospital journey, which is why we continue to expand access to acute frailty services. Those services help to ensure that people receive rapid specialist assessment shortly after arriving in hospital. That allows clinicians to identify people who can be safely managed through community services, such as hospital at home, ambulatory pathways or same-day care rather than traditional in-patient admission.

Healthcare Improvement Scotland reports that, at Glasgow royal infirmary, a frailty assessment unit and multidisciplinary frailty pathway reduced average length of stay from 13 days to nine without increasing readmissions. For families, that means knowing that their loved ones are receiving the right care in the right place while avoiding unnecessary prolonged hospital stays.

I must be direct that solving delayed discharge is not entirely within the gift of the Scottish Government. No organisation can solve that challenge alone. Reducing delays requires co-ordinated action across health services, social care, local government, housing and community support, working together to ensure that people can return home safely and promptly with the support that is needed.

It is the statutory duty of local authorities to deliver social care. Decisions about budgeting cannot take precedence over the needs of the very people we were all elected to serve. I will be working closely with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities through our co-chaired collaborative response and assurance group, but I make it clear to all partners that the status quo on delayed discharge must end.

I ask that local government, and parliamentarians from across the chamber, work collectively on solutions, because at the heart of delays are people who are separated from their loved ones and who are vulnerable to becoming more unwell the longer the hospital stay. The Scottish Government will work in good faith with all partners who want to improve our system.

Alongside the improving flow plan today, we are publishing a refreshed surge preparedness framework for Scotland. Its purpose is straightforward: to help partners to work together to anticipate pressures, take early action and ensure that people continue to receive the care and support that are needed throughout winter. It provides a shared approach across health and social care services, helping organisations to plan ahead, maintain awareness of emerging pressures and take co-ordinated action when that is needed. Above all, it reinforces the collective responsibility that we all share. Again, no single organisation can deliver that alone.

Success depends on national health service boards, local authorities, integration joint boards, primary care services, social care providers, the third sector and national Government working together with a common purpose. When one part of the system experiences pressure, the impact is felt elsewhere. Equally, when partners work together effectively, people receive better care. That collective effort will be critical over winter.

Finally, there is a role for everyone in Scotland to play. Seasonal illnesses, including flu, are already circulating, and I encourage everyone who is eligible to come forward for vaccination. Vaccination remains one of the most effective ways of protecting ourselves, reducing the risk of serious illness and helping to protect those who are most vulnerable during winter. Last winter, around 5,000 adults and 1,700 children in Scotland were hospitalised with flu. Getting vaccinated protects you and those around you—it really is that simple.

It is also important that people know how and where to access care. Attendance at accident and emergency remains extremely high, and many people could be treated more appropriately in services closer to home. A and E should be used for emergencies. Choosing the right service can help people to receive advice and treatment more quickly, while ensuring that emergency care remains available for those who need it most.

That is why we are launching a new public awareness campaign to ensure that people know where and how to access support, particularly over winter. That campaign is scheduled to go live later this month. It will direct people to the most appropriate service, including pharmacy first, general practice, community dentistry, community optometry and NHS 24, whether online or by telephone, from the comfort of their own home.

There is no doubt that winter will be challenging, but we enter it having planned early. We have strengthened our preparedness arrangements, we are delivering practical actions through the plan that is set out in the improving flow document and we are working closely with partners across Scotland to ensure that services are as resilient as possible. Most importantly, we are doing so with a clear focus on the people who rely on those services.

The measure of our preparedness is not whether pressures arise; it is how effectively we respond to those pressures. Our ambition remains clear that every person should receive the right care in the right place at the right time. Achieving that will require leadership, collaboration and determination across the whole system.

Finally, I place on record my thanks to our health and social care workforce, whose commitment,

professionalism and compassion are exceptional. Their dedication, together with the collective efforts of partners across Scotland, means that we enter this winter prepared, focused and determined to deliver the best possible outcomes for the people we serve.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I intend to allow around 20 minutes for questions. A large number of members wish to ask questions, so I appeal for succinct questions and answers.

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for an advance copy of her statement and very much welcome the public awareness campaign that she announced.

The cabinet secretary will be aware that A and E figures published this week revealed that more than 1,600 patients at Edinburgh Royal infirmary waited more than four hours and that more than 1,200 at Glasgow's Queen Elizabeth university hospital did so. Those are the worst weekly figures since records began. That pressure on A and E is demonstrated by increasing corridor care, ambulances stacked up outside and staff burnout. That results in poorer outcomes for patients, and we know from modelling that has been done by the Royal College of Emergency Medicine that those delays often have profound consequences, resulting in hundreds of avoidable excess deaths.

The level of delayed discharge remains stubbornly high, and that causes even more pressure on A and E, because hospitals are operating at dangerous levels of capacity.

The cabinet secretary knows that we have these statements every year and it seems that little changes. Therefore, I ask her what she will regard as a measure of success. Will it be a drop in the level of delayed discharge? Will it be meeting the four-hour waiting time standard? Will it be ambulance turnaround times reducing? Will it be ending dangerous corridor care? The cabinet secretary was absolutely right to say that this issue is about people, so what difference will people and staff actually see?

Angela Constance: I am grateful to Ms Baillie for her questions. I am always very direct, as I am sure that she knows. I have clearly said that winter will be difficult. There is no downgrading on my part of the messaging that I want to convey.

Ms Baillie rightly quotes statistics, and I am well aware of them. I look at some of those figures on a daily basis and some of them on a weekly basis. The figures that she mentions in relation to A and E waiting times, corridor care, ambulance turnaround times and delayed discharge are all symptoms of the increase in demand that our system continues to face.

I have three priorities as we move through winter and beyond. First, we must absolutely remain focused on improving performance and we must not lose track of that—hence the additional investment.

Secondly, we must respond to the winter pressures. Of course, we are having the statement on winter preparedness a bit earlier than usual this year. As a former resilience minister, I know that preparedness and resilience require year-round activity. We can predict the demands of winter, but we know that a surge in demand can occur at any time, irrespective of the season.

Thirdly, we must carry out our public service reform plans. We all have to recognise that, at the end of the day, we want to change all those figures and measures of performance. They have to be moved to go in the right direction. Fundamentally, we all want a system that is more integrated and works better for patients.

The one message that I want to give Parliament is that we have a shared ambition of achieving resilience, a more integrated system and a sustainable health and social care system. However, we also have to recognise that operational improvement and long-term public sector reform are mutually reinforcing. I believe that that is demonstrated by the hospital flow plan and the revised preparedness document that has been produced this week.

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): I thank the cabinet secretary for her statement. She said:

"It is the statutory duty of local authorities to deliver social care. Decisions about budgeting cannot take precedence over the needs of the very people we were all elected to serve."

Local authorities have been cutting their services year on year as they have to balance their budgets, so will she tell us what additional funding will be available to them?

The cabinet secretary's statement also said:

"Success depends on NHS Boards, local authorities, Integration Joint Boards, primary care services, social care providers, the third sector and national government working together with a common purpose."

We have met many third sector organisations that are collapsing under the cost of energy, rates and staffing issues. What additional funding will be available to them to help in this endeavour?

Angela Constance: I acknowledge that the third sector, like local and national Government, continues to live with the consequences of austerity, Brexit and a cost of living crisis. Supporting the third sector is a cross-Government endeavour. Shirley-Anne Somerville has led that work, and many of us—whether it is Mr Gray, me

or other Cabinet colleagues—have moved forward with a fairer funding model for the third sector to give continuity of funding over the medium term and get out of the cycle of yearly funding.

Any time we discuss social care, it is the default position for various stakeholders or MSPs to talk about funding. I have never demurred from debates or questions about quantum, but I put it on record that the Scottish Government is investing significantly in social care, as we are in local health boards. It is for integrated partnerships to allocate funding from their core resources. I can track my health and social care portfolio funding; it is often harder to track funding elsewhere in the system.

As a former social worker, I am well aware of the statutory responsibilities of local government and chief social work officers. I go back to where I started: it has to be a collective responsibility. We have to work together, and the default position should not always be to ask about resource, important though it is. We will also have to work differently, because the status quo in social care is no longer tenable.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I appeal for shorter answers if possible, cabinet secretary, as a large number of members wish to come in.

Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP): The cabinet secretary will recall speaking with me and other north-east MSPs the other week about the recent incident at Dr Gray's hospital and Aberdeen royal infirmary. It was a concerning incident for my constituents. I welcome the fact that the situation has improved, but will the cabinet secretary say more about the action that the Government is taking to try to avoid any further incidents of that nature during the winter months?

Angela Constance: I am grateful to Ms Mitchell for her question and to her and other MSPs who have worked and engaged with me closely on the matter.

I put on record my thanks for the significant efforts by staff at Dr Gray's hospital and Aberdeen royal infirmary. During that particularly difficult weekend, they continued to be there for the people who needed them.

That incident demonstrated the pressures across the whole health and social care system. If Ms Mitchell and other colleagues refer to the national hospital flow plan, they will see immediate actions and more medium-term to longer-term actions.

The national hospital flow plan is, in essence, about improving accident and emergency performance and addressing issues such as delayed discharge. Very specific actions are being pursued this winter; for example, we are beginning to roll out the good practice of discharge without delay and other initiatives in that field, such as the expansion of hospital at home. It is also worth remembering that hospital at home is not just a service that is available for older people; there is, of course, the paediatric service as well.

A range of actions are being taken this winter, but we should always remember that we need to deploy all the solutions. There is no silver bullet, so it is about putting our shoulders to the wheel and ensuring that all the solutions are deployed with consistency across the country.

Gillian Mackay (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Green): I welcome the focus on community care in the cabinet secretary's statement. Pharmacy first is a fantastic initiative that is undoubtedly diverting people from general practice, but it can be strengthened. Currently, pharmacists do not have access to sufficient patient records to prescribe with confidence, which often means that people are turned away. That risks undermining the programme and forcing people back to the general practitioner or, indeed, into A and E. Will the cabinet secretary tell us what work is under way to improve patient record sharing with pharmacists in order to improve the pharmacy first service and encourage more people to use it?

Angela Constance: Ms Mackay is correct to sing the praises of the pharmacist community—I have a member of that community sitting right next to me. I declare an interest in that I am a frequent user of pharmacy first.

Pharmacists want to do more, and we should take full advantage of that. Pharmacy is an area in our health system, and a profession within it, in which there is room for more innovation. In particular, I point to the work on digital prescribing.

A massive piece of work is required on patient records across health boards and the wider health and social care system. One of the reasons why I am an advocate of NHS simplification and reducing the number of territorial health boards is that it would allow us to move to a single system of information governance. Having 14 different systems of information governance is more of a barrier than a help.

Miles Briggs (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con): Corridor care is becoming the norm in our NHS and, anecdotally, we know that the situation is at its worst during the winter months. Fundamentally, care delivered in corridors and other inappropriate places is unsafe for patients and those treating them. It increases the risk of infection, robs patients of their dignity and increases the likelihood of negative health outcomes.

Does the cabinet secretary agree with the Royal College of Nursing's call today for the Scottish Government to follow the UK Government and commit to recording and reporting incidents of care in inappropriate places this winter?

Angela Constance: I very much welcome the RCN's report today. I agree that we need to come quickly to a view on the definition of "corridor care". Like many things in the world of health, there is no single definition, so we need to resolve that quickly. We also need to be able to measure it, because corridor care is unacceptable and should absolutely not become the norm.

I want to achieve a method of measurement that is proportionate but has people's confidence. I can turn to many people who can develop very good and comprehensive measurement systems, but I do not want that to take a huge amount of time. I want it to be workable in the real world, so that we do not place an additional burden on our hard-pressed system. I am in agreement with the RCN and I was also in agreement with the Liberal amendment that we debated and agreed to not so long ago in this Parliament.

Adam Harley (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD): As we have just heard, the Parliament—including the cabinet secretary—voted last month for my amendment that called for the number of instances of corridor care to be measured, monitored and reported on. The cabinet secretary did not mention it in her statement, but I am glad to hear that she is open to doing that.

Patients should never be treated in corridors; they should be treated in wards. We cannot allow that to become a new normal in our NHS. Ahead of what we know will be an incredibly difficult winter, which doctors have described as "terrifying", and now that the cabinet secretary has committed to recording and publishing that data, will she commit to a timeline so that it can be done as a matter of urgency?

Angela Constance: Adam Harley is correct that corridor care is distressing for patients. It is not right—it is not in their best interests. That is not the appropriate place to provide care. It has an impact on people's privacy and dignity, and it is also distressing for family members and staff. Staff do not want to provide care in non-clinical environments.

The member mentioned emergency doctors. For the record, I met the Royal College of Emergency Medicine last week.

Mr Harley will forgive me, but I will come back to him on the timeline. I am interrogating that. I have a proposition in front of me that includes a timeline, and I want to see what I can do to shorten it. However, I would be happy to have further discussion on the issue.

Heather Anderson (Dundee City West) (SNP): The latest figures show that Dundee has one of the best records in Scotland for discharging patients without delay. Clearly, there is a key role for the NHS and national Government in preparing for winter, but, as the cabinet secretary has already said, it is clear that there is also a role for local government. What conversations has the Scottish Government had with local government, including Dundee City Council, to ensure that people can access the social care packages that they need? How can good practice in areas such as Dundee be shared across the country?

Angela Constance: Heather Anderson is correct to highlight the good performance of Dundee. I am well acquainted with the discharge without delay model that has been pioneered in Tayside. I continue to work closely with our partner, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, on delayed discharge.

As I said, it is unacceptable for anyone to have a delayed discharge, and the outcomes for patients whose discharges are delayed can be poor. The issue is a shared one. Alongside Councillor Kelly, from COSLA, I co-chair the collaborative response and assurance group, which is a forum to consider local issues and ensure that there is national oversight.

The median wait for delayed discharge in Scotland is currently 33 days. That is unacceptable. In the worst area, the median wait is up to 60 days. When I look at the variation across Scotland, I see that, as the member says, the figure in Dundee is good and, in Renfrewshire, it is very good—it tends to perform best. We need to resolve that geographical variation, because it is unacceptable.

Irshad Ahmed (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of her statement.

The health issues that some groups face are more serious in the winter. Homeless people, older people and those with addictions or mental illness feel the human cost of the cold. The number of people in Scotland who are waiting for care plans has risen by 5 per cent, and the number of homeless people is at an all-time high. Does the Government have plans to address the risks facing those groups beyond the hospital's doors?

Angela Constance: Irshad Ahmed raises an important issue about vulnerability in our communities. For example, we often narrate delayed discharge in terms of its effect on older people. There is particular vulnerability in our more deprived communities. That is another area on

which the Government is focused, because the performance in relation to delayed discharge can be worse in those communities.

I am also cognisant of the increase in adult social protection investigations. That speaks to the level of complexity of the care needs in our communities and also to the level of vulnerability. That is why the Government says that, if it expects services to be joined up and to co-operate, it needs to mirror that.

I assure the member that we are all focused on that, and we are working together to address the large, structural issues in social work. That includes Neil Gray, with his justice hat on, and Màiri McAllan, with her education and children's hat on. The issues could include poverty or the social work profession.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): We are running short of time. I will try to call as many members as I can.

Stuart McMillan (Inverclyde) (SNP): The cabinet secretary will be aware of the age demographics in Inverclyde and the importance of improving hospital flow to free up capacity. What additional resources can be implemented at Inverclyde royal hospital to free up capacity at other hospitals in the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde area, so that there is improved hospital flow?

Angela Constance: Given Inverclyde's ageing population, key opportunities include expanding hospital at home services, strengthening frailty pathways, increasing the use of acute frailty units, accelerating discharge without delay and home first approaches and making more use of virtual and remote monitoring. Those measures can reduce the number of avoidable admissions and support earlier discharge, and they will help to manage demand and capacity across acute sites.

Victor Currie (Highlands and Islands) (Reform): The cabinet secretary rightly focused on hospital flow, and I welcome the surge preparedness framework.

Although I have an interest, as I am an NHS employee in a secondary care role, I must advocate that general practice should remain the NHS's first line of defence in winter for operational capacity. What assurances can the cabinet secretary give to Scotland's patients that GPs will receive adequate support and clear escalation pathways this winter to prevent additional pressures on hospital services?

Angela Constance: That is an important point. GPs are a crucial up-front part of the system. We are supporting GPs with additional funding, over and above the core primary care funding, of more than £500 million over three years. We are doing that to enhance and get more stability and strength in GP infrastructure. That additional investment was not down to me; my predecessor, Neil Gray, secured it.

Mr Currie will be aware of our programme for walk-in centres. I will give an example that shows the benefits of GP walk-in services. Through the GP walk-in service in Lochee, there is provision for patients from the Lochee practice to register. Compared with the same period in the previous year, the number of referrals to A and E from that practice has reduced by 30 per cent. *[Angela Constance has corrected this contribution. See end of report.]* That shows that there is benefit to GP walk-in services, as well as the fundamental importance of investment in GP primary care services.

Clare Haughey (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests. I hold a bank nurse contract with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde.

Getting a vaccination is one of the easiest and most effective ways for people, particularly our most vulnerable, to protect themselves this flu season. Not only that, but it can alleviate pressures on our health and social care services. At the peak last year, in a single week, almost 1,000 people were admitted to hospital due to influenza. Will the cabinet secretary outline the work that is being done to improve uptake of flu vaccinations?

Angela Constance: Building on progress that was made last year, we are taking a range of actions to improve uptake of flu vaccinations this winter. That includes the refreshed national awareness campaign and—to pick up on Mr Ahmed's point—targeted engagement with groups that have lower uptake rates, along with making vaccination as accessible as possible.

NHS boards know their local populations best and are best placed to tailor their services and engagement to reach the targeted audience. Vaccinations are being delivered through a range of accessible settings, including community clinics, care homes, pharmacies and outreach services, and NHS boards and other partners are focusing on targeted work to improve uptake.

Kayleigh Kinross-O'Neill (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): I appreciate that the cabinet secretary's statement was very much about preparing for a crisis, but things will continue to get worse if we do not push more resources towards prevention. Many of those who have experienced corridor care or delayed discharge could have avoided being brought into hospital in the first place, so that is where we must act. How will the Government directly fund prevention in the

next year, to ensure that physical and mental wellbeing and local treatment are prioritised?

Angela Constance: Our strategies for winter preparedness, the principles behind them and the national flow plan all have prevention at their very heart. That will come from the community first programme, from investment in primary care, from the pharmacy first approach and from recognising that different communities have different needs and act in different ways to access care.

Our focus is on preventing avoidable hospital admissions and on ensuring that, if people have to be admitted to hospital, they do not stay there longer than is clinically required. That applies not only to hospital services for older people. The emergency medicine doctors I met last week made the important point that there is a need for other specialties to ensure that all their patients are discharged once their clinical needs have been met. Preventing avoidable admissions in the first place must be a whole-hospital endeavour.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): That concludes the ministerial statement. I apologise to members whose questions I was unable to take.

We will pause for a few moments to allow those on the front benches to change seats.

Cyber Resilience

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The next item of business is a debate on motion S7M-01517, in the name of Neil Gray, on strengthening Scotland's cyber resilience. Members who wish to speak in the debate should press their request-to-speak buttons now.

15:08

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): Digital technology underpins every aspect of our lives. It supports our hospitals, schools, businesses, transport networks, economy and wider public services. It connects us to one another, enables innovation and provides opportunities that previous generations could barely have imagined.

However, as our reliance on digital technology has grown, so, too, has our exposure to cyber threats. Cyber resilience is therefore no longer a technical issue but a matter of national resilience and security. It is fundamental to our economic prosperity, to public confidence in our institutions and to the delivery of essential services.

The cyber threat landscape is evolving rapidly, and cyber criminals are agile. They change their tactics to exploit any vulnerability and operate across international borders and boundaries. Earlier this week, some users of the ASOS shopping platform received a notification displaying a message that was reportedly from a threat actor and took credit for compromising ASOS systems. Detailed profiles of millions of users might have been compromised. The incident has gained attention due to the unusual way in which the threat actors notified the public at the same time as the organisation about the alleged attack.

Ransomware continues to pose a constant threat to public services, businesses and communities. Supply chains are more complex and interconnected, which creates new opportunities to target multiple organisations through a single point of compromise.

We are witnessing the emergence of a new generation of threats associated with artificial intelligence and other rapidly developing technologies. The opportunities presented by AI are considerable, and those new technologies have the potential to improve research and productivity, enhance public services and support economic growth. However, we must recognise that malicious actors are exploiting the very same technology. Artificial intelligence is already used to automate attacks, identify vulnerabilities, breach systems around the world and support

sophisticated forms of online deception. AI-enabled crime makes phishing attempts, online content, emails and messages more convincing, all in an effort to steal money, data and identities from individuals and businesses.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I am interested in the cabinet secretary's introduction, because it does not distinguish between the individual and the corporate, or between the public and the private. Is there perhaps a trap if we view the issue in terms of public sector resilience, when we need to be thinking as much about individual resilience and security, because there is no distinction in the criminals' or state actors' minds between those different categories?

Neil Gray: Daniel Johnson is absolutely correct, and I completely agree that we must take that approach. I will come on to talk about some of the exercising that must be done in the public sector and in business, as well as by us as individuals, to understand the resilience that we require to prepare for the inevitability of successful cyber attacks in various organisations.

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): I was also interested in the cabinet secretary's comments about the risks and vulnerability that come from the way in which AI is being used and is likely to be used in the future. Does the cabinet secretary think that the Government's AI strategy adequately covers the risks and the actions that need to be taken to mitigate them? That section of the strategy amounts to about one page with very few actions attached.

Neil Gray: The debate has been timed to ensure that we are considering, as a collective and as a Parliament, all those issues, including the challenge for the Government and our strategies, the challenge for the wider public sector, business and the economy, and the challenge for us all individually, as I said in response to Daniel Johnson.

I accept what Patrick Harvie says about the challenges. We must ensure that our strategies evolve in order to deal with the evolving threats that are coming. That is why the motion that is before us for debate, the substance of which I think we all agree with, is about ensuring that we collaborate domestically, across the United Kingdom, and internationally to ensure that we are informed of the threats that are coming.

We must embrace innovation, but we must do so safely. We need to ensure—

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh North Western) (LD): Will the cabinet secretary take an intervention?

Neil Gray: If I have time, Presiding Officer, I will give way one final time, to Mr Cole-Hamilton.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The cabinet secretary talks about cross-border collaboration across these islands, which is a really big part of this, particularly as it speaks to my amendment on cable security. Will he tell us what, if any, involvement the Scottish Government has had with the United Kingdom Government's Department for Science, Innovation and Technology regarding cable resilience?

Neil Gray: I thank Mr Cole-Hamilton for his intervention and for what he has set out in his amendment. Part of the reason why I have lodged the motion for debate today is that I want to see better collaboration between our Governments. We have a consensus among the devolved Governments on the need for greater information sharing and collaboration to ensure, apart from anything else, that devolved Governments with responsibility for critical national infrastructure are informed by the intelligence and information that is held by UK-based agencies. I do not say that as a constitutional point, as Mr Cole-Hamilton will be aware, but as a point of collaboration.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will the cabinet secretary give way on that point?

Neil Gray: I will give way for the last time.

Stephen Kerr: It is important to amplify what the cabinet secretary has just said. He has basically said that he agrees that there is an interdependence here. We, in Scotland, depend on Government Communications headquarters, the National Cyber Security Centre and UK intelligence services, and there really is no space for constitutional game playing when it comes to such a vital matter.

Neil Gray: I whole-heartedly agree.

The growing scale of the challenge is reflected in the data. Cyber crime remains a significant and persistent threat, fraud and scams are increasing, and a growing proportion of criminal activity now has a digital element. Over the past year, Police Scotland recorded an estimated 14,200 cyber crimes in Scotland. Tackling those harms cannot be achieved through enforcement alone. It requires agencies to work together, with advice that can be trusted, and victims of cyber crime need to know where and how to report it and get help. That is why cyber resilience matters.

Improving organisational and public awareness and strengthening personal online security must remain an important part of Scotland's wider cyber resilience efforts. Over recent years, Scotland has learned valuable but difficult lessons from several significant cyber incidents. There was the ransomware attack against the Scottish

Environment Protection Agency in 2020, the incident at Western Isles Council in 2023, the cyber attack on West Lothian Council last year and the targeted attack on NHS Dumfries and Galloway in 2024.

Beyond the public sector, in the business world, the cyber attacks on the Co-op and Jaguar Land Rover in 2025 are a reminder that cyber incidents can have real-world consequences far beyond the organisations that are directly targeted. Such incidents reinforce the importance of preparation, exercises, recovery planning and organisational resilience.

Cyber resilience is not simply about preventing attacks. No organisation, Government or nation can realistically expect to prevent every cyber incident. Cyber resilience is also about ensuring—this responds to Mr Johnson's point—that organisations can withstand that disruption, maintain essential services, recover quickly and apply lessons learned to emerge stronger. The Government therefore recognises the importance of preparedness at a national level and conducts annual exercises to test the Scottish cyber incident management plan. Beyond that, the Scottish Government is participating in the National Crime Agency-led cyber exercise this winter, bringing together a number of Government agencies. That principle sits at the heart of our national approach.

The question is no longer whether organisations will face a cyber incident, but whether they and members of the public are prepared enough to minimise and mitigate harm and disruption when one occurs. We can all agree that cyber resilience must underpin digital transformation, public service innovation and sustainable economic growth. Over the past decade, through successive national strategies, the Government has scaled and strengthened its cyber posture. We have improved collaboration across sectors and nations and are continuing to build an increasingly mature and effective national cyber resilience ecosystem. Our "Strategic Framework for a Cyber Resilient Scotland 2025-2030" provides a clear vision and determination to ensure that Scotland thrives as a digitally secure and resilient nation.

The CyberScotland partnership has become one of the standout strengths of our approach. It brings together organisations from across the public, private and community and voluntary sectors to create a collaborative model that has reduced duplication of effort and ensures that cyber awareness reaches into communities across Scotland. Through the CyberScotland portal at cyberscotland.com, CyberScotland week and our national awareness campaigns, the partnership ensures that individuals and organisations have access to trusted advice, guidance and support, regardless of where they are or the sector in which they operate. I am delighted to confirm to Parliament today that, this week, the Confederation of British Industry Scotland and the Data Lab are the newest CyberScotland partners. That further strengthens our collaborative approach to building a safe, secure and resilient digital nation.

We continue to invest in cyber skills and workforce development. We have supported education and learning initiatives that introduce cyber resilience from an early age and encourage the next generation of cyber professionals. The Scottish Government has provided more than 50,000 primary 1 pupils with a copy of "Cy Bear at School" this year. It introduces early concepts of cyber security through storytelling. More than 90 of our secondary schools are delivering dedicated cybersecurity learning. In the past five years, more than 7,000 pupils have achieved their national progression award in cyber security. That is critical, given the increased risk faced by us all from online harm and exploitation, particularly our young people.

We have expanded opportunities for upskilling and professional development across the public and community and voluntary sectors, funding more than 800 cyber security training courses to date. We have also established the Scottish cyber co-ordination centre, known as SC3, to co-ordinate multi-agency responses to cyber incidents. In partnership with Police Scotland and the National Cyber Security Centre, SC3 is helping us to stay ahead of cyber threats and to respond effectively when public sector incidents occur. Every day, SC3 works behind the scenes to provide threat intelligence, issue early warnings and co-ordinate responses to cyber incidents. Intelligence sharing is vital to ensuring the timely and effective action that can be taken to protect critical national infrastructure and critical public services. That close collaboration across our four nations and law enforcement ensures that information is shared, which strengthens our collective defence to known cyber threats.

Importantly, SC3 also helps us to better understand the cyber resilience of the entire Scottish public sector. That is crucial, because effective policy must be driven by evidence. We cannot improve what we do not understand, and we cannot target support appropriately if we do not know where the greatest risks exist. That relates to Stephen Kerr's point, and it is exactly why the collaboration must happen across all nations.

Key lessons from recent incidents have reinforced that cyber resilience must be considered not simply by technical specialists but also by chief executives, boards, senior leaders and decision makers. Technology tools and processes are important, but leadership is critical.

Cyber risk must be recognised and managed as a strategic business risk. That is particularly important where organisations deliver critical and essential services. The public rightly expect services to be resilient, secure and trustworthy, and they should have confidence that organisations are taking cyber risk seriously.

We continue to work closely with the UK Government to improve legislation such as the Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill, to strengthen regulation, and to deal more effectively with national threats. We passed a legislative consent motion on that bill last night.

Strong leadership, greater accountability and a culture of continuous improvement are key principles in the strategic framework for a cyber resilient Scotland. As our understanding of cyber maturity develops, we gain valuable insights into both our strengths and the challenges that remain.

Through the cyber observatory and the cyber resilience assessment process, we now have our clearest picture yet of the cyber maturity of Scotland's public sector. Although the findings demonstrate substantial progress, they also sharpen our focus on the challenges that remain. That insight helps us to target investment, provide support more effectively and accelerate the adoption of best practice. Now is the time to strengthen that governance and assurance across the public sector. The organisations that deliver our critical and essential services must achieve, maintain and evidence robust cyber resilience standards. However, that must not be about creating unnecessary bureaucracy. It must be about ensuring that organisations are supported to achieve, maintain and demonstrate appropriate levels of cyber resilience.

No discussion of cyber resilience would be complete without addressing the impacts of artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies. Those technologies have the potential to drive innovation, improve public service delivery and increase productivity. At the same time, however, those technologies, which can support our prosperity, are being exploited by malicious actors around the world. Recent international events have demonstrated that the cyber risks that are associated with AI are no longer theoretical. As Governments and organisations grapple with the benefits of those technologies, we must ensure that innovation is matched by appropriate security, governance and resilience to avoid serious consequences.

Our challenge, then, is not whether to adopt those technologies, but how to do so safely and securely. We must ensure that governance keeps pace with rapid technological change. This Government must and will engage closely with industry, academia and UK and international partners to share expertise, good practice and future plans as well as information and intelligence, and I intend to pursue that in a collaborative way with UK colleagues.

The Government cannot tackle the challenge alone, and neither can individual organisations. Success depends on partnership and collaboration. Businesses must be equipped to understand and manage cyber risk and they must have strong cyber resilience. That is not only good security practice, but good business practice. It protects reputation, supports strong growth and strengthens supply chains.

Community and voluntary sector colleagues must also be supported to continue delivering essential services securely. They support many people in our society, which is why we fund the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations to deliver cyber awareness and learning activities for voluntary organisations.

Collaboration is the central pillar of our approach. No Government can tackle today's cyber challenges alone. We must understand the risk of emerging technologies and work across not only sectors but national and international boundaries. Leaders across all sectors must be accountable for their organisations' cyber security and resilience, and the Scottish Government commits to working alongside them so that our country can thrive as a digitally confident and resilient nation.

I move,

That the Parliament recognises that strong cyber resilience is essential to protecting people's rights, safety and access to essential public services as well as ensuring Scotland's national resilience, economic prosperity and the delivery of public services; notes that the increasing reliance on digital technologies is exposing individuals, businesses, public services and the democratic system to growing cyber threats, including cyber crime, online fraud, scams, and ransomware; acknowledges the importance of improving public awareness and personal online security and protecting people's safety; recognises that cyber resilience is a shared responsibility requiring coordination and action across all sectors, and robust regulation of new technologies; welcomes progress through the Strategic Framework for a Cyber Resilient Scotland, the CyberScotland Partnership and the Scottish Cyber Coordination Centre; recognises that these strategies must be effectively resourced; supports more robust cyber resilience standards for public, private and third sector organisations, and supports continued collaboration and cooperation with partners across Scotland, the UK and internationally to identify, manage and respond to evolving digital risks.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I call Pauline McNeill to speak to and move amendment S7M-01517.1.

15:24

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): As we have heard, Scotland faces a persistent and growing threat from ransomware and cyber attacks, but it is the speed at which this criminal space is developing that is quite alarming. In fact, only this morning, the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body discussed the threats to the Scottish Parliament, and rightly so. We need to catch up apace in response to that issue.

That is why Labour welcomes the UK Government's Cybersecurity and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill, which would expand existing regulations, would have extraterritorial reach and would beef up the powers of regulators, so that Scotland and the UK would be better protected against cyber attacks.

I particularly welcome what the cabinet secretary said about upskilling, because without the skills, we will not meet this challenge.

I want to elaborate on where the risks are. We are now seeing AI accelerate cyber threats, while hostile states are increasingly targeting critical infrastructure, as the cabinet secretary said. The targeting of essential services across the UK is the most worrying thing. A recent report has named the UK as Europe's "most targeted" country for state-backed cyber attacks—a fact that I did not know until I prepared for this debate. Richard Horne, who is the head of the UK's National Cyber Security Centre—which is part of GCHQ, a body that everyone will know—has

"warned that hostile states are driving the majority of cyber activity targeting the country's critical infrastructure, saying around 75 per cent of attacks can be linked to state actors."

The more you go into the issue, the more alarming it becomes. Richard Horne also reported that the agency has managed more than 200 cyber incidents affecting critical national infrastructure just during the past year. He said that countries such as Russia, China and Iran—although not those countries exclusively—are increasingly focusing on systems that underpin essential services.

Last month, the National Cyber Security Centre, as well as agencies in 15 other countries, supported activities of a group referred to as "Laundry Bear", which specialises in covert acquisition of email data. The group is thought to be a Russian state-supported cyber actor that is targeting western organisations with a malicious campaign that uses a zero-click exploit to steal emails. People think, "If I don't click on it, I'll be okay," but that has changed. Beth Hopkins, the chief operating officer at the National Cyber Security Centre, said:

"This phishing campaign demonstrates how hostile actors will ruthlessly adapt techniques and exploit vulnerable technology in pursuit of their aims to steal sensitive information from Western organisations."

It is believed that hackers based in Russia were behind another recent attack when a pathology provider known as Synnovis, a public-private partnership, was the victim of a ransomware attack. That attack crippled the pathology services of the national health service in London, delaying critical blood test results and causing the cancellation of about 11,000 appointments, at an estimated cost of £32 million. Unfortunately, it was linked to the death of one person. Again, the more we dig into this issue, the more we see how alarming it will be if we do not catch up.

Cyber criminals are increasingly turning to AI agents, as the cabinet secretary said in the last parts of his speech. Chatbots autonomously plan to carry out cyber attacks, as autonomous artificial intelligence systems can carry out complex cyber intrusions without step-by-step human direction. In addition, William Altman, director of cyber threat intelligence at CyberCube, has said:

"When the cost of running a full attack chain approaches zero, criminals do not need to be selective."

We have probably learned growing up that there is a cost to making attacks; however, if it does not cost any money and you know what you are doing and have a level of skill—well, we can see the attacks that are being made on infrastructure. Altman continued:

"Small and medium-sized businesses that were safe because they weren't worth a dedicated team's time become viable targets at scale."

That is obviously a message for all businesses, regardless of size, and it is a huge cause for concern. One in eight small businesses in Scotland has already experienced a cyber attack—we need to get them equipped to deal with that.

The UK Government's AI Security Institute has highlighted that AI models have engaged in a level of autonomy and deception that we have not seen before. In July this year, OpenAI admitted that some of its most advanced AI models went rogue and hacked a start-up after it lost control of them during a security test. The company software that it developed—an AI system that can operate alone after human instruction—was being tested in a controlled environment but, after finding weaknesses, was able to escape the test limits. The software targeted Hugging Face, an online library of AI models, gaining access to some internal company systems. Hugging Face eventually detected and stopped the attack. We can stop those attacks if we invest in skills and realise the extent of the issue.

Neil Gray: Will the member give way?

Pauline McNeill: Of course I will.

Neil Gray: I thank Ms McNeill for giving way, and for the considered approach that she has taken in her contribution, all of which I very much agree with.

Building on Patrick Harvie's intervention on me with regard to AI, I recognise that the Scottish Parliament does not have powers to carry out successfully the regulation that is required in this space, and nor does the UK Government, because the issue is international.

Would Ms McNeill agree with me on that point? Does she believe that we need a much greater international focus on better regulation of artificial intelligence so that we can adequately deal with what we are facing, not just from artificial intelligence companies and AI potentially going rogue but from the hostile state actors that she spoke about in her introduction?

Pauline McNeill: I absolutely agree with that, and it highlights the central point: there are no borders where the internet is concerned. We know that from our experience of tackling organised crime. However, given the scale of this issue, the more I look at it, the more I worry that we may not be as equipped as we should be. We need to work with all the international players that face the same threats as us; otherwise, we will simply not meet the challenge, and the consequences are very serious if we do not.

In a similar case, Anthropic—

Stephen Kerr: Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Pauline McNeill: Yes, of course.

Stephen Kerr: What has been said is true, but it does not absolve us from doing everything in our power to create appropriate and ongoing defensive strategies to protect ourselves, especially our vital public services. We should make no mistake about it: the foreign states that wish to undermine this country do so economically and by seeking to undermine our democracy and public confidence, and their intent is to create chaos and division. We can do something about all of that. Some of it relates to technology, but much of it has to do with the way in which we conduct our politics.

Pauline McNeill: Yes, I agree with Stephen Kerr. He talks about the disruption caused, which is important. It is not all about money; it is to disrupt what we do and to disrupt our services. I agree, therefore, that, as the first line of investment, we have to take responsibility for what we can do here. However, I also believe that tackling this issue cannot be done alone, because we do not know everything that is going on, and it is vital that we work together with other countries that face similar threats.

I will close soon, Presiding Officer. As I said, we cannot ever eliminate cyber attacks, but we need to work with our UK and European partners to improve capabilities in order to ensure that we are best equipped to deal with the attacks when they happen. It is clear that the UK and Scotland have to fight on new frontiers of crime and against new levels of disruption to stop these hostile attacks by foreign actors, and it is vital that the Parliament continues to discuss the issue so that we are all up to date with the action that is being taken.

I move amendment S7M-01517.1, to insert at end:

"; welcomes the UK Government's Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill as a step towards building nationwide protocols for protecting critical infrastructure, and calls on the Scottish Government to ensure that areas within its devolved competence are adequately resourced to establish any additional security measures or reporting mechanisms that may be required."

15:32

Amanda Bland (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): I welcome the opportunity to speak on strengthening Scotland's cyber resilience, and I thank the cabinet secretary. I also thank Pauline McNeill for her interesting contribution. The cabinet secretary is right that cyber resilience is about far more than technology. It is about protecting people, essential public services, our economy, businesses and Scotland's national resilience.

Our reliance on digital technology brings huge opportunities but also significant risks. Individuals face fraud and scams; businesses face cybercrime and ransomware attacks; public services can be disrupted; and sensitive information can be compromised. We have seen that happen locally, as the cabinet secretary noted. In May 2025, West Lothian Council, in my region, was subject to a cyber attack. A small percentage of data was stolen in the council's education network.

When something goes wrong, the key question is whether essential services can continue. My amendment makes the important point that having the right framework is only the beginning, and Scotland already has a substantial framework. We have the strategic framework for a cyber resilient Scotland, the CyberScotland partnership and the Scottish cyber co-ordination centre, and the Government's motion rightly recognises that progress.

However, our amendment recognises that significant gaps remain in implementation across Scotland's public sector. The Scottish Government's latest cyber activity report tells us

that only 64 per cent of Scottish public sector organisations reported that they had carried out cyber exercising in the previous 12 months. That level of 64 per cent cannot be the finishing line. Cyber resilience cannot simply be assumed—it must be tested.

An organisation can have policies, plans and procedures, but when a cyber attack happens, those arrangements matter only if people know what to do and if the systems work.

Neil Gray: I thank Amanda Bland for the points that she has put on the record. Does she accept that the 64 per cent figure that she cited is out of date, because developments have taken place since then? Does she also accept that, as I said in my opening speech, work is being done on exercising to ensure that we have a resilient public sector, the need for which is the issue that she is raising?

Amanda Bland: I look forward to receiving the updated figures.

That is why our amendment calls for

"clear minimum standards for regular testing of cyber defences and incident response arrangements across the public sector".

It is not a question of imposing a rigid one-size-fits-all model, because different organisations face different risks, but there should be clear minimum expectations. Can ransomware take down critical systems? Can essential services continue? Can an organisation respond if systems are unavailable? Can it recover? Those are basic questions of resilience. The Government's report says that regular exercising should be realistic and should test scenarios such as prolonged outages, loss of identity systems, loss of email and extortion attacks. Testing alone is not enough.

Our amendment also recognises that resource constraints are limiting organisations' ability to implement lessons learned from incidents and exercises. The Government's report makes the same point. Exercises are identifying lessons, but many organisations lack the capacity to implement them, while staffing and resource shortages are preventing some organisations from exercising in the first place. That matters.

Identifying a vulnerability is not the same as addressing it. If testing identifies weaknesses in back-up systems, specialist expertise or legacy technology, public bodies must have the capacity to fix those weaknesses. That is why our amendment calls for public bodies to have

"sufficient financial, technical and specialist resources to address identified vulnerabilities."

That is consistent with the motion's recognition that cyber resilience strategies "must be effectively resourced".

Our amendment also makes a clear choice on priorities. There will always be a place for strategies. Threats change, technology changes and new risks emerge, but we should resist the tendency to create further strategies and frameworks to achieve objectives that we already know need to be delivered. We have the framework. Now we need robust implementation. We have the standards. Now we need robust testing. We have identified vulnerabilities. Now we need the resources to address them. That is the purpose of our amendment.

I do not see our amendment as contradicting the motion; I see it as taking the next step. The motion recognises the importance of strong cyber resilience standards. The amendment says, "Let us make sure that those standards are implemented and tested." The motion recognises the importance of resources. The amendment says, "Let us make sure that public bodies have the resources to act on what the testing reveals." We are not asking for a different direction to be taken; we are asking for delivery.

The motion is right to support co-operation across Scotland, the UK and internationally, but co-ordination works only if organisations have the capability to act. Identifying a threat is only the first step. The real test is whether we can respond. Our priorities should be clear: implementation, testing and resources. For those reasons, I move the amendment in my name.

I move amendment S7M-01517.3, to insert at end:

"considers that, despite a substantial framework of strategies, significant gaps remain in the implementation of cyber resilience across Scotland's public sector; expresses concern that only 64% of Scottish public sector organisations have reported carrying out cyber resilience exercises in the previous 12 months; believes that the priority should now be the effective implementation, testing and enforcement of existing cyber resilience standards and to resist the tendency to create further strategies and frameworks to achieve simple objectives; understands that resource constraints are limiting the ability of organisations to implement lessons learned from incidents and exercises to address identified weaknesses, and calls on the Scottish Government to establish clear minimum standards for regular testing of cyber defences and incident response arrangements across the public sector, and to ensure that public bodies have sufficient financial, technical and specialist resources to address identified vulnerabilities."

15:39

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Cyber resilience is important, but it is not a good or an end in and of itself. Cyber resilience that does no more than protect corporate profits is not inherently desirable. Making more secure systems that have climate-destroying energy

requirements is simply robbing Peter to benefit Paul. We must ask ourselves: cyber resilience for whom and to what end? Ultimately, resilience should be about protecting people, the services that we rely on and our collective ability to make democratic choices about the technologies that we use.

Stephen Kerr: Maggie Chapman surely agrees that we also need to take cyber security seriously for the purpose of protecting businesses. Businesses are not just about profits, as she described them; they are about people's jobs and our economy. Does she not agree with that? She was very sweeping in her opening statement about businesses and profits—perhaps predictably. Does she understand my point?

Maggie Chapman: I thank Stephen Kerr for that intervention, entertaining as it was. I am 45 seconds into my speech—give me a chance. I am coming on to exactly those points.

Cyber resilience is important because almost all the services that we need to live happy and healthy lives are substantially or entirely digital. The consequences of attacks or outages are not just downed systems or lost trade but disruption to essential services that we all—especially the most marginalised—rely on.

We have seen that in tangible ways. Pupils in Edinburgh were temporarily locked out of revision materials following a targeted phishing attack on the City of Edinburgh Council's schools network. Patients in NHS Lanarkshire had appointments cancelled due to malware attacks. Our environment, climate and animals have suffered, too. The 2020 attack on SEPA demonstrated that cyber resilience is about our ability to protect the environment and enforce environmental standards. SEPA was, in effect, locked out of its systems and data, requiring a major rebuild. We are talking about the resilience of our institutions, including those that protect our environment, public health and communities.

We must look at the consequences of poor cyber resilience for staff in our public and private sector. Information technology staff are at the front line of ensuring that our public services are secure against attacks. When we do not invest in them, and when we cut posts and allow austerity to tear through our public sector, we make their job of protecting us harder, and the risk of attacks increases. When attacks happen, it is the IT professionals who bear the brunt.

The experience of the Western Isles is instructive. When its council was hit by ransomware in 2023, five of its 17 IT posts were vacant. Audit Scotland found significant implications for disaster recovery and cyber resilience work, while staff were placed under enormous pressure. We must make sure that our essential workers have the right support and skills to keep themselves, their unions and the people whom they support safe. I pay tribute to the work of Scottish Union Learning on that. Funded by the Government's cyber resilience unit, it has run interactive cyber security workshops for 8,000 workers and union reps on how to spot attacks and store data securely.

Ultimately, however, it is not workers who should be responsible for our cyber security. Organisations and technology providers must be required to build security into systems from the outset and by default. Secure by design, secure by default—that must be the norm and not an aspiration. It will be much easier to achieve if we wean ourselves off our dependence on a very small number of multinational technology companies that are based and regulated elsewhere in the world and whose interests and motivations are not necessarily the same as ours. That concentration of power makes us vulnerable to disruptive cyber attacks and outages; it also locks public services and businesses to a small number of providers from which it can be hard to switch.

We must focus more on digital sovereignty and our ability to control our destiny in a world that is more and more digital. That is not about pretending that Scotland can or should build every piece of technology itself. It is about having choices: diversified suppliers, interoperable systems, open standards, open-source technologies where appropriate, and the skills and infrastructure to avoid dangerous dependencies.

The European Union is making progress on the issue. Its tech sovereignty package brings together measures on chips, cloud, AI, open source and energy to reduce strategic dependencies and strengthen technological autonomy and resilience. Its open-source strategy is particularly relevant here, too. It identifies open source as a way of reducing technological dependency, avoiding lock-in and giving public bodies and private businesses greater control over critical digital infrastructure.

Digital sovereignty is also about who has power over our data, our infrastructure and our choices. It must therefore sit alongside privacy, human rights and democratic safeguards. Digital sovereignty cannot become a justification for disproportionate surveillance or the erosion of civil liberties.

This is where the question of independence matters. An independent Scotland would need to be able to protect essential services, manage strategic dependencies and make democratic choices about the technologies on which we

depend. We should not wait, though, until independence to begin that work. If we believe that Scotland should be capable of determining its own future, we should also believe that Scotland needs the capacity to determine its own digital future. That means beginning the work on a Scottish digital sovereignty strategy now.

In closing, cyber resilience is about much more than protecting computers and data: it is about protecting the public services that we depend on and have human rights to; supporting the workers who deliver those services, not blaming them when services fail; building technology that is secure by design, environmentally sustainable and subject to democratic oversight; and ensuring that the technology on which our society depends does not leave us powerless to make our own choices.

Ultimately, resilience is not simply the ability to survive an attack; it is the ability to retain control over our collective future when the systems around us are under pressure. That is what cyber resilience should be for.

I move amendment S7M-01517.2, to insert at end:

"; recognises that digital sovereignty is an increasingly important aspect of cyber resilience, including the risks arising from excessive dependence on a small number of multinational technology companies and foreign-owned digital infrastructure; further recognises the importance of strong privacy, human rights and democratic safeguards; supports diversified, interoperable and secure digital infrastructure, open standards, responsible public procurement and investment in Scotland's cyber security skills, research and public-interest technological capability; notes steps being taken at a European level to strengthen digital sovereignty; agrees that the UK Government should be more proactive in pursuing digital sovereignty, and believes that the Scottish Government should begin work to develop a Scottish digital sovereignty strategy, given that this will be necessary in the event of independence."

15:47

Alex Cole-Hamilton (Edinburgh North Western) (LD): The strongest password in the world cannot protect us from a severed cable. We can have sophisticated firewalls, world-class cyber expertise and systems that are designed to repel the latest digital attacks, but all that ultimately relies on the infrastructure beneath it remaining secure.

Cyber criminals adapt, technologies change and hostile actors develop new capabilities. As our economy and public services become increasingly digitally connected, the consequences for disruption become far more serious. We cannot base our resilience on yesterday's threats. We must anticipate the next vulnerability and always stay one step ahead.

The scale of that challenge is already significant. The Scottish Government's first "Scottish Cyber Activity Report", which was published earlier this year and which we have heard something of in the debate, found that there had been 183 cyber incidents across Scotland's public sector since 2018, including 43 in 2025 alone. This is happening now.

The UK Government's latest cyber security breaches survey paints an equally stark picture for business, with nearly seven in 10 large businesses experiencing a cyber breach or attack in the previous 12 months. Those figures show why we cannot afford any complacency. The stronger standards and the co-ordination and collaboration that are recognised in today's motion from the Government are important.

Cyber threats do not respect organisational or national boundaries, and neither can our response to them, but as those threats continue to evolve, we need to keep challenging ourselves as to what we mean by cyber resilience and where our vulnerabilities lie. That is why I will be pleased to move my amendment. Cyber security is about protecting not only the systems we use but the physical infrastructure that those systems depend on.

For most of us, our digital world exists in the cloud—in the very air around us, it sometimes seems—but it has a very physical backbone, and the services that we rely on depend on infrastructure, from fibre-optic cables and landing stations to telecommunications masts and data centres. That infrastructure can be damaged accidentally or deliberately disrupted, including by hostile actors. There can be no cyber resilience without physical resilience of the infrastructure that underpins it.

A UK parliamentary inquiry has warned of vulnerabilities in our subsea cable network, particularly around our island communities and cable landing points. Cyber security cannot stop at a firewall. We need to understand where those vulnerabilities and single points of failure are, and contingency arrangements must be put in place.

What happens when the infrastructure fails? That question is not separate from the issue of cyber security. A digital service can be lost because its systems are attacked but also because the physical infrastructure carrying it fails. We need to be prepared for both events, and the experience of Shetland and Orkney shows us why.

The SHEFA-2 cable is a vital fibre-optic link connecting Shetland and Orkney with mainland Scotland and the wider telecommunications network. In July 2025, it was damaged off Orkney when a fishing vessel made contact with it, leaving hundreds of people without service for 12 days.

Then, months later, it happened again: in October 2025, SHEFA-2 suffered another rupture, this time due to bad weather. For some customers, the resulting outage lasted 26 days. Imagine what a three-week outage means for a business, a general practitioner surgery, a ferry booking system or a business that relies on card payments.

I note that those were not isolated incidents. Evidence to the Scottish Affairs Committee in the House of Commons earlier this year revealed that SHEFA-2 has suffered 20 serious breaks in just 19 years. However, what is most important is what happened when the cable failed. Some customers could be rerouted and remain connected, and others just could not. That is the difference between being connected and being resilient. Cyber resilience is ultimately about continuity, and whether the digital services that we depend on can withstand that disruption and recover when something goes wrong.

Neil Gray: I thank Alex Cole-Hamilton for emphasising the point about the outage that was faced by customers in Orkney and Shetland. He will know that my family members were impacted by that. It is a real example of the point that Daniel Johnson raised about individual resilience and individuals' understanding of what is happening when something goes wrong, and about the importance of organisational resilience.

Does Alex Cole-Hamilton accept that, in relation to our defence posture and our broadband connectivity posture—both concern reserved issues—we need strong interaction across the four nations to ensure that our defence and critical infrastructure postures meet the demands of our cybersecurity threats?

Alex Cole-Hamilton: I agree. We have to have a more joined-up approach to this issue, both with DSIT and the UK Government as a whole and across these islands. There was no sophisticated malicious code or ransomware in the outages that I highlighted. A fishing vessel just made contact with the cable, yet the result was disruption to the digital connectivity on which many people and businesses such as that of Mr Gray's family absolutely depend.

That is why physical infrastructure belongs firmly within our understanding of cyber resilience. We need to understand where failures could cause significant disruption and where those contingency arrangements are not strong enough to respond to disruption when it occurs. Right now, it is the responsibility of the private sector—cable owners—to effect repairs. It is not clear to me that there is an element of Government co-ordination, and that matters far beyond whether someone can get online.

The issue is about whether businesses can operate, whether public services can function, whether critical data can move and communities can remain connected. For Scotland's islands and remote communities, in particular, the resilience of the infrastructure that underpins connectivity is vital. It cannot be an afterthought.

Although those incidents involved accidental damage, the same physical infrastructure can be exposed to deliberate disruption. Scotland lies at the Atlantic approaches. The grey-zone activity of Russia means that disruption to our connectivity is cheap and below the war threshold, and is easier to effect with plausible deniability.

A severed cable does not care whether it was damaged accidentally by a fishing vessel or deliberately by a hostile actor. We need to be prepared for that, we need to acknowledge it and we need to plan for it.

I move amendment S7M-01517.4, to insert at end:

"; recognises that cyber resilience depends on the security and resilience of the physical infrastructure on which digital services rely; understands the risks to critical digital infrastructure of accidental, environmental and deliberate disruption, including sabotage and the actions of hostile actors, and recognises the particular importance of resilient and diverse connectivity for Scotland's island and remote communities."

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I call Stephen Kerr. You have up to six minutes, Mr Kerr, and we do not have much time in hand.

15:54

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): That is a great pity. I would like a good debate—although we seem to be agreeing with one another, so I am not sure how much of a debate we are having.

Frankly, Alex Cole-Hamilton is right. We are in a grey-zone war, and we should recognise that. The first responsibility of a Government is to protect the people it serves, and today that means protecting the digital systems on which our country depends. Scotland's national resilience rests on hospitals treating patients, electricity reaching homes, water supplies operating, businesses paying staff and democratic institutions functioning freely. The hostile foreign actors understand those dependencies and see opportunities to steal, spy, disrupt and undermine public confidence. That threat must shape this debate.

The Government's motion recognises national resilience and the protection of our democratic system. I welcome that. However, it names fraud, scams and ransomware without explicitly naming hostile state activity. Russia, China, Iran and North Korea feature prominently in the National Cyber

Security Centre's threat assessments. Their objectives differ. Their operations may seek intelligence or intellectual property. Some of them seek money, political influence or disruption. State-aligned groups further complicate that picture.

Daniel Johnson: Does Stephen Kerr agree that, as much as we should examine our systems and processes, we must also examine our overall political discourse? Those state actors do not seek only to destabilise our systems; they want to destabilise our democratic process itself.

Stephen Kerr: We should all guard against being useful fools in the hands of those manipulative foreign actors. That is a reality, so I welcome Daniel Johnson's intervention.

The operations that we are describing take place below the threshold of conventional warfare. That is why they are called grey-zone operations. An adversary can weaken a country by stealing research, interrupting essential services and undermining confidence in democratic institutions. Are we prepared for an adversary that keeps attacking, targets several services or exploits an international crisis? Ministers should explain how that threat shapes their planning, preventative investment and public procurement decisions. We cannot be defenceless. In June, the National Cyber Security Centre's chief executive reported that it had managed more than 200 incidents affecting UK critical national infrastructure and its supporting ecosystem in the year to May.

Neil Gray: I absolutely agree with Stephen Kerr. I think that he will understand that I am not seeking to divest responsibility, but does he agree that those of us with responsibility for critical national infrastructure in devolved Governments require those agencies to share the information to ensure that we can take informed decisions about where the threats arrive from? He is right about the state actors about which he has spoken, but they are not the exclusive threats that come to our shores.

Stephen Kerr: I completely agree. It is a policy area primed for very high-level and intensive interministerial and intergovernmental work. It has to be. We cannot allow ourselves to end up in silos or pockets when we are dealing with such a joined-up, planned and deliberate strategy from some, including organised criminals, as I think Neil Gray was alluding to. However, by the National Cyber Security Centre's estimation, nearly three quarters of the activity is down to state actors. Those incidents underline the threat to essential services.

Scotland is exposed through our energy infrastructure, defence-related industry, financial services, universities and public institutions. Our research strengths are assets that others might seek to disrupt and, indeed, exploit. Earlier generations—our forebears—built walls to protect their communities. Today, we depend upon invisible walls. We should attend to building those invisible walls: secure networks, controlled access, protected information and the capacity to keep functioning when those defences are breached. Those walls require investment, maintenance, testing and vigilance.

The motion welcomes strategies, partnerships and co-ordination. Parliament must establish whether those deliver dependable protection. What assessment have the Scottish ministers received of hostile state targeting of Scottish institutions? What practical action followed? How do ministers verify that intelligence warnings produce improvements across devolved public services?

Scotland benefits from the capabilities of GCHQ, as I intervened to say earlier. As the cabinet secretary himself said, co-operation across the United Kingdom—and, indeed, more widely in our network of allies—is fundamental to our security, but the Scottish ministers remain responsible for preparedness in the services that are within their remit. Councils, health boards and agencies must know their responsibilities. Those warnings from the security services must reach the people who are responsible for our services, and ministers must know that they have acted.

We have seen the consequences. In the limited time that I have, I refer to the incidents that have been mentioned by other speakers, including those that occurred in Dumfries and Galloway and the Western Isles.

Deputy Presiding Officer, do I have to conclude now?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): No—the member has additional time as he took interventions.

Stephen Kerr: That is wonderful. It is music to my ears—the kind of music that I like.

Those cases demonstrate damage to services and confidentiality, but they do not necessarily establish foreign state involvement, so the question that I ask Neil Gray is: have ministers verified that lessons have been learned in other councils and health boards? Who has checked that corrective work was completed in those instances and across the board?

A determined adversary could seek to disrupt several services simultaneously. Electricity failure can affect water, telecoms, transport and healthcare, so a compromised supplier can expose multiple organisations. When was Scotland's last national exercise for testing that situation? Which operators and suppliers participated? Were arrangements with UK

authorities rehearsed? What serious weaknesses emerged that remain unresolved? Those are questions that I hope the cabinet secretary will address in his summing up.

Public awareness matters, of course. Citizens cannot personally secure a hospital network or electricity control system, so institutional responsibility must be clear. The Government's framework involves independent testing and a 14-day standard for patching critical vulnerabilities. How many bodies meet those standards? How many serious exceptions remain? Ministers can provide sensitive assurance confidentially to Parliament, and they should, because that is our duty. How many public bodies have actually tested whether they can restore an essential service quickly enough? Where are the high-risk legacy systems, and what is the funded timetable for replacing or securing them?

Deputy Presiding Officer, I appreciate your willingness to show me some latitude this afternoon. Our invisible walls protect Scotland's safety, prosperity and freedom. Ministers must tell Parliament where those walls are weak—not as a game plan for those who seek to undermine us, but so that we know who is responsible for repairing them and when the work will be finished. That is the assurance that I want from this debate.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): We move to the open debate. I call Calum Kerr to speak for up to six minutes.

16:02

Calum Kerr (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I am pleased that we are having this debate. Technology is so central to our lives that it is incumbent on us to go a bit deeper, understand it properly and debate both the opportunities and the challenges that it brings. We do not all need to become experts, but we do need to understand enough to ask the right questions, make sure that the right structures and support are in place, and legislate where that is needed.

I spent 28 years in enterprise technology, from voice networking to data networking and on to global contact centre projects and AI. I have to confess that, back then, security was seen as a necessary evil—even a painful one. I lost count of the projects that were delayed and of the changes that failed because of firewall rules.

However, over that time I have seen considerable change. As systems moved online and into the cloud, technology brought new risks and offered new solutions. I remember well the first time that a company came to us, having suffered a ransomware attack, and asked for help. We rerouted their calls and built them a new contact centre in under two days—something unheard of before then.

That shift also changed how organisations planned for the worst. We moved from disaster recovery—simply restoring the system—to business continuity, keeping the organisation running, and now cyber resilience, which is planning for an attack that we know will come. Cyber security is about preventing an attack. Cyber resilience asks the harder question about what happens when prevention fails—because sometimes it will.

Last month, I hosted an event in the Parliament with Cyber and Fraud Centre Scotland and Arnold Clark. Arnold Clark took cybersecurity seriously. It has more than 200 people in IT, including a dedicated cyber team. Despite that, in 2022, it was hit by a cyber attack. More than 4,000 customers were affected immediately, including 700 who were waiting to collect cars. The impact was far wider than that: stolen customer data was published online. An organisation may have thousands of potential vulnerabilities to protect. The attacker only needs to find one of them.

Most organisations are not like Arnold Clark. Many small businesses and charities have no IT team at all. For them, a single attack can threaten their survival. That is why standards must be proportionate and why the free support that is already available needs to reach them.

The damage does not end when the systems come back up. Often, the greater harm occurs when the stolen data is sold on the dark web and, increasingly, used to extort the individuals behind it. On the last big contract I worked on, liability for data breaches was the final thing that had to be agreed on, and the contract was delayed while that was done. Businesses have learned to take that seriously; the law has been slower to catch up.

Patrick Harvie: Does Mr Kerr agree that companies are already behind the curve in relation to protecting data because they think that, for the moment, it is encrypted and safe? That encryption will not last more than a few years and, if it is already being harvested, that is being done before the technology is available to decrypt it.

Calum Kerr: There is a saying that, "If you always do what you always did, you'll always get what you always got." That is no longer true. Everything is moving quickly. I welcome this debate and add that there are opportunities to harness AI and new technology on the defensive side—Nvidia and CrowdStrike have recently developed a system to do exactly that.

Patrick Harvie is absolutely right that we do not know what data has already been stolen, or whether anyone is holding that stolen data and

waiting to be able to decrypt it. He makes an excellent point.

Stephen Kerr: It is true across the board—and it is important to amplify the point in this debate—that although, in many ways, AI is a threat when it is in the hands of people with malicious intent, we can also deploy it: we can use our research and capabilities as a country to counter that threat. In fact, if necessary—in the most extreme circumstances—we could use it to go on the offensive.

Calum Kerr: I thank Stephen Kerr for that intervention. I am finding it disturbing how often I am agreeing with him in this debate. I look forward to normal service being resumed after recess.

Currently, there is no explicit offence that covers the knowing purchase of stolen personal data. Scots law deals with knowingly handling stolen goods through the crime of reset, but it is much less clear whether stolen data counts as property in the same way. The founding head of the National Cyber Security Centre has said that that loophole should be examined and, if it is as serious as it looks, it should be closed. Reset is a matter for this Parliament, but data protection law is reserved, so part of the answer lies here and part lies at Westminster. As the cabinet secretary alluded to, a four-nations approach makes sense.

Recently, I met the cabinet secretary and Jude McCorry from the Cyber and Fraud Centre Scotland to discuss exactly that. I welcome the cabinet secretary's engagement and his commitment to look at the issue further.

As we have heard, AI is changing the nature of the threat, mostly by making familiar attacks faster, cheaper and more convincing. Phishing is still by far the most commonly reported type of attack on UK businesses and charities. What AI adds is scale: an attacker can now produce thousands of convincing, personalised messages in the time it used to take to write one.

AI is an accelerator. It accelerates the attacker and it can accelerate the defender too. Our organisations and our regulations have to keep pace. That is why the human side matters so much.

Michelle Campbell (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention? [*Interruption*.] Sorry, I have knocked my card out of the slot.

Calum Kerr: I am happy to give way.

Michelle Campbell: Does Calum Kerr agree that it is important that we recognise during this debate that women are disproportionately affected by the impacts of cyber attacks and data breaches? They are weaponised against women in a very particular way, so, when we talk about the priority of dealing with violence against women and girls, we cannot separate the fact that cyber attacks have also been weaponised against women.

Calum Kerr: That was one of the points that I did not have time to make. A huge percentage of cyber crime is sexualised images, and I thank Michelle Campbell for putting that on the record.

In every company that I have worked for, cyber security training was an annual requirement, rightly so. Cyber resilience is an organisational capability, and it needs to be resourced as such. The Government's approach starts from the same place. Attacks will come, so organisations must be ready to respond and recover. That is why I welcome the strategic framework, the work of the Scottish cyber co-ordination centre and the cabinet secretary's focus on working with partners across Scotland, the UK and beyond.

On 27 October, members will meet to establish a new cross-party group on AI and cyber, with Cyber and Fraud Centre Scotland providing the secretariat. Anybody who is interested in getting involved should get in touch with me or Zen Ghani, as we are setting that up together.

Cyber resilience might sound technical, but ultimately it is about trust—trust that our records are safe, that public services keep working, that businesses can recover from an attack and that the voice on the phone really is who it claims to be. That is a responsibility for all of us, and I support the motion.

16:11

Zen Ghani (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP): I declare an interest as an elected member of Glasgow City Council.

I welcome the motion on strengthening Scotland's cyber resilience. Almost every part of modern life now depends on digital systems. We bank online, shop online and work online. Increasingly, the public services that we all rely on depend on digital systems simply to function. That has brought huge benefits to Scotland. It has opened up new opportunities for businesses, changed the way we work and made many everyday services faster and easier to access. However, that dependence has also created risks, because as more of our lives move online, so do the people who want to exploit us—scammers, criminal gangs, hostile actors and those using new technology to make existing threats faster, cheaper and harder to detect. That is why cyber resilience matters, not only to the Government and large organisations, but to every business, every public body and every person in Scotland.

Protecting our data is one part of that, but cyber resilience is also about protecting the systems and services that we all rely on—transport, financial services, local government, our NHS and our businesses, large and small. If those systems fail, the consequences are not just technical but are felt by people. When we talk about cyber resilience, we are talking about whether those vital services can continue when something goes wrong. Something will go wrong. That is part of the challenge, and the answer cannot be to simply pretend that every cyberattack can be prevented; it cannot. It is right that we acknowledge that some risks cannot be solved simply by spending more money.

Old systems, outdated practices and weak processes can create vulnerabilities of their own. Sometimes, resilience means investing in new technology, and sometimes it means making better use of what we already have. It means making sure that, when an incident happens, organisations can respond quickly, recover and keep essential services running.

That is why this is a shared responsibility. No single Government, council, business or organisation can deal with those threats alone. It requires co-operation between the public sector, private sector and third sector. It requires good information sharing. It requires working with partners across the UK and internationally, because cyber crime does not stop at national borders.

That is why I welcome the strategic framework for a cyber-resilient Scotland and the work being taken forward through the CyberScotland partnership and the Scottish cyber co-ordination centre. The aim is not to create a Scotland where cyber incidents never happen, because that would not be realistic, but to create a Scotland that is harder to attack, better prepared when attacks do happen and faster at recovering from those.

We can already see why that matters. The Scottish cyber co-ordination centre has responded to 183 co-ordinated cyber incidents across Scotland's public sector since 2018, including 43 in 2025 alone. Those figures remind us that the threat is not theoretical. Graeme Downie MP yesterday published a report on the so-called "Putin tax", which estimates that Russia-linked cyber activity alone is costing the UK around £1.5 billion every year. His work points to more than 300 Russia-linked cyber incidents affecting UK companies since 2022 and says that 75 per cent of significant cyber incidents affecting critical national infrastructure have been linked to hostile states. The threat is not simply from individual criminals sitting behind their laptops; increasingly, cyber resilience is part of our national security.

That threat is changing quickly and AI is a good example of that. It has enormous potential: it can help businesses be more productive, can support research, improve services and help us to identify threats more quickly. However, the same technology can also be used against us. AI can help criminals to produce convincing phishing messages at scale and can be used to imitate voices and identities. It can produce deepfakes and help attackers to identify vulnerabilities far more quickly than before. The Scottish Government's own cyber advisory work has warned that AI is increasing the speed, scale and accessibility of existing cyber threats, including fraud, phishing and impersonation attacks.

That means that the basic rules of cyber security matter more, not less. Keeping systems up to date, training staff, using strong authentication and knowing how to respond when something looks wrong all matter, as does making sure that people understand the risks that they face online.

Cyber resilience is not only about protecting organisations: it is about protecting the people of Scotland and the UK. As the technology becomes more sophisticated, public awareness must keep pace with that. That is why I welcome the motion's focus on public awareness, personal online safety and stronger standards across the public, private and third sectors. Cyber resilience cannot be treated as an optional extra for a modern country. It is part of our economic and national resilience and, increasingly, it is part of how we protect people in their everyday lives.

Scotland should embrace new technology. We should be ambitious about AI, digital services and the opportunities that they can bring, but ambition also means being prepared for the risks that come with that. If we want Scotland to be a modern digital nation, we must also ensure that it is a secure and resilient one, and that requires us all to play our part.

16:18

Pauline Stafford (Bathgate) (SNP): I draw members' attention to my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a sitting councillor on West Lothian Council, which has already been mentioned in the debate. I welcome the opportunity to contribute.

Cyber resilience matters to every one of us, but as we work to build a cyber-resilient Scotland we must recognise the simple reality that we are doing so on shifting ground. Technology is evolving at an extraordinary speed and so are the threats that we face. My generation was the last of the pre-internet world. As I was preparing for the debate, I remembered getting my first email address when I was 16 and thinking to myself, "What am I going to

need that for?" If only I had known. I also remembered the difficulty of explaining to my children the purpose of a phone box that we once found on holiday. They are part of a generation who carry supercomputers in their pockets and their world is light years away from anything that we could have imagined.

Cyber resilience is not a niche IT problem; it is a health issue and an economic one. It is a public service issue, and for children, families and staff in West Lothian last year it became an education issue. On 6 May 2025, West Lothian Council's education system suffered a catastrophic ransomware cyber attack. For many, including me as both a councillor and a parent, something that had been a distant and abstract threat was suddenly very real.

Reporting and safeguarding systems went down. Access to teaching resources disappeared. Reports had to be handwritten. We were thrown back 20 years. I take the opportunity to commend the efforts of West Lothian Council's IT and education staff at that time, who responded with professionalism and determination to minimise disruption and keep services running. Education continued and exams went ahead, much to the disappointment of some students.

One of the key lessons from that incident is that operational excellence must be matched by clear and transparent leadership. When cyber incidents occur, transparency is essential to maintain public confidence and contain the threat as quickly as possible. Although the immediate disruption lasted only a few hours, the effects of the attack continue to be felt more than a year later.

Education presents perhaps the clearest example of the balance that we must strike between risk and opportunity, which we have heard about today. Our schools, colleges and universities are vulnerable precisely because they are open, collaborative environments that are built around sharing knowledge—yet that openness is also their strength. The answer is not to close doors but to build resilience, because although education systems are a target for cyber attacks, they are also one of our most powerful defences against them. The skills and awareness that we develop in learners today will determine Scotland's cyber resilience tomorrow.

We have had many references to AI in discussions in the chamber. It is clear that AI is supercharging cyber threats by compressing attack execution times from weeks to hours and drastically lowering the technical skills required for sophisticated breaches.

Most cyber security experts consider the occurrence of an attack a matter of when, not if. During evidence taking in the Criminal Justice Committee last year, the head of cyber security at NatWest presented the shocking statistic that the bank faces 100 million cyber attacks per month. Large banks such as NatWest have the resources available to invest in defending themselves against such attacks, but, as they come under increasing financial pressure, councils and third sector organisations face much more of a challenge in allocating appropriate resources.

That means that cyber defence must be a whole-nation effort, with responsibility shared across our society. If our goal is a cyber-resilient Scotland, the key question is how we collectively understand and mitigate those risks. Technology and legislation alone cannot solve that challenge; we need digital equity and digital literacy for every citizen if Scotland is to seize the opportunities of a digital age.

Today's young people will inherit a world that is shaped by AI, automation and technologies that are evolving faster than ever. Many will work in jobs that do not yet exist. If we are serious about building a cyber-secure Scotland, we must equip them not only with the technical skills but with the confidence and critical thinking to navigate both the opportunities and the risks of this digital age.

I recently met the Young Women's Movement in the Parliament, which has developed online guidance and a resource library to help young women to form a critical understanding of AI. With reference to Michelle Campbell's point, that shows that young people understand the risks, challenges and dangers that they face, and they know the importance of getting this right.

Other examples, such as Abertay University's cyberQuarter, show how Scotland can harness world-leading expertise in areas such as ethical hacking and threat detection. Ultimately, our strongest defence is not technology alone but educating the next generation and empowering them with that.

As the tools to defend ourselves become more sophisticated, without upskilling users, we will not only remain vulnerable but will be the vulnerability. Bad actors targeted our education system in West Lothian, yet education is fundamental to our resilience. As our devices and their software become smarter and more integrated in our lives, we must become smarter in their use. They connect us all at work, at home and socially, but they also connect us all in a shared risk. It is only by working collectively that we will succeed in building a cyber-resilient Scotland.

16:24

Bob Doris (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP): The collection and use of data, both personal and financial, the deployment of

technology, the use of online platforms and the use of AI can all drive good-quality public service reform. As convener of the Public Service Reform Committee, I thought that it was worth considering the area of cyber resilience in that context. During the summer, our committee met the Data Lab and CivTech—both organisations were very impressive—to discuss how data and systems can be best used for the public benefit and can be taken forward safely.

Only this morning, the committee heard from Scotland Excel. As people in this place will know, but people outside might not, Scotland Excel is a public body that works with Scotland's 32 councils to secure best value in a whole range of procurement and commissioning activities. Its witness told us that it is working to support local authorities in developing their cyber resilience. I understand that the local government Digital Office, an organisation hosted by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and funded by councils,

"has been working on a project with Scotland Excel to develop a single supplier framework for councils to call off for Security Operations Centre (SOC) services."

I am sure that you know exactly what that means, Presiding Officer, but I did not, so I will quote further from the Digital Office website:

"A SOC is one of the best ways that an organisation can increase their cyber security. Cyber attacks can happen at any time, and cyber criminals often choose times when they know staff will be thin on the ground, with bank holidays being a popular target for this reason.

A SOC provides 24x7x365 monitoring of council systems and can take actions when certain types of incident are seen or escalate to chosen points of contact."

Here is the key aspect:

"Developing this kind of service in-house, with round-the-clock monitoring and specially trained staff would be beyond the reach of a council, so using the private sector to provide this service is the best way to make vital services available to councils."

At the heart of our public sector reforms, we must feel confident about embracing technologies, but with cyber resilience embedded within them. The public must feel safe.

Glasgow had its own cyber attack last year. Thanks to the use of a SOC and partner agencies, the only impact that the public felt was that bin collection data was not available in real time online, and some people could not pay their fines in the online systems. My point is that that attack was dealt with effectively because of partnership working across 32 local authorities and the private sector—and it was affordable.

Calum Kerr: Bob Doris is making a number of excellent points. The attack on Arnold Clark took place on 23 December—exactly as he said, those behind the attack picked a sensitive moment. Part of the reason for that was the lack of staff at that time. Attackers are keen for companies to roll over and just pay the ransom. Arnold Clark decided to go public and spend even more money repairing things, but we do not know how often such ransoms are paid because that is the only way that a company can see a way out of the situation.

Bob Doris: Let me respond to Calum Kerr's intervention in this way, in case I run out of time later. I was very impressed with Mr Kerr's speech and his expertise in the matter. The Parliament should develop expertise here on an ongoing basis. I am not sure if that sits well with any individual committee; I wonder if it requires a small-membership specialist cross-party committee of MSPs to review this area on an ongoing basis. Indeed, Mr Kerr might wish to sit on that.

Calum Kerr: A cross-party group.

Bob Doris: That sort of idea would be of absolute value for the Parliament's scrutiny. [*Interruption*.] I think that the idea has just been seconded by Mr Kerr himself. The Parliament should consider how we scrutinise this area with expertise in the future.

I was going to go on to make a point about outcomes, but I will take an intervention.

Stephen Kerr: Bob Doris is making a good speech, as he often does.

On public awareness, Bob Doris mentioned the example of Glasgow City Council. The lack of awareness about things being disrupted is actually a problem. There is a general complacency among the population that things simply ought to run on, and that there ought to be no disruptions. The lack of awareness among many of our fellow citizens about the real threats that our country is facing, both from hostile actors and from organised crime, is something that we should be speaking much more about, so that the general awareness of the population will rise.

Bob Doris: I agree with Mr Kerr in relation to all of that, but we should also seek to reassure Mr Kerr. We are keen to use all the various new technologies for the benefit of society and our public services, and we do not want to get our citizens so worried that they do not engage with all the opportunities that can be secured. There is a balance to be struck.

I was trying to make the point that there needs to be cross-sector collaboration in all of this, with the third sector and the private sector, so that good practice and lessons learned can be shared. I know that that is part of outcome 4 of the strategy that we are debating. That co-ordinated approach should benefit us all.

I want to talk a little bit about the impact on business. In preparing for the debate, I noted that Glasgow Chamber of Commerce specifically referenced a British Chambers of Commerce report that says that 42 per cent of UK businesses experienced some form of crime in the past year, which includes cyber crime and attacks. It is not only large businesses that are affected, as 32 per cent of microbusinesses had experienced crime. Businesses are in the same position as local authorities. How on earth can they have the cyber resilience and security that they need? We ought to look at the Scotland Excel example and consider how we can provide cyber resilience and security expertise at an affordable price to all our businesses.

Glasgow Chamber of Commerce has picked out four recommendations from the British Chambers of Commerce report. I do not have time to list them all, but the first is that a national business crime strategic assessment be carried out across the UK. It also notes that the creation of a single cyber attack reporting system for firms would reduce administrative burdens while improving protection. The second is the creation of regional business crime hubs with business crime reduction partnerships and the expansion of cyber and fraud resilience support for small and medium-sized enterprises.

My expertise on this is limited and I do not know which parts of the UK and Scottish Governments have collaborated on the framework. However, as British Chambers of Commerce is saying that those things are important and that has been echoed by my local chamber of commerce, I want to ensure that the Parliament looks at the matter to ensure that businesses in Scotland are well served.

I will finish in a slightly different tone. Andy Burnham is in Berlin today, and the press release on his visit says that

"Britain and Germany are joining forces to find, expose and disrupt"

cyber attack activity. Mr Kerr said in his intervention on the cabinet secretary that this is not about constitutional wrangling, which perhaps showed his humour early in the debate. Irrespective of our constitutional positions, we can all agree that the challenge goes beyond Scotland and beyond the UK. It is a global challenge for society, and we have to act together in solidarity to meet it.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): We move to the closing speeches.

16:32

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Cyber resilience does not start with firewalls. It starts with cabinets, cables and cable landing stations. Digital services run on physical things that can be sabotaged by being cut, crushed or flooded. We have talked about the grey zone, and Russia's approach is deniable, below the threshold of war and cheap. We know that there is pretty much constant Russian submersible activity around the cables in the North Sea, testing their resilience and weak points. Scotland sits at the threshold of the north Atlantic approaches, with transatlantic cables, energy interconnectors and Shetland's high-voltage direct current link. All of those are prime targets should relationships deteriorate further in this increasingly hostile world.

As I said at the end of my first speech, a severed cable does not care whether it was damaged accidentally or sabotaged by a hostile actor. Either way, the challenge for Government is to ensure that the system is resilient enough to cope. That means protecting critical infrastructure and ensuring that robust contingency and recovery arrangements are in place when it fails. For Scotland's island and remote communities, it means making sure that their geography does not leave them disproportionately exposed when something goes wrong.

Cyber threats will continue to evolve and our response must evolve with them. The focus of the motion is on awareness, stronger standards, preparation and collaboration. All those things are important, but we must also recognise that cyber security does not exist solely in cyber space. Our digital services rely on physical infrastructure. The resilience of one depends on the resilience of the other. This is about protecting our systems from attack and ensuring that the services that we depend on can withstand disruption and recover when something goes wrong.

Whether disruption begins with malicious code, a hostile actor or physical damage, we have to be prepared for it. That is why understanding physical vulnerabilities that underpin our digital networks must form part of Scotland's approach to cyber resilience. My amendment speaks to that, and I was gratified to hear the cabinet secretary talk of collaboration with our partners in the United Kingdom so that we can have an islands-wide approach to cyber resilience.

16:34

Stephen Kerr: I will finish on the question that I think matters, which is about what will change after this debate. It is undoubtedly important that we have debated this issue, but what will change? The motion contains words that everyone can support,

about having stronger standards, resources and co-operation, but I think we would all agree that words in a motion will not protect a hospital or a council. What matters is whether those standards are enforced and weaknesses are repaired, and whether someone is answerable when they are not. One of my colleagues in the House of Commons, Ben Spencer MP, put the question bluntly: what does further regulation achieve if existing requirements are not enforced?

To me, that is at the heart of the debate. A public body can have policies—we always have plenty of policies—committees, risk registers and presentations, but none of them can repair a vulnerability. A standard that nobody checks is not protection. A deadline with no consequence is merely a date on a piece of paper. Who requires action when a Scottish public body falls short? Who signs off the remedial work? What happens when it is late or never completed? Responsibility cannot disappear into a system. It must rest with accountable officers, chief executives, boards and, ultimately—I am sure that the cabinet secretary is pleased to hear me say this—ministers. The same applies to supply chains.

Neil Gray: I was going to touch on some of that in my conclusion, but, as Stephen Kerr has raised the issue directly, I will touch on it now.

He is right about the expectation that there are accountable officers for when there is a failure in a public body, and I will give an example of where that is already in place. NHS Dumfries and Galloway had a cyber attack. Its cyber resilience plans had been audited shortly prior to that cyber attack, so it was in a robust position. That highlights the point, which many members have made, that, even with a robust cyber posture, we can still be vulnerable. The issue is not whether there is robustness or whether there has been a failure; it is ensuring that lessons are learned and shared. I can categorically guarantee that that is happening across the public sector.

Stephen Kerr: I welcome that, because this is a dynamic landscape. There is nothing static about this—things are constantly moving—so I completely accept the premise of what the cabinet secretary has said.

That also extends to supply chains. A public body might secure its own network and then give a supplier privileged access to it. That supplier might rely on subcontractors and cloud services elsewhere. One weak link could compromise the whole chain. Before a contract is awarded, who tests that risk? Do contracts impose security and incident-reporting duties? Can services continue if the supplier is compromised? Who checks the subcontractors? I realise that I am asking a lot of questions in my speeches this afternoon—perhaps there is nothing new there—but those are very important questions.

If we are serious—and we cannot afford not to be serious about this issue—we have to admit that a lot of public service contracts in the past few years have been determined largely on price, and we have to be very cautious about that. A cheap contract is no bargain if, in the process of acquiring the cheap goods or services, we end up importing an expensive vulnerability.

Ben Spencer argued that these decisions must reflect intelligence about hostile states. We have had a debate in this Parliament about a hostile state that has wanted to install something in our country. We had a party-political division on that. I would argue that we need to give pre-eminence to consideration of national security. Ministers must act on security advice, even when that decision is not convenient, as was the case in the example that I am thinking of, and which I am sure the rest of the Parliament is thinking of. Procurement cannot be separated from national security, and neither can economic development.

Ministers may say that annual reporting already exists, and I know that it does. The Government conducts an annual assessment of public sector cyber maturity, and the Scottish cyber co-ordination centre publishes an annual activity report. However, that is not the end of the question—it is clearly the beginning of it.

I will, therefore, ask the cabinet secretary another set of questions. Will ministers publish information on how many bodies meet the required standards and how many do not? I recognise that that will be a snapshot. How much of that assurance is down to self-assessment, and how much is independently verified? Those are critical questions. How many essential services have tested their recovery arrangements? I asked that question in my first speech, and I ask it again now. How many failed elements of those tests, and how many of those failed elements were fixed, and by when?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Katy Clark): I appreciate that the member took a lengthy intervention, but he must bring his remarks to a close.

Stephen Kerr: I will conclude simply by saying that we do not need more strategies and reporting structures—we need the existing system to produce evidence on challenges and consequences. This is a matter of vital importance to us all. Although today's debate is sparsely attended, I think that we would all agree that, in the event of a national incident of the proportions that we are discussing, every seat would be filled, because the issue is so important.

16:40

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green): My entry in the register of members' interests shows that I am a member of the Open Rights Group. I thank the Government for bringing the debate to the chamber; it has been important. I think that we will be in a position to have a more useful debate in Parliament if we come back to the issue in the context of cross-portfolio committee work that goes into the subject in more detail. Bob Doris's speech gave me good reason to think that that will happen, and that not just the Public Service Reform Committee but other committees will be interested in working together to achieve progress on that.

I acknowledge the level of agreement among parties on the text of the Government's motion. Scottish Greens recognise the extreme scale of the risk and the pace at which things are changing, and the fact that this is not a threat for the future. It is not imminent—it is happening now. As Pauline Stafford discussed, the scale and the number of attacks that are already happening is shocking. I think that a great many members of the public are unaware of that and would be shocked and disturbed to know about the number of attacks, not just at private sector institutions but in our councils and public institutions, and in other places.

Yes, there is a shared responsibility across all sectors, but the responsibility for regulating new technology falls squarely on Government—not just the Scottish Government, but the UK Government—and internationally. I remain concerned that we are not seeing such an approach, particularly with AI. Both the Scottish and UK Governments seem to be more in thrall to the potential economic benefits than they are alive to the very real risks.

As for the amendments, we will support them all, with one exception. The idea of calling the issues that we are addressing in this debate "simple objectives" is pretty absurd, and I wonder whether artificial intelligence was the only kind of intelligence that was used in drafting that amendment.

I have a couple of comments on the Labour amendment, which Scottish Greens will support. We voted for the legislative consent motion on the UK Government's Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill yesterday, and we can accept that it is a positive step, but it is a modest one. Despite a strong case—

Alex Cole-Hamilton: Will the member give way?

Patrick Harvie: In just one moment.

Despite a strong case being made by some at Westminster, the UK Government is, so far, resisting the call to develop a digital sovereignty strategy. Like the Scottish Government, it seems to perceive more opportunities than risks from AI.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The member's amendment surfaces some important points, particularly on digital sovereignty. I share his anxieties about the UK Government's apparent unwillingness to embrace a sovereignty strategy, but I think that that will change over time, and I am anxious that, if Scotland were simply to plough on with its digital sovereignty strategy, it would need to be redone when we come together. We need a whole-islands approach to the issue and, unfortunately, even though he and I disagree on the destination of independence, I think that we will always need to work with the rest of the UK on this matter, irrespective of that.

Patrick Harvie: We will, and we will need to work with the rest of Europe and other countries, too. That includes Scotland—I am not for a moment suggesting that Scotland should be dealing with the matter on its own, but the approach certainly includes Scotland, regardless of our constitutional destination.

Further in relation to the UK approach, the UK Government has also been inviting the likes of Palantir into UK service delivery and, by doing that, it has unquestionably worsened vulnerability that comes from overreliance on a handful of big tech companies, despite the deeply troubling ethical questions that their behaviour raises. This is, but is not only, a matter of foreign states that may pose a threat. It is also about threats to our security and our democracy that corporations pose.

I would challenge anyone to deny that the likes of Musk and Thiel pose a threat to our democratic values. I mentioned my membership of the Open Rights Group, which has done a significant amount of work on our overreliance on the likes of Amazon, Microsoft, Oracle and Google. I welcome the fact that the Scottish Government has not repeated the error of inviting Palantir into the mix, but the problem remains. The industry spends vast amounts of money persuading Governments around the world to adopt its systems. The public sector becomes locked in and, as it does so, becomes less able to resist the industry's efforts to oppose responsible regulation. As the industry's power grows, the state becomes more vulnerable to overseas companies or countries pulling the plug.

Calum Kerr: It has been an interesting debate, and it is great to hear sovereignty being mentioned. It is a shame that we did not have enough time for sovereignty to have been included as a strand in the debate on data centres. Does Patrick Harvie agree that the issue is one not only of sovereignty but of data residency? It is all very

well to have sovereignty in terms of the laws governing data, but if the data resides in a place where a cable can be cut, we are fundamentally in a vulnerable position.

I also draw Mr Harvie's attention to the fact that one of the subjects that the cross-party group on science and technology is looking at is sovereign AI and small models, which are very good for Scotland.

Patrick Harvie: I will do my best to come along to the CPG.

The point about physical location is only one aspect of the issue. Control by companies and countries is also part of the threat. We have already seen the Trump regime and Microsoft acting in such a way—the International Criminal Court's email systems and electronic banking were politically targeted by them in recent times. Digital sovereignty will not be quick or easy to achieve, which is why we need to start now.

I want to briefly mention the concept of Q-day, which will make the Y2K issue seem like a storm in a teacup. Q-day involves the projection that, at some point soon, quantum computing will have the ability to break pretty much all the cryptographic and encryption systems that are used around the world. Earlier this year, Google and other major companies brought forward their estimate. We are not talking about something that could happen well into the 2030s; it could happen in the next three years.

Data harvesting is already happening in anticipation of that. Data that we consider secure today is being harvested because the companies involved know that it will not be secure in the future. There is a clear connection between that threat and the AI arms race. The motion recognises the need for robust regulation of new technologies, yet we still seem to be framing AI principally as a source of growth.

In closing, I want to draw attention to some data of my own. The world's losses on AI are astonishing. Globally, about £1 trillion more has been spent by the companies that are developing AI than has been earned by them. If we look down the list of those that are making a loss and those that are making a profit, we see that it is only AMD, Micron and NVIDIA that are making a profit. The companies that are manufacturing the chips and the data hardware that everybody else is using to lose money and increase our vulnerability are the ones that are making a profit. In the time that we have been having this debate, an extra £178 million has been lost globally. That is the scale of the losses. Therefore, I ask those who frame the issue as one of economic growth, does that look like growth? All that we can see is red line after red line after red line.

Governments need to have the confidence to govern, and that means regulating to ensure that new technologies make people's lives better instead of serving the vested interests of an industry that is too often led by the most toxic examples of the world's super-rich.

16:48

David Kirkwood (South Scotland) (Reform): When most people hear the word "cyber", they tend to think of the internet and connected communications, and that has been the subject of most of the contributions to the debate. However, the term actually refers to any kind of electronic data processing or messaging.

I first encountered what we now call IT almost 50 years ago, I started to use it professionally about 40 years ago and I became a full-time freelance IT consultant 30 years ago, so I have seen massive changes in cyber security and resilience over that time. In the good old days, very few people even had a computer, so it was not an issue for the ordinary person. Once personal computers started to appear in offices during the 1980s, cyber security meant locking up the floppy disks at night. During the 1990s, networking started to become common, and we all suddenly realised the value of file system access controls and electronic firewalls.

Around the turn of the century, the internet started to become endemic in normal lives, and email and the worldwide web brought many imaginative ways for baddies to plunder people's wallets, personal information and general wellbeing. Phishing, pharming, impersonation, malware and trolling all took their toll.

At a personal level, browsers had to become more sophisticated to protect untutored users against online threats, and it is generally much more difficult for intruders to penetrate a reasonably well-protected computer now than it used to be. However, the cyber arms race continues and, as new software defects appear, malicious actors—many of them nation states—are quick to exploit them.

In the past few months, the application of AI to source code review has uncovered enormous amounts of legacy bugs in mainstream software. In September, Microsoft used patch Tuesday to issue 974 Windows patches in an attempt to fix rafts of newly found problems. That is up from the few dozen patches that usually appear every month. A huge proportion of the patches will have been to close long-standing operating system holes that might let—and might have already let—bad actors into affected systems. Microsoft noted that at least two of the defects were under active

exploitation at the time that the patches were issued.

Baddies move quickly, and users need to move even quicker to keep their systems updated. Microsoft Windows uses closed source code, which means that it is not published, and there is no way for an independent expert to inspect it for security flaws. At least in part because of that, many people have migrated to Linux, which is God's own operating system and entirely open source. That does not necessarily mean that it is more secure, but many more people are able to scan the source code to look for problems, and new Linux systems are updated regularly and, generally, very quickly after flaws are discovered.

Many flaws would be discovered at source if software were adequately tested, and, as a former professional test manager, I would like to use the opportunity to address the software industry directly: just test the stuff properly before you foist it on your customers, will you? You might be saving money by using your customers as testers, but it is costing the rest of us a huge amount of money, sleepless nights and frustration.

I am glad to have got that off my chest after all these years—that is a lot of frustration gone there. I will make an honourable exception of McLaren Software Group in Glasgow, which, of all my clients over 30 years, has proved to be the most professional of any software company that I have ever dealt with—brilliant company and wonderful software.

Even with fully patched systems, the weakest link in cyber security is often more animal than technical. In IT support, we have an acronym for some problems: PICNIC—problem in chair, not in computer. It was often the case that I would go to the desk of a user who had reported a problem only for them to turn their keyboard over to check the password on the Post-it note underneath.

Clever social engineering can bypass any technical security, and there is a recent worrying development of AI-generated telephone calls using a convincing simulacrum of the voice of a trusted colleague to try to persuade nefarious access to be granted. We are now at the point of having to agree passwords with colleagues beforehand so that we can identify them in telephone calls.

Bad actors are becoming more professional and might look towards long-term gain rather than quick wins. Patrick Harvie referred to that aspect a couple of times in the debate. Harvesting is now undertaken for exploitation at some point in the future—a point that is possibly not even known yet.

Ransomware attacks are an unfortunate aspect of modern life, as many of our institutions have found out over the past few years. For a well-prepared organisation, recovering from those attacks used to be a relatively simple matter of shutting down and wiping the affected systems and restoring the most recent good back-ups. However, ransomers are developing patience and might leave their malicious code in place for many weeks or months before triggering it, by which time good back-ups might no longer be available. New recovery strategies need to be developed to cope with such longitudinal threats.

Cyber security involves more than just controlling network access. I am sure that many of us remember when the entire UK child benefit database was burned on to a couple of CDs, which were then left on a train. Training users in the proper application of the general data protection regulation can obviate most of the more egregious data leakages, but even with fully patched and isolated systems and trained users, things can still go wrong. Resilience means being able to recover efficiently from any catastrophe.

I have been present at a few system disasters and even had a hand in one. I have seen that the difference in the success of a recovery operation depends on how prepared the organisation was before the event. There is a saying in IT that no back-up can ever be considered secure until it is restored. There are many tales of organisations that discover that their backups are corrupt and unrecoverable only once disaster strikes.

The multiplicity of computers and cyber networks in Scotland together comprise part of our national strategic infrastructure, and careful management must be applied at every level to ensure that the security and prosperity of the nation are preserved.

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): I call Daniel Johnson—seven minutes, please.

16:55

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Thank you, Presiding Officer. It is good of you to arrive in the chamber specifically to hear me speak, and I am sure that that is the case.

The Presiding Officer: It was long planned.

Daniel Johnson: Earlier in the debate, Stephen Kerr—I do not know whether he was complaining or observing—said that this is not really a debate because everyone seems to be agreeing. That might be the case, but it certainly makes it very difficult to sum up, because there were a broad range of views.

I have a bit of a framework for summarising those views, but Patrick Harvie made an overarching point about encryption and Q-day that

does not completely fit into it. We may be facing a point where all our approaches to cyber security will be rendered null and void because of our inability to use encryption, because virtually all of cyber security is underpinned by it. We must get to grips with that overarching point and have some approaches and strategies for it, because that situation is looming and impending.

I thank the cabinet secretary for the way in which he framed the debate. I was concerned that perhaps we would look at systems, structures and guarantees, but how we use technology is all-encompassing. It affects every element of our lives—it spans the personal through to the social, commercial, political and national. It is important to understand the scope of the issue. The cabinet secretary acknowledged the point—and she reflected on it well—that many of the threats do not acknowledge those boundaries at all. They seek to exploit individual issues or vectors at a social or national level.

It is also important to acknowledge personal issues. Michelle Campbell made a very good point in her intervention about females very often being the victims of cyber crime. We need to start considering the issue by thinking about things such as sexploitation approaches.

Pauline Stafford made the excellent point that our starting point needs to be education. Ultimately, addressing the vulnerabilities that arise from individuals using systems has to start with education and making sure that we all take security-aware approaches.

This issue is part of everyday life; it is a bit like teaching kids how to cross the road. Cyber security is something that we all need to be thinking about all the time. Because of the nature of information systems, it is all-encompassing. I highlight the contributions from Reform members and from Alex Cole-Hamilton about needing to be very clear about the nature of the systems that we have and the contingencies that are involved.

There are several important points to make. We need transparency around the posture on resilience across all our institutions. Although concern was raised in the chamber about whether that might heighten fears, I think that we need that transparency.

Furthermore, several members raised the issue of what happens when systems fail. We absolutely must seek to defend ourselves against these threats, but the frequency and scale of the incidents are now such that we need to think about whether things can continue to operate and services can continue to be delivered if systems are completely compromised in their entirety and if elements are removed from service on a permanent basis.

I would like to address the points around state actors in particular—we heard a number of very good contributions on that. I would also like to highlight a point that we alighted on midway through the debate. As part of the indivisible scope of these threats, we need to think about the issue at a political and democratic level. Again, these state actors will seek to undermine how we go about our daily lives and how we seek to operate at a political level. That involves issues such as system attacks as well as disinformation. We need to encompass that in our debate.

A number of members, including Pauline McNeill and Stephen Kerr, made the very good point that we need to be cognisant of the level of threat we are facing from foreign actors, particularly China, Iran and Russia. We have seen a number of attacks on power plants, on national retailers, on manufacturers, on local government and on schools and education institutions. It is notable that many members were able to reel off examples of attacks that have happened. They are things that we do not need to look very hard to find. If we were having this debate 10 or 20 years ago, we would have had to try to find niche examples, but the attacks are now commonplace. Further, we are at a point where they have gone from being simply inconvenient to causing significant disruption, if not damage.

Stephen Kerr: Does Daniel Johnson agree that everyone in this chamber has an obligation to make the public more aware of the real-life threat of the grey-zone warfare that this country has become involved in because it is a target of those hostile states?

Daniel Johnson: I agree, and I see that the cabinet secretary is indicating that he agrees, too. That is why we are having this useful debate. I very much appreciate Zen Ghani's reflections on my colleague Graeme Downie MP's recent work on the Putin tax. The fact that that could be costing this country more than £2.5 billion a year—that is just in terms of identified costs coming from direct attacks—is important, and we need to increase public awareness of it.

We also need to remind people that many of these attacks are hybrid. They are seeking to attack us in any way they can. This is why cyber is such a central point of the strategic defence review that the UK Government undertook. Although it is very much focused on the fact that we need to defend ourselves against these grey-zone attacks, hybrid attacks and cyber and other attacks—I highlight that it also says that we must not make a division between cyber attacks and hybrid attacks. The strategic defence review makes very clear that we need to be ready for an attack, whether that be a cyber attack or a physical attack. It makes a call for civil contingency, resilience and co-ordination

across the public sector. Although I absolutely agree that that requires information sharing, it also requires us not to wait to take action on this, and to think about what defence means in those terms. That is not something that, hitherto, the Scottish Parliament has had to do, and that is a new challenge for us.

The Presiding Officer: I call Neil Gray to wind up the debate. You have up to 10 minutes, cabinet secretary.

17:03

Neil Gray: Often, as we hurtle towards recess, our tempers can become frayed in this place, so I am glad that we have had such a considered and consensual debate. Let it be known to Stephen Kerr that my nature is to bring people together, and so we have done today with this debate.

In all seriousness, it is critically important that we come together on this issue, because we have highlighted a clear recognition of the importance of cyber resilience to Scotland's future. Members from across the chamber have reflected on the challenges that are posed by an increasingly complex cyber threat landscape, the opportunities presented by new digital technologies and the importance of ensuring that our public services, our businesses and our communities remain resilient in the face of those evolving risks.

Although there might be differences in emphasis on some aspects of delivery, investment or future policy direction, it is clear that cyber resilience underpins everything that we do. It matters to our economy, our public services, our communities and the people of Scotland, who increasingly rely on digital technologies in every aspect of their daily lives.

The debate has shown that we are all becoming familiar with the growing sophistication of cyber criminals, the continued threat posed by ransomware—whether from serious and organised crime or state actors and their proxies—as well as the continued threat of online fraud, scams and the opportunities and risks associated with artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies. The threats that we face today are faster, more sophisticated and increasingly capable of operating at scale—Calum Kerr made that point eloquently in his speech.

Cyber incidents can have severe and long-lasting impacts on individuals, essential public services and the organisations that communities depend on. Pauline Stafford referred to that point in relation to the issues that West Lothian Council's education department faced last year. From local authorities and health services to businesses, charities and critical infrastructure, the consequences of cyber disruption are real and increasingly significant. Every online scam, fraudulent transaction, cyber attack and disrupted service can expose individuals and families to cyber threats and leave victims to deal with the consequences.

I referred earlier to the fact that this was a consensual debate, which might have caused an element of consternation or frustration for Stephen Kerr. However, that consensus should not mask the undeniable quality of the debate. We have had considered and informed speeches that have made a significant contribution to raising awareness, which was my intention in contributing to Mr Johnson's speech from a sedentary position. I am grateful to everybody for their contributions. Calum Kerr, Zen Ghani, Pauline Stafford, Bob Doris and Daniel Johnson made considered, informed and very helpful contributions.

Alex Cole-Hamilton: The cabinet secretary spoke eloquently about the threats to our online resilience that we face from hostile actors—particularly criminal gangs. However, so far, he has not covered much about the physical resilience that we require. I talked about SHEFA-2, the cable that was damaged by storm Amy, which led to an outage of 26 days in the northern isles. Is he confident that lessons have been learned from that natural disruption to our cyber resilience? Is the co-ordination with private companies and the UK Government now in place to ensure that another such outage would not be so long lasting?

Neil Gray: We had interaction across the chamber on that point, and I accept the focus that Alex Cole-Hamilton has given to it. In summing up the debate, I will start with his speech.

We will accept the Liberal Democrat amendment, although I have to say that it must not have gone past Liam McArthur in its drafting, given that it comments on our rural and island communities as being remote. I know that he shares my consternation on that point. I leave that aside and will ensure that we still support the amendment in the consensual way in which we seek to bring people together. Alex Cole-Hamilton is absolutely right that we must ensure that our physical infrastructure and the lessons learned from some of the issues that he raised are part of the Government's consideration and our four-nations approach.

Pauline McNeill made a good speech that focused on the threat from hostile states and the targeting that is coming to the UK and all of us as a result. We support the Labour amendment. What we face is deeply concerning. On Patrick Harvie's point, the UK legislation for which we provided a legislative consent motion last night takes us forward, but there is more for us to do.

I agree with much of what Amanda Bland put on the record. I also agree with much of the Reform amendment and about the need for better exercising. However, that needs to be done not just in a Scottish context—that must happen—but more frequently at a four-nations level. I recognise the exercise that is due to take place this winter.

I agree with a substantial amount of Ms Bland's amendment, but we cannot support it, for the reasons that I set out earlier around the data that informs it. I also feel that, as an alternative, Ms McNeill's amendment covers the need for intervention.

Maggie Chapman's contribution was very strong and, again, we agree with the Green amendment.

Stephen Kerr contributed a significant amount to the debate, both in his speeches and in the interventions that he took and made. He asked a direct question regarding the national cyber exercises. The last exercise was in March 2025 and was led by SC3. In total, 23 organisations participated, including the Scottish Government, Police Scotland, SEPA and the NHS, as well as BT and Capita, which contributed as strategic suppliers. To give him reassurance around our exercises, the next national exercise will be in December, and we will ensure that that work is taken forward with haste.

Cyber resilience cannot be viewed simply as a technical issue. It is about protecting people, services and the systems that underpin modern life. Improving awareness, providing up-to-date guidance and strengthening personal online security all help to build trust and public confidence. Although there may be different views on how best to achieve it, I believe that today's debate has shown that there is broad agreement across Parliament on the importance of cyber resilience and its place as a central thread in our national security posture.

First, there is a recognition that the threat continues to evolve. Regardless of political perspective, we all agree that Scotland must remain prepared for that increasingly complex and dynamic cyber environment. In that context, I agree with Stephen Kerr's intervention on Pauline McNeill regarding our own resilience in Scotland.

Secondly, there is a recognition that Scotland is making progress. We have developed our cyber resilience ecosystem, we are establishing new capabilities, we are strengthening our public sector and we are collaborating to bring meaningful improvements across a wide range of organisations.

Thirdly, there is recognition that cyber resilience is a shared responsibility. No organisation or Government can solve these challenges alone. Success depends on individuals, businesses, public services, academia, the community and voluntary sector, law enforcement, Government and international partners all playing their part. Although we should recognise all of those, we must also be clear-eyed about the challenges ahead and build on the progress made so far.

As Scotland's cyber resilience arrangements continue to mature, it is right that we consider how best to strengthen preparedness, assurance and governance across our essential services. Organisations that deliver critical services must equip themselves to manage cyber risk effectively and demonstrate resilience in the face of these evolving threats. We expect organisations delivering our public services to understand risk, ensure robust governance, prepare appropriately and learn lessons. With regard to the intervention from Stephen Kerr, I hope that that gives him reassurance. That is why developments such as the cyber observatory and cyber resilience assessment processes are so important. They provide the evidence that allows resilience to be continuously monitored and improved rather than simply assumed.

I acknowledge the contribution made by all those involved in this work: cyber professionals who work behind the scenes; public servants who are responsible for bringing partners together to deal with the risks; organisations and businesses that support awareness raising and skills development; those who invest in resilience; and universities that drive research and innovation and, alongside schools and colleges, develop the next generation of talent.

Cyber resilience is not solely a technology issue—it is a national resilience issue. The security and resilience of our digital systems is integral to our economic prosperity, community wellbeing and public confidence in our essential services.

As Scotland continues to embrace innovative technologies, harness innovation and pursue public services reform, cyber resilience will remain critical to that success. If we are to build a trusted, adaptable and high-performing Scotland, we must ensure that we embed that resilience into everything that we do.

The progress made over the past decade demonstrates what can be achieved through collaboration. That collaborative approach remains one of our greatest strengths and will be essential as we navigate the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead.

Our task now is to build on that progress to ensure that technological innovation is matched by strong governance, robust standards and effective partnerships that will enable our people, services

and economy to flourish in an increasingly digital world.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on strengthening Scotland's cyber resilience.

Decision Time

17:14

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): There are five questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S7M-01517.1, in the name of Pauline McNeill, which seeks to amend motion S7M-01517, in the name of Neil Gray, on strengthening Scotland's cyber resilience, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

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

17:15

Meeting suspended.

17:17

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: The broadcasting system is now back.

We come to the vote on amendment S7M-01517.1, in the name of Pauline McNeill. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adams, James (North East Scotland) (Con)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)

Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Green, David (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

Against

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

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S7M-01517.1, in the name of Pauline McNeill, is: For 96, Against 13, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S7M-01517.3, in the name of Amanda Bland, which seeks to amend motion S7M-01517, in the name of Neil Gray, on strengthening Scotland's cyber resilience, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adams, James (North East Scotland) (Con)
Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)

MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Offord, Malcolm (West Scotland) (Reform)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Schmulian, Kim (Glasgow) (Reform)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Green, David (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

The result of the division on amendment S7M-01517.3, in the name of Amanda Bland, is: For 35, Against 74, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S7M-01517.2, in the name of Maggie Chapman, which seeks to amend motion S7M-01517, in the name of Neil Gray, on strengthening Scotland's cyber resilience, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted no.

The Presiding Officer: Your vote has been recorded.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)

Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

Against

Adams, James (North East Scotland) (Con)
Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Green, David (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Offord, Malcolm (West Scotland) (Reform)
Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Schmulian, Kim (Glasgow) (Reform)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S7M-01517.2, in the name of Maggie Chapman, is: For 65, Against 42, Abstentions 0.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S7M-01517.4, in the name of Alex Cole-Hamilton, which seeks to amend motion S7M-01517, in the name of Neil Gray, on strengthening Scotland's cyber resilience, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: Well done, Alex.

The final question is, that motion S7M-01517, in the name of Neil Gray, on strengthening Scotland's cyber resilience, as amended, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

The vote is closed.

Gary Bouse (Falkirk West) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am not sure whether my vote has been recorded.

The Presiding Officer: I can tell you that you have voted, Gary.

Gary Bouse: It has not shown up on my screen.

The Presiding Officer: Better safe than sorry.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire West and Levern Valley) (SNP)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North) (SNP)
Black, Dawn (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)
Bland, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Bouse, Gary (Falkirk West) (SNP)
Brown, Alan (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Chou Turvey, Yi-pei (North East Scotland) (LD)
Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
Day, Martyn (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Ghani, Zen (Glasgow Cathcart and Pollok) (SNP)
Gibson, Patricia (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Goodlad, Hannah Mary (Shetland Islands) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
Kerr, Alex (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Leask, Kristopher (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
McLennan, Paul (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP)
McMillan, Stuart (Inverclyde) (SNP)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Moodie, Laura (South Scotland) (Green)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Slater, Lorna (Edinburgh Central) (Green)
Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Smith, David (West Scotland) (Reform)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

Against

Adams, James (North East Scotland) (Con)
Ahmed, Irshad (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Baxter, Andrew (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)
Beresford, Senga (South Scotland) (Reform)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Briggs, Miles (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Con)
Burnett, Alexander (Aberdeenshire West) (Con)
Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh North Western) (LD)
Currie, Victor (Highlands and Islands) (Reform)
Dijkstra-Downie, Sanne (Edinburgh Northern) (LD)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab)
Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Con)
Green, David (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD)
Griffin, Mark (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)
Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
Harley, Adam (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (LD)
Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Kerr, Thomas (Glasgow) (Reform)
Kirkwood, David (South Scotland) (Reform)
Langan, Jamie (South Scotland) (Reform)
Lindsay, Amanda (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
MacCallum, Morven-May (Highlands and Islands) (LD)
MacDougall, Julie (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
MacKinnon, Donald (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
McDade, Helen (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform)
Offord, Malcolm (West Scotland) (Reform)
Rennie, Willie (Fife North East) (LD)
Sangster, Katherine (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)
Schmulian, Kim (Glasgow) (Reform)
Simpson, Graham (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Reform)
Simpson, Mark (North East Scotland) (Reform)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Young, Jenny (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S7M-01517, in the name of Neil Gray, on strengthening Scotland's cyber resilience, as amended, is: For 70, Against 37, Abstentions 0.

Motion, as amended, agreed to,

That the Parliament recognises that strong cyber resilience is essential to protecting people's rights, safety

and access to essential public services as well as ensuring Scotland's national resilience, economic prosperity and the delivery of public services; notes that the increasing reliance on digital technologies is exposing individuals, businesses, public services and the democratic system to growing cyber threats, including cyber crime, online fraud, scams, and ransomware; acknowledges the importance of improving public awareness and personal online security and protecting people's safety; recognises that cyber resilience is a shared responsibility requiring coordination and action across all sectors, and robust regulation of new technologies; welcomes progress through the Strategic Framework for a Cyber Resilient Scotland, the CyberScotland Partnership and the Scottish Cyber Coordination Centre; recognises that these strategies must be effectively resourced; supports more robust cyber resilience standards for public, private and third sector organisations; supports continued collaboration and cooperation with partners across Scotland, the UK and internationally to identify, manage and respond to evolving digital risks; welcomes the UK Government's Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill as a step towards building nationwide protocols for protecting critical infrastructure; calls on the Scottish Government to ensure that areas within its devolved competence are adequately resourced to establish any additional security measures or reporting mechanisms that may be required; recognises that digital sovereignty is an increasingly important aspect of cyber resilience, including the risks arising from excessive dependence on a small number of multinational technology companies and foreign-owned digital infrastructure; further recognises the importance of strong privacy, human rights and democratic safeguards; supports diversified, interoperable and secure digital infrastructure, open standards, responsible public procurement and investment in Scotland's cyber security skills, research and public-interest technological capability; notes steps being taken at a European level to strengthen digital sovereignty; agrees that the UK Government should be more proactive in pursuing digital sovereignty; believes that the Scottish Government should begin work to develop a Scottish digital sovereignty strategy, given that this will be necessary in the event of independence; recognises that cyber resilience depends on the security and resilience of the physical infrastructure on which digital services rely; understands the risks to critical digital infrastructure of accidental, environmental and deliberate disruption, including sabotage and the actions of hostile actors, and recognises the particular importance of resilient and diverse connectivity for Scotland's island and remote communities.

The Presiding Officer: Before everyone goes off on their merry way, I want to announce a slight potential change to First Minister's question time for party leaders. For the past two Wednesdays, conveners have asked questions of the First Minister at question time sessions. Eight conveners asked questions of the First Minister at those one-hour sessions, for about seven minutes each. Yesterday, 56 questions were answered by the First Minister. Some members asked up to four questions, and some asked a dozen or so.

What I have decided to do at the next First Minister's question time for party leaders is not to say that there should be three questions from Reform, three from Labour, three from the Greens and two from each of the other parties, but to have seven minutes for Reform, seven minutes for Labour, six minutes for the Greens, five minutes for the Conservatives and five minutes for the Liberals. It will be up to them whether they wish to continue asking one rather in-depth question or a series of shorter questions. That will give the party leaders more flexibility in how they ask their questions.

Judging by the response from the First Minister over the past two Wednesdays, I know he will be well up for that. [*Laughter*]. If I was still on his Christmas card list, I would be off it now.

I wish everyone a good recess.

Face Coverings in Public Places

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S7M-01375, in the name of Thomas Kerr, on face coverings in public places. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. Members who wish to contribute should press their request-to-speak button now.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament notes the ongoing debate across Scotland, and particularly in Glasgow, regarding the wearing of full-face coverings, including the burqa and niqab, in public places; recognises that legislation in Scotland already provides police with powers to require the removal of face coverings in specified circumstances where there are reasonable grounds to believe that they are being used to conceal identity in connection with criminality or disorder; notes the Scottish Government's current position that existing police powers are sufficient; further notes that a number of European countries have introduced restrictions on face coverings in public places, and notes calls for the Scottish Government to set out its assessment of the potential benefits of introducing further restrictions on full-face coverings in public places, including consideration of public safety, individual liberty and community cohesion.

17:26

Thomas Kerr (Glasgow) (Reform): I begin by once again thanking Stephen Kerr for backing the motion in order to allow Parliament to hear this debate. I know that we disagree on the issue, but it is really important that our Parliament is used for the democratic process of debating an issue, even if members disagree with it.

I know that the debate has caused a bit of a stooshie, but, when we cut through the noise and the nonsense, at its heart is a simple belief that, in a free and open society, people should ordinarily be able to see one another's faces. The ability to see the person we are speaking to is not some trivial social—

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): Will the member give way?

Thomas Kerr: On you go.

Kirsten Oswald: Does he accept that, in a free and open society, it is up to people—women—to decide what they wear?

Thomas Kerr: If the minister had waited, I would have come to that point my speech. I know that she is eager to get in, but I will come to the points that I am going to address, and I do agree with her.

The ability to see the person we are speaking to is not some trivial social convention; it is fundamental to communication, identification, trust and public safety. That is why Reform believes that Scotland should introduce a clear and comprehensive ban on face coverings, including the burqa, in public places.

The burqa and other forms of full-face covering present a particular challenge because they entirely conceal the identity of the person wearing them. A modern democratic society depends on people participating openly in public life. Communication matters in our schools, universities, courts, public services and workplaces, and being able to identify the person standing in front of us matters.

Katie Hagmann (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Thomas Kerr: Can I finish my point? I will take interventions, but I want to finish this part of my speech.

A person entering a court cannot simply insist that their identity should remain concealed; a person sitting an examination cannot reasonably expect to conceal their face from those supervising it; and nobody should expect security staff to accept an unidentified person entering a sensitive building such as the Scottish Parliament.

I will take the intervention before I move on.

Katie Hagmann: I am really baffled why we are even debating this. The motion talks about a "debate across Scotland", but I am not aware of anyone debating this. What hard evidence does the member have to show that what a woman wears constitutes a public safety debate? I want evidence, please.

Thomas Kerr: There appears to be some confusion across the chamber. I am not surprised that the member does not understand, because there seems to be some confusion here. The debate is about banning face coverings—all face coverings. If I remember correctly, the member's own party leader called for face coverings to be banned.

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

Thomas Kerr: No—I am finishing my point.

The member's own leader called for face coverings to be banned. That debate took place over the summer, and that is why we are debating the matter here. I am not surprised that members seem a bit confused, because of how they anticipated the debate, but we have made it very clear that it is about face coverings.

Let us consider—

Pauline Stafford (Bathgate) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Thomas Kerr: No, I will not.

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Will the member give way?

Thomas Kerr: I will give way—to Stephen Kerr. [*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Sit down please, Mr Kerr.

Members of the public in the gallery are very welcome to observe, but you are observers and clapping is not allowed, I am afraid. You are very welcome to be here tonight.

I call Stephen Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: The debate, according to the motion, is about those who wear face coverings to engage in criminal activities, which by no stretch of the imagination would include people who may be wearing face coverings for another reason. Would the member address the subject of the motion that he lodged, which is about face coverings and police powers in relation to being able to anticipate criminal activity? That is what the motion actually says.

Thomas Kerr: If I can make some progress in my speech, I will address all those points. I know that members are very agitated and want to speak, but, if I can finish my speech, we may get to those points.

Stephen Kerr makes an important point. When I asked the question, the cabinet secretary said that Police Scotland currently has the powers to deal with face coverings. Police Scotland has been clear that it does not feel that it has those powers. Members from across the chamber have continually said that they want a ban on face coverings, and that is what the debate is all about.

Let us consider the burqa. At least 24 countries around the world have acted to ban it. In Afghanistan, the burqa is legally enforced. We are all aware that family members here, in Scotland, are forcing their own women to wear this medieval piece of clothing. Human Rights Watch argues that the burqa symbolises systematic subjugation, shifting the responsibility for male behaviour and temptation on to women's bodies. The burqa is the clearest example of a piece of clothing that imprisons women and undermines their dignity. Whether someone is wearing—[*Interruption*.] I will get to speak at some point, I am sure. Whether someone is wearing a—[*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Please sit down, Mr Kerr. We will hear the member who has the floor. I ask members not to make comments from a sedentary position.

Thomas Kerr: Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer.

Whether someone is wearing a burqa, a balaclava, a full face mask or another piece of clothing that prevents their face from being identified, the same principle should apply. That is both fair and easy.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Will the member give way?

Thomas Kerr: No, I will make progress. I think that I have taken enough interventions, and I am certainly not taking one from the member who is requesting one.

We also need to consider the message—[*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Excuse me. I am sorry, Mr Kerr, but can you sit down again? I remind everyone that the debate should be conducted through the chair, please. Members should not make direct comments to one another across the chamber.

Thomas Kerr: We need to consider the message that we send about integration. Coming to Scotland means that people should integrate with ordinary Scots in our way of life—no ifs, no buts. When we consider people coming to Scotland and contributing to our communities while at the same time participating in the shared public culture of this country, the burqa has no place within it.

When people are interacting with Scots in ordinary public life, their faces should be visible. The burqa is sometimes defended simply as an expression of personal choice. However, it is clear to everyone that it is a medieval piece of clothing that is often forced upon many women in Muslim households by their male family members or communities. It is restrictive, it is oppressive and it has no place in modern Scotland.

Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention on that point?

Thomas Kerr: Yesterday, we had a debate on Europe. It is not just here, in modern Scotland; the burka has no place in France, Belgium or Austria, to name but a few countries, because they have imposed a full ban.

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

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The member has made it clear that he is not taking interventions at the moment, and he is concluding his speech. If your request to make an intervention is not accepted immediately, please sit back down.

Thomas Kerr: Let us consider reasonable limits imposed by public authorities on individual freedoms every day where wider societal interests

are involved. The right to drive does not include the right to drive dangerously. Freedom of speech does not include the right to make threats. Religious freedom does not mean exemption from every generally applicable law. Personal freedom does not mean an unrestricted right to conceal your identity in every public setting, even if it is by wearing a burqa. That is not intolerance; it is the balancing of individual liberty with the legitimate interests of Scotland.

The Minister for Community Care (Alison Thewliss): Does the member accept that, on the streets of Glasgow, not a single woman in a burqa and not a single woman in a niqab has threatened anybody? It is men with balaclavas covering their faces who are running down the streets and threatening people—and he is content to speak at the demonstrations that those balaclavad racists are speaking at.

Thomas Kerr: I will stand up for a fair approach. I want to see balaclavas banned as much as the burqa.

It is interesting, because members on the Government benches debated Europe for two hours yesterday but I do not hear them objecting to Belgium, Denmark, Austria, Switzerland, Bulgaria, Luxembourg or France all having banned the burqa. It just happens to be when we are speaking on these benches about trying to make modern Scotland better that we are attacked—

Jackie Dunbar: It is racist.

Thomas Kerr: It is not racist, and how dare the member say such a thing? How dare she say such a thing—[*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Members!

Thomas Kerr: —when she sits in the same chamber as the Green Party, which is racist? [*Interruption*.]

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Members, will you please let the speaker be heard? I am again near the point of naming people. I do not want to do that, so can we please hear Mr Kerr?

Thomas Kerr: Scotland should be confident enough to say that there are certain basic expectations in public life. We should be able to see each other, we should be able to identify each other when necessary and we should not be afraid to uphold those principles simply because doing so may be considered controversial. A Scotland that believes in integration should encourage people to participate in shared public life, and a Scotland that takes public safety seriously should not be afraid to insist that, in ordinary public spaces, people's faces should be visible, no matter what piece of medieval and oppressive clothing they are wearing.

That is why I and Reform believe that Parliament should support a ban on face coverings, including the burqa, in public spaces. It is a matter of safety, identification and integration—and, ultimately, it is about maintaining an inclusive Scotland where women do not feel forced into covering their faces. That is why I lodged my motion to support the idea of banning all face coverings and not just one.

17:36

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP): At the beginning of speeches in members' business debates, it is customary to commend the member who lodged the motion for bringing the issue to the chamber for discussion. However, many members may think, understandably, that that should not be done in this instance, because of the unnecessary and, as we have heard, deliberately provocative and Islamophobic inclusion of a reference to a particular religion in the wording of the motion.

Freedom of expression and freedom of thought, conscience and religion are, rightly, key aspects of human rights law, including in the European convention on human rights. That is relevant and important to us all today and every day. David Hume's courage in challenging the religious principles of the Christian church in centuries past led to a key legacy of the Scottish enlightenment and one that we should protect.

Stephen Kerr: Ben Macpherson is one of the more thoughtful members of this Parliament. There is nothing in the motion about banning anything, so Thomas Kerr has given a speech based on a completely fictitious motion. I am surprised that, rather than playing into the narrative that this is about banning the burqa, we are not confronting what the motion is actually about, which is those who wear face coverings and engage in criminal or intimidatory behaviour. That is what the motion says.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian Coast and Lammermuirs) (SNP): That is shameful.

Stephen Kerr: It is not shameful.

Paul McLennan: Aye, it is.

Stephen Kerr: That is what the motion in the *Business Bulletin* says—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Thank you, Mr Kerr. No props, please.

Ben Macpherson: As I have often said, I defend people's right to challenge others and discuss issues. That is what it means to be liberal and to believe in democracy. What I condemn is the

singling out of the great religion of Islam in the motion. I would do similarly if it singled out the great religions of Christianity and Judaism, or any others.

I chose to speak in this debate because I acknowledge that the issue of face coverings is being discussed in communities around the country, including the one that I serve. I will say more about that shortly. However, let me be very clear before I proceed that, apart from with regard to some very specific settings, such as where people wear uniforms or that sort of thing, we should agree as a democracy that no person should obligate, instruct or pressure any other person on what they should or should not wear. That is fundamental to freedom of expression, and it is particularly relevant to religious dress.

Moreover, notwithstanding the fact that, in some instances and places—for example, in Taliban Afghanistan—the burqa can be, and has been, an obligation that is enforced on women against their free will by men, people who suggest a legal ban on any religious dress in a country should be very cautious about being illiberal. History warns us that that is a dangerous road to travel down. I emphasise that no man should seek to obligate or tell any woman what they should or should not wear. That should be a collective guiding principle, and I suggest that all men support all women in their choices in all our communities.

We should also be very cautious about raising the temperature on issues of religious difference and consider how that can create intolerance and harm. We saw the very worrying and awful consequences of that in my community on Leith Walk this summer, with the shocking, violent Islamophobic attacks that appeared to be whipped up by racist assertions by online actors and far-right political messages.

As well as our Muslim community feeling worried about that, concerns have been raised even this week that those in our Jewish community are afraid to wear their skullcaps and express their beliefs. Those in the Sikh community often fear racism because of their commitment to wearing a turban, and we have known for decades how much damage Christian sectarian divisions have caused in our country.

Let us, therefore, spend our time emphasising our common humanity between those of all faiths and none. I plead with colleagues to turn down the dial on the rhetoric. Social cohesion is fragile, and it is the responsibility of us all to carry it very carefully

I wanted to speak today because the rest of the motion on face coverings in public places, aside from the unhelpful and—as I said—deliberately provocative reference to the burqa and the niqab, raises a serious issue that is a concern. In recent years, we have seen an increase in balaclava wearing, generally by groups of young men who threaten others and engage in violence, theft, public disorder and harassment. That cannot be accepted and allowed to go on. The Scottish Government therefore needs to carefully consider the efficacy of the existing powers for Police Scotland to remove face coverings under section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. The threshold—

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

Ben Macpherson: The threshold for initiating that power is very high, for good reason, but it is perhaps impractical for dealing with the growing occurrence of face coverings being used for criminal purposes, to escape arrest and to create fear in others. We have seen Nottingham, in recent weeks, enable police officers to ask people to remove face coverings if they reasonably believe that those are being used to conceal their identity to commit crime or antisocial behaviour. I am glad that the Scottish Government is looking at the example of Nottingham.

I hope that, in the future, we can discuss these important issues without the needless and deliberately provocative, and arguably intolerant, correlation with matters of religious dress. Let us be better than that.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I remind members who are called to speak in the open debate that speeches must be up to four minutes, please.

17:43

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): I wondered whether to indulge Thomas Kerr by taking part in what I believe is a divisive debate, but I want to put on the record where Scottish Labour stands on what is, as other members have said, a fundamental freedom—the freedom to wear what you like—and on tolerance, respect and human rights.

Kirsten Oswald said earlier that, in a free and open society, in a democratic, modern Scotland, law-abiding people should be able to dress how they wish. It is for women to decide how they dress.

Thomas Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Pauline McNeill: I will, in a minute.

I know many women who wear the burqa and the niqab, and they do it out of choice. I have had my photograph taken with many women who wear

the burqa. It is not for me to question it. I respect their right to do it. I once was in Cairo and crossed the road with a woman wearing full dress. She knew exactly where she was going, and I did not. I have the utmost respect for the women I know who have made that choice.

I admit that there is a debate about whether or not for some women it is a choice, but this debate in Parliament is not the way to go about addressing that, and I am not willing to see that addressed in Scotland in the form of any law.

Thomas Kerr: Pauline McNeill mentioned how a tolerant society would not support this. France has restricted face coverings in public places since 2011, as have Belgium, Austria and Denmark. Does she really believe that every one of those democracies has got it wrong and that they are no longer tolerant of people's beliefs?

Pauline McNeill: France is a country that I know and love, but France has made decisions, including about building a mosque, that I do not agree with. I think that, in some areas, France has not shown itself to be the tolerant society that I would like it to be, but we are not talking about France.

I was elected to represent Glasgow in this Parliament, as was Thomas Kerr, and I want to fight for a Scotland that stands on the fundamental freedom of people to wear what they want. As Ben Macpherson said, there is a really serious debate to be had about face coverings, and I would have wished that Thomas Kerr had brought that debate to the chamber. I might not have supported it a year or two ago, but now I would say that people choosing to wear face coverings so that they can commit crimes is what we should be talking about. Ben Macpherson talked about youth crime in Glasgow and people on e-bikes speeding at 60mph wearing face coverings. There is a real debate about people choosing to do that, and those are the people we should be talking about, not law-abiding, peaceful women who choose to wear what they want.

I have enjoyed being part of the Criminal Justice Committee with David Linden as convener. We have taken this question very seriously.

Iris Duane (Glasgow) (Green): I thank my fellow regional MSP for Glasgow for giving such a reasoned speech. On the steps at Buchanan Galleries in Glasgow, she and I joined in during what was a summer of demonstrations against racial discrimination. We saw many men in masks sieg-heiling towards us and making references to Adolf Hitler. Does the member believe that that has resulted from rhetoric that riles up far-right ideology and that we should be working towards a society that is tolerant of all people?

Pauline McNeill: Iris Duane is describing a demonstration in Glasgow where there were men who had to be cordoned off, their faces completely covered, screaming and bawling at us and the police in a very threatening manner. That is what we should be discussing in our society, but Reform chose not to do that with its motion. They are all nodding their heads over there, but they chose to conflate the issue of religious and cultural freedoms with a very serious matter. Maybe we can have that debate at another time.

In closing, Presiding Officer—I know that I am out of my four minutes—I want to discuss whether Nottingham is an example that we could look at. I think that we could give the police some rights in this area, and I would like a debate on that when the time is right.

17:48

Kate Nevens (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): I declare an interest in the fact that I am a member of the steering committee of Women Against the Far Right Scotland.

I am appalled and disgusted that this discussion has been brought to the chamber, and I know that I am not the only one who finds it deplorable. Just before today's debate, demonstrators from across the political spectrum gathered outside Parliament to say no to Islamophobia, to say no to the weaponisation of violence against women and girls as a means to instigate racism, and to say no to the attacks on Muslim women and to all forms of misogyny. They stood together in solidarity with Muslim women, and all women, and to bear witness to the hideousness that is happening in Parliament today.

All of us in Parliament represent Muslim communities in our constituencies and regions. It is crucial that all MSPs remember that the privilege of serving demands that we serve equally and fairly everyone we represent. The motion demands the very opposite. It is yet another abhorrent attempt to stir up anti-Muslim hatred, stoking fears, peddling prejudice and attacking the rights of marginalised groups. It is Islamophobic. It is misogynistic. It is racist. It is designed to make people feel fearful and to push Muslim women out of public space. The conflation of the niqab with balaclavas is not just disingenuous, it is dangerous and it engages in a form of disinformation that puts Muslim women at even greater risk.

This is fascism in action: manufacture an other, demonise that other and claim exclusion as the solution. It should be condemned by parties across the entire political spectrum.

It is rhetoric such as that which we see around the motion that is directly contributing to a devastating rise in anti-Muslim hate in Scotland,

with human rights organisations warning that Islamophobic attacks are reaching emergency levels. As we know, Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate have disproportionate effects on women, who bear the brunt of this hostility. Amina—the Muslim Women's Resource Centre tells us that it has seen an approximate 30 per cent increase in calls relating to hate crime and Islamophobia since 2025. Huge numbers of Muslim women are reporting being afraid to be in public spaces due to rising fear and hostility. Women in Leith, in my region, are telling me that they are being attacked in public parks for being visibly Muslim, and they do not feel safe about reporting their experiences to the police.

Today's motion also forms part of a wider attempt by the far right to weaponise women and women's safety. Far-right groups are making themselves out to be the protectors of women, but their behaviour is, in fact, making all women less safe.

I ran to be an MSP on a platform of defending human rights for all and building a welcoming and inclusive Scotland. Despite desperate attempts by the far right to make it less so, Scotland is a welcoming country. We look after and stand up for each other, not just regardless of our race, gender, sexuality, religion or disability, but because of how beautifully diverse our country is. Voters place trust in me and my fellow Greens to always speak up in defence of those values and not to allow anyone's rights to be undermined. I take that trust seriously.

Reform wants to create despair and use it to scapegoat and target marginalised communities, which will leave us all worse off.

I want all the women, particularly Muslim women, who are following this debate today and feeling afraid and let down—members can see that this is making me emotional—to know that I will never stop speaking up for them and defending their rights, and I know the same is true of many of us here this evening.

17:52

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): As I have said a couple of times when I have intervened on other members, this debate is primarily about an issue that I want to speak about. Before I address that issue, however, I want to say something to Thomas Kerr.

I have known Thomas Kerr for a long time, and I have tried to say this to him in very many different ways. There is a character to the people of this country. They are generally moderate, tolerant people, and, although it might be necessary to discuss these issues—I do not dispute that—I think that the people of this country will not abide some of the discourse, the words, the language and the tone that is used in those discussions.

I will give members an example of what I mean. In 2009, the BBC incurred incredible criticism for inviting Nick Griffin on to the panel of "Question Time". There was huge uproar about it, but what happened that night was that the language, the tone, the behaviour and the words that were used by Nick Griffin destroyed the British National Party, because the people of this country do not accept the intemperate, intolerant language of those who are at the extremes of politics. That is not where people in Britain are.

I say that as someone who has known the proposer of the motion for a very long time, and I regret very much the journey that Thomas Kerr has gone on politically.

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): I accept that Mr Kerr has not known me for long, but I would like to ask him whether he thinks that what he is describing characterises what he knows of me. If not, could he perhaps address the motion?

Stephen Kerr: Despite what some people may think, I try very hard not to make politics about personal differences. I do not believe in personal attacks—I genuinely do not. However, the subject matter at hand is about the language that is being used collectively by members of the Reform party; it is about the way that they talk about people of colour and people who belong to minority religions. [*Interruption*.] I believe that Reform members court the same fate as Nick Griffin because of the way that they conduct themselves in the public square.

I am running out of time and I want to move on to the issue that I want to talk about.

In my view, there are two issues here, which have been wrongly conflated. I want us to talk about the issue that I believe matters to my constituents in Mid Scotland and Fife, which is the issue of those who wear face coverings—balaclavas—with the intent to cause mischief, to harass people and, indeed, to engage in criminality. There is a world of difference between the two issues.

Senga Beresford (South Scotland) (Reform): Will the member take an intervention?

Stephen Kerr: I am going to move on to talk about the second issue, because it is important.

Ben Macpherson rightly referenced section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. Having spoken and listened to senior police officers and—more importantly—officers on the front line, I am convinced that there is a gap in the powers that are available to our police to prevent crime and serious disorder. We saw the scenes in

Glasgow and elsewhere this summer. There was even a photograph taken outside this building of men in ranks, dressed in black and with balaclavas on. It is utterly unacceptable that we would countenance such behaviour. We have not countenanced such behaviour in this country since the 1930s. The Public Order Act 1936 was passed to prevent such uniformed thuggery on the streets of our country.

Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP): Will the member take an intervention?

Stephen Kerr: I do not have the time, as generous as I know the Deputy Presiding Officer will be to me.

I believe that we will be making a big mistake as a Parliament if we do not debate the important issue of giving the police in Scotland the powers that they need, for all the reasons that were rehearsed by Ben Macpherson and Pauline McNeill.

I asked—or, to be more precise, David Linden asked—Assistant Chief Constable Catriona Paton, when she appeared before the Criminal Justice Committee, whether the police have the powers that they need. At first, she said yes, but then she realised that she had better be square with the committee, because there was quite a story in that session, as we will remember for a long time.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Generous as I am, Mr Kerr, you must come to a conclusion.

Stephen Kerr: She said:

"no, we do not have powers related to that."—[*Official Report, Criminal Justice Committee*, 16 September 2026; c 32.]

Frankly, the section 60 powers are set at such a threshold that they are fairly unusable. The Scottish Police Federation has been even clearer. Its general secretary, David Kennedy, said:

"we need a law change, we need to give police more powers."

That is why it is important that we have had time in this Parliament to talk about face coverings in public and why we should unite—not on the side of those who wish to divide our society, but on the side of those of us who want a strong arm of law and order to deal with the rise in thuggery that we see on our streets.

17:58

Steven Bonnar (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I oppose the motion, and I oppose even more the racist sentiment behind it. I believe that any proposal to restrict people's freedoms must begin with clear evidence of a problem and a convincing explanation of how such a restriction would solve it. The motion provides neither. It acknowledges that Police Scotland has powers to require the removal of face coverings in specified circumstances. It also acknowledges the Scottish Government's position that those powers are currently sufficient, yet it asks us to consider further restrictions without identifying the gap that those restrictions would fill. What additional protections would they provide? To whom would they provide them and at what cost to an individual's freedom? What is it about Muslim women that Thomas Kerr fears so much? I would love to know. Those questions deserve an answer before any serious MSP lends support to measures that would affect how women dress and whether they feel able to participate in public life.

Let me be clear about this point: public safety matters. Where identification is required or there are concerns about criminality or disorder, the response must be lawful, necessary and proportionate. Wearing a religious garment does not make someone a threat. We should be very careful about allowing that suggestion to take hold in the Parliament or in our society.

I want to address the argument about women's freedom. No woman should be forced to wear a burqa or a niqab, nor should she be threatened, intimidated or controlled over any other aspect of her clothing. If and where coercion exists, we should confront it and support the women who experience it. That is our job. We cannot defend a woman's freedom to choose by taking away a choice that belongs to her. A woman's autonomy belongs to a woman. It does not belong to her family, her community or the state, and it certainly does not belong to Thomas Kerr.

If we are serious about understanding the consequences of further restrictions, we should listen directly to the women who would have to live with them. Would such measures make it easier for them to work, study, use our public services or take part in community life, or would they make some women feel that leaving their home meant risking confrontation or punishment? The motion does not answer that question. It also refers to restrictions elsewhere in Europe, but the existence of a policy in another country is no substitute for evidence that it would be necessary, effective or proportionate here, and Scotland should make its decisions on that basis.

On community cohesion, I believe that we have a responsibility to consider the message that this debate sends, but that is Thomas Kerr's whole shtick, is it not? Our Muslim brothers and sisters are a valued part of Scotland. They are our colleagues and friends, they are parents and constituents and they are entitled to the same dignity and freedom of expression as anybody else in Scotland. We build stronger communities when

people feel secure enough to participate and when we address concerns through conversation, trust and fair treatment. We risk undermining that work when a particular group of women finds their clothing presented as a problem that requires state intervention.

Freedom must mean something when another person makes a choice that we would not make ourselves. The case for further restrictions has no basis in reality. Thomas Kerr would like to conflate the wearing of a face covering with marauding hooligans and balaclavas as a way to attempt to hide his own prejudice, but his veil is thin—very thin. We see you and we see your racism, Mr Kerr. This Parliament and its MSPs should protect public safety, uphold women's autonomy and defend the freedom of all our constituents.

18:02

Holly Bruce (Glasgow Southside) (Green): Tonight, I had planned to attend the 35-year anniversary celebration of the Glasgow Women's Library, which is an organisation that does so much to support women, particularly women of colour and migrant women in Glasgow. However, instead of being there, celebrating its work, I am here because, once again, I must stand up against the racist, inflammatory rhetoric of Reform UK, to ensure that my constituents know that I will show up for them when it matters.

I want to be clear from the outset: I was elected in Glasgow Southside on a firm commitment that I would not bend to hateful and divisive politics. Forgive me, but that is the sole motive of the motion. It is a calculated and dangerous attack on Muslim women, proposing that we deny people the right to freedom of religion and belief and dressing it up as a public safety measure. It is reprehensible, misogynistic and Islamophobic.

I want to give voice to the campaigners who were protesting outside the Parliament earlier, including the women against the far right Scotland group, Stand Up to Racism, Amina, the University and College Union Scotland, the Scottish Trades Union Congress, the sisters against cuts group, the teachers union—NASUWT—and all their supporters and members. Their solidarity with women of colour does not go unnoticed.

I highlight the work of Amina, which my colleague Kate Nevens mentioned, too. It is an organisation that is based in my constituency, and it recently held a round-table discussion with women from a mix of Pakistani, Indian and Arab backgrounds. Approximately two thirds of the women wore the hijab, while one participant wore the niqab. Before I go on to their findings, they asked me to ask Thomas Kerr one question: has he met with women who wear the niqab and listened to their views? Has he spoken to any Muslim women about this? Did they consent to his advocating on their behalf?

A consistent theme throughout Amina's discussion was fear. Most women reported feeling significantly less safe in the public than they did a year ago. As Kate Nevens pointed out, Amina's helpline recorded a 30 per cent increase in contacts related to anti-Muslim hate. That suggests that the concerns raised by participants are not isolated cases but form part of a broader pattern of increased hostility. Muslim communities have been under a calculated attack on their character by the likes of Reform under the false pretence of tackling violence against women.

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

Holly Bruce: I will not.

The motion is violence against women. One participant of Amina's focus group who wears the niqab described being assaulted by a cyclist who approached her from behind, grabbed her hijab, pulled her to the ground and shouted, "Go back to your own country." The psychological impact of that incident has meant that she no longer feels safe leaving her home alone. That is the real-world impact—

Thomas Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Holly Bruce: I will not take an intervention. [*Interruption*.] I will not legitimise this debate. This is not up for debate.

That is the real-world impact of legitimising hostility towards Muslim women. This is not simply a debate about face coverings. A blanket ban on the burqa and niqab would disproportionately impact Muslim women and risk undermining human rights that are central to Scotland's commitment to equality, inclusion and human dignity. It would only further marginalise a group that already experiences significant levels of racism, Islamophobia and exclusion.

I must ask my colleagues in the chamber, where would this end? When would we stop telling people what they should wear and how they should dress? The motion is nothing more than a racist attack on women of faith. I will not stand for it and neither will my home constituency of Glasgow Southside.

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

I invite Thomas Kerr to move a motion without notice.

Motion moved,

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

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The question is, that the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Without the consensus of members, we cannot extend the debate. I am sorry to the members who will not be able to take part. I invite the minister to respond to the debate up until 18:11.

Helen McDade: Vote.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): There is no mechanism in standing orders for a vote in a member's business debate. I call the minister to respond to the debate.

Stephen Kerr: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I am completely at a loss to understand why you would put the question on a motion to members if, when there are dissenting voices, it is not possible for us to have a vote. What is the point of asking someone to propose a motion if we cannot then have a division when there is a need for a division? It seems ridiculous. If it is the case that someone can just say no and it all ends without there being a division, this is hardly the Scottish Parliament's finest hour. Even common sense must have a place in the standing orders, for goodness' sake.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): This is an unusual situation, so I will suspend the meeting and will discuss the matter with clerks. I will come back to you shortly. Thank you.

18:09

Meeting suspended.

18:15

On resuming—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): We have checked standing orders, and we will move to a vote on the motion. The division bell will sound now.

18:15

Meeting suspended.

18:23

On resuming—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Members, we return to business. The question on the motion without notice is, that the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): There will be a division. There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

18:23

Meeting suspended.

18:25

On resuming—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The question is, that the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes. Members should cast their votes now.

The vote is closed.

Pauline McNeill: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted no.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I, too, would have voted no.

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

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Those votes will all be recorded.

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): On a point of order, Presiding Officer. I would have voted no.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Thank you, Ms Mochan. That will be recorded.

For

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

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
Anderson, Heather (Dundee City West) (SNP)
Barratt, David (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Bonnar, Steven (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
Bruce, Holly (Glasgow Southside) (Green)
Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
Campbell, Michelle (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP)
Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP)
Duane, Iris (Glasgow) (Green)
Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
Fagan, Joe (South Scotland) (Lab) F
Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
Gray, Neil (Airdrie) (SNP)
Hagmann, Katie (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)
Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen and Cambuslang) (SNP)
Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth)
Kerr, Calum (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
Kinross-O'Neill, Kayleigh (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Kumar, Simita (Edinburgh South Western) (SNP)
Linden, David (Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston) (SNP)
MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
Mackay, Gillian (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Green)
Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP)
Manivannan, Q (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
McKee, Cara (West Scotland) (Green)
McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn) (SNP)
McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
Melville, Lloyd (Angus South) (SNP)
Merrick, Colm (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
Middleton, Jack (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
Mitchell, Laura (Moray) (SNP)
Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
Nevens, Kate (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green)
Oswald, Kirsten (Eastwood) (SNP)
Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Smith, Alyn (Stirling) (SNP)
Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
Stafford, Pauline (Bathgate) (SNP)
Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
Thewliss, Alison (Glasgow Central) (SNP)
Todd, Maree (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The result of the division on the motion without notice in t he name of Thomas Kerr, that the debate be extended by up to 30 minutes, is: For 14, Against 51, Abstentions 0.

Motion disagreed to.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): As there was debate time left when I called for the motion, I invite the Minister for Victims and Community Safety to respond to the debate.

18:28

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Kirsten Oswald): Here we are again, with Reform MSPs thinking that it is their job to tell women what to wear. I appreciate many of the contributions from members across the chamber on, for instance—

Helen McDade: Will the minister take an intervention?

Kirsten Oswald: —the wearing of balaclavas by people who are engaged in antisocial behaviour and worse. I will come on to speak about that.

Helen McDade: Will the minister take an intervention?

Kirsten Oswald: No, thank you.

However, let us be clear that this debate—[*Interruption*.]—which Thomas Kerr has—

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Minister, could you sit down, please?

I ruled earlier that, if an intervention is not taken immediately, the member should sit down. I invite the minister to carry on.

Kirsten Oswald: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

Let us be clear that this debate, which Thomas Kerr has seen fit to bring to the chamber, is not about balaclavas, or he would surely have referred to that in his motion. The only face coverings that he has referenced are the burqa and the niqab. Like all of us in the chamber, I am concerned by the disorder that we have seen on our streets recently, and, like all of us, I know who was not causing that disorder. We heard from Iris Duane, who spoke very effectively, about what did happen, and I have to say that it did not involve women in burqas and niqabs. For Thomas Kerr to suggest that that is a public safety issue is nonsensical. As Steven Bonnar made clear, wearing a religious garment does not make someone a threat.

Nonetheless, and not for the first time, another Reform man has come to the chamber looking to tell women what to wear. I do not know why it is difficult for them to understand, but I will say it again: it is absolutely none of their business what women wear.

Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform): Will the minister take an intervention?

Julie MacDougall: Will the minister take an intervention?

Helen McDade: Will the minister take an intervention?

Victor Currie (Highlands and Islands) (Reform): Will the minister take an intervention?

Max Bannerman: Will the minister take an intervention?

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Please sit down, minister.

The minister has made it clear that she is not taking an intervention at this time. I request that members respect that. It is up to the member who is speaking to decide whether they want to take an intervention. I will hear the member who has the floor—Kirsten Oswald.

Kirsten Oswald: Why is Thomas Kerr so concerned about burqas and niqabs in particular? Why mention those specific garments over any other—those garments worn by Muslim women? That is the politics of division, racism and Islamophobia, and it has no place in this Parliament, as Holly Bruce said.

Helen McDade: On a point of order, Presiding Officer. Under respect for members of the Parliament, none of the women on this side of the chamber has been given an opportunity to respond to the accusations that have come from the other side.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): That is not a point of order under standing orders. The minister again has the floor.

Kirsten Oswald: Why is Thomas Kerr so concerned about burqas and niqabs in particular—those garments worn by Muslim women? Why are those specific garments mentioned? It is the politics of division, it is racist and it is Islamophobic. It has no place in this Parliament or this country. He should be ashamed of himself.

It is a huge distraction from the issues that should cause us concern, including community cohesion. On that point, I want to put on the record how much I abhor Thomas Kerr's language, which, as Ben Macpherson said, was deliberately provocative and Islamophobic. I also point out to Thomas Kerr that "ordinary Scots" are also women and Muslims.

People wear face coverings for a whole range of legitimate reasons, including health, faith and cultural observance, or to stay warm if they are going on a bike ride. We know that face coverings can, in some instances, be an attempt to disguise the identity of someone who is engaging in criminal or antisocial behaviour. That is not acceptable. Police Scotland, through the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, can require the removal of face coverings where there are reasonable grounds to believe that they are being used to conceal identity in a temporarily designated area where serious criminality is liable to occur. That is in addition to powers of arrest or statutory powers of stop and search, which may be available where there is reasonable suspicion that the individual is committing or has committed an offence or is concealing an illegal item.

Stephen Kerr: Will the minister give way on that point?

Kirsten Oswald: For example, those powers were used around an old firm game last year, as a means of helping to prevent disorder and serious violence. I will reflect again that it was not women wearing burqas who were the cause of concern there. Despite what Thomas Kerr has said—

Stephen Kerr: Will the minister give way?

Kirsten Oswald: I am not giving way, Mr Kerr.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Mr Kerr, your intervention was not taken.

Kirsten Oswald: Despite what Thomas Kerr has said, Police Scotland has stated publicly that it believes that the powers that it has—

Stephen Kerr: On a point of order, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Please state which standing order you are drawing on in your point of order.

Stephen Kerr: In respect to the way in which we do business in the Parliament—

The Minister for Equalities and International Development (Simita Kumar): Which standing order?

Stephen Kerr: I am not going to quote a number, but I will say to the Deputy Presiding Officer that the convention in this Parliament, up until now, has been that, when members take interventions from another member, that member has some obligation to at least engage in the debate when they are making their speech.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Mr Kerr—

Stephen Kerr: Why is the minister taking no interventions from anyone when she is making debating points that were central to my speech, for example, which I wish to ask her about? She will not take my intervention, but surely the convention is that she should. That is my point of order.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I have two things to say, Mr Kerr. First, the Presiding Officer has made it clear that a point of order should identify the rule in the standing orders that it refers to. That has been asked of all members since the start of the term.

The other issue is that it is absolutely up to the discretion of the person who is speaking in this chamber, whoever it may be who has the floor, whether they take an intervention.

I invite the minister to continue.

Kirsten Oswald: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

Stephen Kerr: Will the minister give way?

Kirsten Oswald: No, I will not give way. I am addressing the point that Stephen Kerr made in his speech and points that others have made.

Despite what Thomas Kerr said, Police Scotland has stated publicly that it believes that the powers it has in that regard are sufficient at the present time. However, ministers have been clear that we remain open to considering further proposals should there be clear evidence that additional measures are necessary, practical and effective—

Stephen Kerr: Will the minister give way on that point?

Kirsten Oswald: Stephen Kerr must wait, please.

We would need to ensure that the measures balanced public safety with fundamental rights and freedoms. I welcomed the comments of Pauline McNeill, Stephen Kerr and Ben Macpherson on that point.

I am happy to give way, at the appropriate point, to Mr Kerr.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to the minister for giving way. Does she acknowledge that the evidence presented by Assistant Chief Constable Catriona Paton to the Criminal Justice Committee three weeks ago suggested that the police do not have all the powers that they need? Section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 sets a very high threshold for circumstances in which police officers are able to intervene to prevent crime. We should not forget that a fundamental purpose of policing is to prevent crime. The police need to have the powers to deal with people who are wearing masks or face coverings if they believe that they are about to commit criminality.

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful to Mr Kerr for that intervention, although I am slightly confused, because I think that what I have said is not a million miles away from what he just said. I reiterate that we remain open to considering further proposals based on evidence. I am sure that we will come back to that subject—it is a subject that there is interest in.

I will go back to some of the other comments. The suggestion from Reform that the wearing of garments for religious reasons, including those that require the individual to cover their face, is in any way equivalent to the issue of face coverings being used to conceal identities amid incidents of wrongdoing is clearly not a sensible comparison. Stephen Kerr himself said that those are not the same thing. Kate Nevens pointed out that the suggestion is disingenuous and racist.

Scotland is a modern, inclusive nation where internationally recognised human rights are protected. The Scottish Government remains committed to strengthening community cohesion and ensuring that everyone feels connected and safe—all of us, in all our communities in Scotland, have the right to be safe and to feel safe. Not for the first time, I point out to Thomas Kerr that migration and the cultural diversity that it brings are vital for supporting sustainable communities, economies and public services. Evidence shows that people who choose Scotland as their home help to grow our economy, increase productivity and address skills shortages.

Our programme for government includes establishing a ministerial task force on community cohesion to address shared, urgent concerns and issues. We have announced an increase to the community cohesion fund for 2026-27 and further actions that aim to make Scotland a more inclusive place to live. I was struck by Ben Macpherson's careful words on the great value of cohesion and our responsibility there.

This particular motion, with the specific language that is used in it, tells us everything about what really matters to Reform: dictating to women what we can and cannot wear; fostering division and causing fear and anxiety in our diverse communities; and feeding hateful and dangerous algorithms. It is really regrettable that Reform members do not have a real focus on doing the best for all our communities and keeping us all safe.

I will conclude by reinforcing three things. First, on face coverings in situations of disorder, Police Scotland has stated that it believes that the powers that it has are sufficient. However, ministers are clear that we remain open to considering further proposals if the evidence for them is clear in that space.

Secondly, as Pauline McNeill said, women should wear what they like. The question should not be about what a woman wears; it should be about whether the woman is safe, her rights are protected and perpetrators of violence are being held to account. That is what the Government is focusing on.

Finally, Scotland is a modern, diverse country. We are by far the better for that diversity, and this Government will stand up against hatred, racism or division wherever it raises its head.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I clarify for members that the minister had to be on her feet during the remaining time of the debate. It was at my discretion how long she was allowed to speak in that context.

That concludes the debate. I wish everyone a good recess.

Meeting closed at 18:40.

Corrections

Angela Constance has identified an error in her contribution and provided the following correction.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance):

At column 36, paragraph 2—

Original text—

Compared with the same period in the previous year, the number of referrals to A and E from that practice has reduced by 30 per cent.

Corrected text—

Compared with the same period in the previous year, initial feedback has reported reductions in the number of referrals to out-of-hours services from that practice.

Alex Kerr has identified an error in his contribution and provided the following correction.

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP):

At column 4, paragraph 1—

Original text—

Children's Hospices Across Scotland, which recently celebrated its 21st birthday, supported 126 children across Scotland last year

Corrected text—

Children's Hospices Across Scotland, which recently celebrated its 21st birthday, supported 540 children across Scotland last year.

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