The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 10 November 2026

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

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): Good afternoon, colleagues. The first item of business is time for reflection. Today, that will be led by the Rev Dr Alistair May, principal clerk of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

The Rev Dr Alistair May (Principal Clerk, General Assembly of the Church of Scotland): Good afternoon. I will tell you the story of Walter, who was a soldier in the second world war. His father had lost an eye in the great war and Walter, who was then 14, had worked on farms. In 1943, he was called up to serve. He trained as an infantry radio operator then was sent to the front. Years later, he would speak of the deaths that he witnessed and the comrades whom he lost.

A sniper shot from a church roof and pinned down his patrol. Walter radioed for an air strike. That sniper's death was to haunt him for years. In 1944, Walter became a prisoner of war and was marched deep into enemy territory.

Does Walter have your sympathy? His full name was Herr Walter Warder. I wonder whether that changes how you receive that story.

A number of years ago, in Normandy, I stood in the allied graveyard, thankful—as we are at this season—for the service and sacrifice of those within. Then I stood in the German cemetery and contemplated the fact that another young life was beneath each stone—a son; a brother; a devastated family.

Tomorrow, we mark armistice day We do not celebrate; we remember. That remembrance is as universal as the grief of war.

Jesus said:

"love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you",

not because the enemy is right or the persecution is justified but because we must not let division cost us our humanity. Division invites us to stop seeing a person as a person and to see them simply as "one of them".

What is true of war is true of other arenas, such as sectarian bigotry or—dare I say it?—even, sometimes, the partisanship of politics.

To love an opponent, never mind an enemy, is hard, but Jesus, in that statement, tells us where to start: to pray for them—to decide to pray God's blessing into their lives and to desire for them good things such as justice, peace, repentance, healing, forgiveness and wisdom.

Jesus also said, in the verse that is quoted at this time:

"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Again, however, Jesus moves us to love even beyond our friends. On the cross, he prayed for his enemies:

"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

Paul reminds us that Christ loved us and died for us when we were still estranged from him. If our enemies are loved by God, and valued by Christ enough that he would die for them, we cannot hate, and we must always steer clear from dehumanising the other. Perhaps, as we remember, we can also recover our humanity.

I pray: God of love, grant us your love, and may we always see each person that you have created as known and loved by you, as we, too, are known and loved by you. In Jesus's name, amen.

Business Motion

14:05

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is consideration of business motion S7M-01981, in the name of Jamie Hepburn, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, on a revision to the business programme.

The rest of this Official Report will be published progressively as soon as the text is available.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revision to the programme of business for Tuesday 10 November 2026—

after

followed by Ministerial Statement: Winter Resilience

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: HMP and YOI Polmont—[*Jamie Hepburn*.]

Motion agreed to.

General Question Time

14:06

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): The next item of business is general question time.

Flood Forecasting

1. **Michelle Campbell (Renfrewshire North and Cardonald) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it has taken in conjunction with the Scottish Environment Protection Agency following the severe flooding caused by storm Boelo to address any issues identified with flood forecasting during severe weather. (S7O-00461)

The Minister for Agriculture, Marine and the Islands (Jim Fairlie): Flood forecasting is a complex process that is made more difficult by the increased frequency and intensity of storms due to climate change. However, the Scottish Government acknowledges SEPA's critical forecasting role during events such as storm Boelo in warning communities, businesses and responders about flood risk and informing them of the actions that they should take.

After such events, all responders should review their actions and learn any lessons. As such, SEPA is reviewing the forecasting information provided, and I welcome the commitment from Renfrewshire Council to review its decision making on the operation of barriers. We will continue to engage with responders.

Michelle Campbell: In the town of Renfrew in my constituency, 13 businesses and a number of residents were affected by the flooding during storm Boelo. I have done my best to get around as many of them as possible. What financial and practical support is available to those affected, and what steps is the Scottish Government taking to ensure that communities impacted by severe flooding receive timely assistance and support with recovery?

Jim Fairlie: Through the flood recovery framework, eligible households can apply for grants of up to £500 and eligible businesses can apply for grants of up to £2,500 to help with recovery. Officials are working with North Ayrshire Council, Renfrewshire Council and West Dunbartonshire Council, which are responsible for administering grants.

Alongside the immediate recovery support, the programme for government commits to an additional £15 million over the next three years to improve Scotland's flood resilience. That includes a £5 million community flood resilience fund, investment in nature-based and green solutions, support for flood protection assets, innovative coastal resilience projects and a new flood advisory service.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Many communities across Argyll and Bute are regularly being impacted by flooding following the extreme weather events referred to by the minister. What work is the Scottish Government undertaking with SEPA to improve flood prevention measures in rural and coastal communities?

Jim Fairlie: SEPA is responsible for flood forecasting and warning, and it continues to deliver regular service announcements and post-event reviews, which will help to ensure that warnings remain accurate, timely and useful for communities at risk. The Scottish Government continues to support that work through its funding of SEPA, regular engagement with the flood warning service, funding for the development of a national flood asset database and assessment of infrastructure that is critical to flood warning services.

In addition, we have funded investment of almost £1 million to deploy new near-shore wave buoys. Once fully operational, they will be transformative in SEPA's coastal flood warning service, helping to inform better flood risk management decisions and coastal change adaptation.

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): For 30 years, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency has played a pivotal role in supporting the country when environmental disasters strike, yet its staff now face uncertainty

about their future, since the First Minister announced that it would be brought under a single overarching environment body. What analysis has taken place to ensure that SEPA's critical institutional capability and its hard-working staff are not already being disrupted by the proposed reorganisation?

Jim Fairlie: What Paul Sweeney talks about is the ongoing wider public service reform agenda, the whole purpose of which is to make the best use of public money across all sectors. SEPA is part of that discussion at the moment.

General Practitioner Walk-in Service (Elgin)

2. **Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con):** I voluntarily remind members of an interest: my wife is a GP partner.

To ask the Scottish Government what evidence informed its view that a four-hour walk-in general practitioner centre operating on Friday afternoons in Elgin will be sufficient to meet local healthcare in Moray. (S7O-00462)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care (Angela Constance): NHS Grampian is responsible for the design, delivery and planning of its walk-in services, including in Elgin. The board is focused on ensuring that safe and sustainable services can be stood up for Moray as soon as possible, and it has agreed to this initial phased opening to provide access for local people while a fuller service is established. My officials remain in close contact with the board while that work continues, and we remain clear that services must roll out to provide a seven-day operation as soon as possible.

Tim Eagle: This is a bit of a mess. The site is a palliative care centre on the outskirts of Elgin. It has no direct bus service, it is open for only four hours on a Friday afternoon, there are very serious concerns about infection control and it will likely rely on local GPs, who are already stretched across the area. Major professional bodies have highlighted serious concerns, so why will the Government not scrap the plans and, instead, invest in local GP practices that are much closer to all patients?

Angela Constance: It is not an either/or. We are doing both: we are investing in general practice and in primary care. Neil Gray, my predecessor, delivered a historic additional resource investment for GP practices of £531 million over three years.

The walk-in centres are about complementing GP practices, not competing with them. More than 21,000 cases have been seen via walk-in services thus far, which demonstrates that there is clear public demand for that model of care.

Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP): It is welcome that, across the country, we have seen more than 21,000 cases treated in GP walk-in centres since they started to open in February. That demonstrates the reach that those services have in local communities, which I want to see people in Moray benefit from. Will the cabinet secretary join me in calling on NHS Grampian, which operates the service and is looking to move it to an alternative location in Moray, to extend the GP walk-in centre's opening hours to seven days a week as soon as possible?

Angela Constance: Yes, I will do that. For the avoidance of doubt, I repeat what I said earlier: I am crystal clear that I expect services in Elgin and, indeed, in Inverurie to be further rolled out to a seven-day-a-week programme. However, it is important that that is done in a safe and sustainable way. The initial phase in Elgin is intended to be a starting point, not an end point. This is about mobilising new services while always ensuring patient safety. As I said earlier, it is a matter for NHS Grampian to lead on, but I remain in close contact with it.

Proposed Local Government Reform (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

3. **Alexander Burnett (Aberdeenshire West) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on any further discussions it has had with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities regarding its proposals for local government reform. (S7O-00463)

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government (Jenny Gilruth): On 4 November, the First Minister and I met the COSLA presidential team alongside other members of the Cabinet and the ministerial team, as part of our ongoing engagement on local government reform. Our discussion highlighted the significant common ground between the Scottish Government and local government on the need to improve outcomes for people, to strengthen local democracy and to ensure that public services remain sustainable in the face of increasing demand and financial pressures. We agreed that reform must be developed in partnership with local government, communities, the workforce and trade unions, and our ongoing programme of engagement is focused on building a shared vision for the future, on which we will continue to engage with COSLA in the weeks ahead.

Alexander Burnett: Last week, I met representatives of COSLA, who repeated their dissatisfaction with the consultation process and the lack of any meaningful detail. Councillors across Scotland report that the Government round-table meetings started a month after the proposals were announced and have varied in length from 15 minutes to an hour. Those meetings are being carried out by a variety of ministers, with no clear agenda and no consistent approach.

Will the Scottish National Party now admit that there is no substance to or support for these reforms? Will the cabinet secretary also admit that the real problem facing councils is the chronic underfunding from her Government, and will she instead focus her attention on next year's £529 million funding gap, which COSLA has identified?

Jenny Gilruth: The clear agenda for ministers throughout the process is to go out and listen to local government. We are not going in with a prepared agenda directing local government as to our final vision for local governance reform; we are there to listen to councils and engage with them.

On Friday just last week, I had a really helpful discussion with Fife Council, which spoke to some of the issues that it faces—yes, there are challenges, but there are real opportunities for reform, too.

The meeting that we had with COSLA only last Wednesday was really productive in respect of the common ground that we were able to establish on a number of different fronts. As a result of that meeting, we have agreed to further joint working on the future distribution of powers. I would welcome Mr Burnett's contribution to that process, because this is a Parliament of minorities and we will need to engage ahead of the budget. If he has any suggestions for me ahead of the budget, I am all ears.

Julie MacDougall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): I declare an interest as a sitting councillor.

I have spoken with many council chief executives so far, and with COSLA, and they have told me that the rushed and minimal nature of current consultations has been wholly inadequate, given the possible scale of change that we expect to see. Given that the Scottish Government is legally obligated to hold meaningful consultations before approving major changes in local government, will the cabinet secretary confirm whether an extended period of consultation will occur after this series of meetings has ended?

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Julie MacDougall for her question. I have to say that I am somewhat surprised by it, given that I met the chief executive of Fife Council only on Friday—as I intimated in my previous response—and I did not hear such a suggestion from her. I appreciate that she may have engaged with others.

Of course we will continue to engage in the dialogue, but we have quite deliberately set a truncated period for that engagement to take place, because there is a necessity here, which goes back to Mr Burnett's point about financial sustainability. For a number of councils, the status quo is not working and we need to move on reform—the financial reality of where we currently are necessitates that we do so. However, we also need to improve services. I very much hope that, at the end of the three-month period, we will have reached a consensual position with COSLA and will be able to move forward. I look forward to the further meetings that are to take place between now and the end of the consultation period.

Katie Hagmann (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I welcome the fact that discussions are progressing on the Scottish Government's proposals for local government reform. Does the cabinet secretary agree that reform, such as continuing to develop shared services to deliver savings that can then be reinvested in front-line provision, is vital to ensure that the service best supports the needs of our communities?

Jenny Gilruth: Yes, I very much agree. Public services are facing unprecedented pressures and, without reform, demand is going to outpace resources, and the sustainability of our public services will be put at risk. Every £1 that is spent on bureaucracy or duplication is £1 that is taken away from front-line services, so reform is therefore not a choice but a necessity, and it is going to help us refocus our resources where they matter most.

Colleges (Investment in Infrastructure)

4. **Iris Duane (Glasgow) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to fund the £2.5 billion of infrastructure investment needs identified by the Scottish Funding Council for colleges over the next decade. (S7O-00464)

The Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education (Alyn Smith): I am grateful to Iris Duane for the question and for her long-standing interest in the sector. Like her, I welcome the publication of the Scottish Funding Council's "College Infrastructure Investment Plan 2027-28 to 2036-37" report, which is important evidence that, if nothing changes, £2.5 billion will be necessary over the next 10 years to ensure that the college estate is up to scratch. That is why change is needed, and we are already working with

Colleges Scotland and the SFC on the college sector of the future workstream, which looks to pave the way to a more equitable, future-proofed, empowering and financially sustainable college sector for generations to come. The plan will inform that work, and I am grateful to the Scottish Funding Council for that data, but it underlines the need for change.

Iris Duane: I thank the minister for his conducive response and appreciate that he is working on change. However, as he will know, colleges are facing those issues now. It has been suggested that more than £150 million of capital funding will be required for 2027-28 to begin addressing the maintenance backlog that they currently face. Does the Government recognise that investing in the infrastructure right now will prevent greater costs in future? Will the upcoming budget fully utilise the fiscal powers of devolution to address those long-term infrastructure needs?

Alyn Smith: I am grateful, again, to Iris Duane for her interest. We have discussed this at length. Will we use the full fiscal powers available to us? Yes, we will. However, as she is well aware, we are in a financial straitjacket in relation to the devolution settlement. If a college is not undertaking basic maintenance, it is storing up problems for the longer term. The answer to everything cannot simply be more money. We need to think about purpose, then incentives, then structure. That is the work that I am taking forward, and I am very glad of her support on it.

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): That all sounds great. However, the situation at Dundee and Angus College is increasingly urgent. The affected buildings at Kingsway have reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete and asbestos, which means that they could be unusable by November 2028, which is just two years away. They need an answer about the first phase of their transformation programme now. When will they get that answer in order to make sure that they do not have to decant out of the Kingsway to another temporary building?

Alyn Smith: I am aware that that is an issue that is with the Scottish Funding Council at the moment. By chance, I will be in Dundee next week, so perhaps we can liaise on that in due course.

Palliative and End-of-Life Care (Glasgow)

5. **Bob Doris (Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it works with Glasgow city health and social care partnership to help reduce unscheduled presentations to acute services among people requiring palliative and end-of-life care. (S7O-00465)

The Minister for Community Care (Alison Thewliss): Senior officials meet regularly with chief officers of health and social care partnerships, including Glasgow city HSCP, to discuss a range of topics of strategic and immediate importance. Last year, we published our palliative care strategy for 2025 to 2030, which was developed through engagement with key stakeholders, including health and social care partnerships. It outlines an aim that people of all ages with life-shortening conditions receive palliative care and care around dying and that their families and their carers receive bereavement support, based on what matters to them.

Following the strategy's publication, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has been working together with local health and social care partnerships to develop its strategy for palliative care and care around dying. That strategy was discussed and approved by the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde board on 29 October. I also note that the Scottish Ambulance Service has in place, and is developing, pathways around improving palliative care.

Bob Doris: Marie Curie's fast-track service, which provides urgent specialist palliative nursing care at home and keeps people out of hospital, looks set to end if Glasgow city HSCP ratifies its plans, with district nursing teams having to try and pick up unmet demand. Around £500,000 will be withdrawn from the service, with roughly half of that being Marie Curie's own funds that it brings to the table. Does the minister share my concern that those reforms appear to have been developed without the participation of Marie Curie, and that they may increase pressure on scheduled care and result in a poorer quality of care overall? Will the minister join me in asking Glasgow city health and social care partnership to meet Marie Curie to discuss how they can work together to ensure that a rapid response service continues?

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely appreciate the valued work that Marie Curie staff do; indeed, I went to visit them in Glasgow in July. Decisions on how best to deliver services for local communities are, ultimately, for those integration authorities to make, in consultation with the people that use those services, and in full awareness of the impact on them. If Glasgow city health and social care partnership has not already met Marie Curie to discuss the implications of those decisions, I would certainly hope that it will do so.

Learning for Sustainability

6. **Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of the impact of its head count reduction programme on the delivery of the learning for sustainability action plan and the target 2030 commitments (S7O-00466)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): Ministers are firmly committed to delivering the learning for sustainability action plan and making progress towards the target 2030 commitment. The Scottish Government and Education Scotland met the cross-agency learning for sustainability leadership group on 4 November, where they discussed key topics, including curriculum reform. We are also working closely with partners to progress the implementation of the new Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Act 2026, which is an important part of learning for sustainability.

Laura Moodie: Internal ministerial papers that were released following a freedom of information request linked changes to learning for sustainability staffing directly to the Scottish Government's headcount reduction target. They also acknowledged that key areas of work would be paused as a result, such as engagement with young people and local authorities. Does the cabinet secretary believe that reducing capacity in the area is compatible with the Government's stated ambitions on climate education? Did she know about the staffing reduction when answering my written question on learning for sustainability this summer? When does she expect those paused workstreams to resume?

Màiri McAllan: The Scottish Government regularly reviews staffing structures across all business areas. That is part of our responsible management of the delivery of work in our areas. Each area retains flexibility in deploying resources, in line with ministerial priorities and business needs.

I mentioned in my initial answer that a great deal of work was going on to implement the Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Act 2026, which is a core part of delivering learning for sustainability. To give Ms Moodie further reassurance, I point her to the technical framework for Scotland's reformed curriculum, the first full draft of which was published last week. I was pleased to see Learning for Sustainability Scotland commenting on social media that it sees the programme as a

"non-negotiable, cross-curricular policy commitment"

in that updated curriculum. That should give her some confidence.

Centre for Contemporary Arts Building (Actions of Creative Scotland)

7. **Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green):** To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to reported concerns regarding Creative Scotland's handling of the future of the former Centre for Contemporary Arts building in Glasgow. (S7O-00467)

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): The Government's position is that the former CCA building should reopen and that it should do so as a cultural venue with a viable and sustainable future in Glasgow and Scotland's cultural sector. On asking, Creative Scotland assured me that it is pursuing that outcome.

Following the 30 October deadline, Creative Scotland is assessing detailed proposals that it has received to operate the building. Its board is due to consider the assessment of those bids on 26 November. Although I regularly meet Creative Scotland's leadership, I will make sure to do so in advance of that 26 November meeting to discuss its preferred options.

Patrick Harvie: Ever since the CCA closed, there has been a concern that the long-term trajectory would be towards selling off what has been a publicly owned public asset for more than half a century. The cabinet secretary will be aware that, recently, one of the bidders—an artist-led theatre company—pulled out of the process, writing that it struggled

"to see how any organisation with the intention of keeping the building alive … can afford to buy it."

Does the cabinet secretary accept that the preferred bidder must be rooted in public ownership of the building and that privatisation of this public asset would be an unacceptable outcome?

Màiri McAllan: First, I put on the record the importance that I and the Government place on the CCA and on the Third Eye Centre, which preceded it. It has been a critical part of Glasgow and West of Scotland's artistic scene for many years. My objective is to have it reopened and serving that purpose for many years to come.

The building is currently closed. If we want it to be reopened and serving that purpose, we have to invite expressions of interest. That is exactly what Creative Scotland has done; as I said, I will meet it to discuss the bids this month.

Nicotine Addiction (Under-18s)

8. **Heather Anderson (Dundee City West) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to reduce levels of nicotine addiction among under-18s. (S7O-00468)

The Minister for Mental Wellbeing, Public Health, Sport, Alcohol and Drugs (Maree Todd): The Scottish Government is taking decisive action to reduce nicotine addiction among under-18s. From 1 January 2027, it will be illegal to sell tobacco products to anyone born on or after 1 January 2009. On 29 October 2026, age-of-sale restrictions were introduced for nicotine products: you must be over 18 to buy those products. We have also introduced a ban on free distribution.

The results of the consultation on the display of vaping and nicotine products are being analysed and will inform our proposals to restrict the display of those products—for example, by putting them behind screens, just like we do for tobacco.

Nicotine is a highly addictive substance and should not be used by young people. Our next tobacco and vapes implementation plan will set out further actions.

Heather Anderson: I am relieved that the Scottish Government took action last month to outlaw the sale of nicotine pouches to under-18s. Those pouches were too easily accessible to young people and they do considerable harm.

Young people are contending with an ever-changing nicotine landscape and I am concerned about the scale of addiction among young people. What support to identify the signs of nicotine addiction is the Scottish Government giving to those who work directly with young people? How can we encourage appropriate treatment to ensure that young people do not enter adult life suffering from nicotine addiction?

Maree Todd: I share Heather Anderson's concerns. Earlier this year, we published guidance to help schools to take a preventative approach to substance use, including the use of vapes and other nicotine products. The guidance supports schools to develop policies and respond to substance use among young people in schools, and there is signposting to sources of specialised support, if appropriate.

Our schools provide substance use education through the curriculum for excellence. Young people learn about a variety of substances, including alcohol, medicines, drugs, tobacco and solvents, and they explore the impact that risk-taking behaviour has on life choices and health.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general question time. I apologise to the many members with supplementary questions whom I was unable to call due to time constraints.

First Minister's Question Time

Back-bench Members

14:30

Cladding Remediation Programme

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Reform): Nine years after the Grenfell tower tragedy, it has been reported that 22 buildings in Scotland now require urgent safety measures because of risks to human life, while not a single building has been fully remediated through the Scottish Government's national cladding remediation programme. Given that only £21.6 million of the £97.1 million that the Government received from Westminster for cladding remediation has been spent, does the First Minister accept that progress has been unacceptably slow? What guarantee can he give residents living in affected buildings that their homes will be made safe by the end of this parliamentary session?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The issues that have been raised are of vital importance. The Government had to put in place a legislative framework to enable us to address these situations. That legislative framework has now been put in place, and we are taking forward the programme of remedial action that is required.

Contrary to recent reports, there are risks to life-safety measures in place in the 22 affected buildings, and we have confirmed to all building owners that we will fund statutory single building assessments for all 956 residential buildings where owners have come forward. When cladding has been identified as an immediate risk to life, we have provided funding to building owners to allow them to enact urgent measures. We have provided local authorities with £31.5 million to fund assessments and initial mitigation measures. The Government is committed to undertaking the necessary action to protect the public.

Public Service Reform (Worker and Trade Union Representation)

Carol Mochan (South Scotland) (Lab): Given that public sector workers on the ground know their services best, how will the First Minister guarantee that those workers and their trade unions are represented in discussions and decision making concerning public service reform?

The First Minister (John Swinney): It is important that we hear the perspectives and views of front-line staff. To that end, the Government is engaging substantially with a range of trade unions to hear the voices of individual front-line staff. Just last week, in Bute house, I convened an extensive discussion on issues connected to public service reform with the Scottish Trades Union Congress and a range of its constituent members. I felt that we had a constructive and valuable discussion about the issues that are involved.

I appreciate that there is a period of uncertainty following the Government setting out its belief that change is necessary, but we can overcome that anxiety with good and substantial engagement. I commit the Government to undertaking exactly that with front-line workers, as well as with other stakeholders, on this important topic.

Tenant Protection (Lawrie Reilly Place)

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh North Eastern and Leith) (SNP): I am very concerned that more than 100 tenants in my constituency face the prospect of losing their homes around Christmas because Nevis Properties is planning to sell properties at Lawrie Reilly Place with vacant possession, after having purchased them from a housing association. The situation is obviously very worrying for those affected, and it is part of a growing problem of large-scale corporate landlords negatively impacting communities in my constituency and elsewhere in urban Scotland. What immediate support can the Scottish Government provide to protect my constituents from displacement in this instance? Will the First Minister commit to rapidly assessing whether current Government guidance and current housing and tenancy laws offer sufficient safeguards against such practice?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I am very concerned to hear about the situation that Ben Macpherson raises with me today. There are significant and strict legal requirements that private landlords and letting agents must follow when seeking to end a tenancy. The type of significant large-scale development that Mr Macpherson refers to is of deep concern because of the implications for a range of individuals who will be affected.

The steps that can be taken will be affected by the type of tenancy that an individual has in place, but there are substantial legal protections in place to ensure that individuals can pursue the rights that they have in relation to any form of eviction order.

We are, at present, also increasing eviction protections through the Housing (Scotland) Act 2025, which Parliament has passed. Advice will be available to members of the public who are affected by such developments. I will consider the issues that Mr Macpherson raises and will look at whether there are adequate protections in place to ensure that individuals are protected from that unacceptable development from Nevis Properties Limited.

Hyperscale Data Centres (Impact)

Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green): A recent freedom of information request in relation to communities hosting hyperscale data centres has revealed that a Scottish Government official stated that

"there is a clear risk here that locals bear the brunt of increased electricity prices—or even a shortage of energy, or unreliable power—while seeing little direct benefit."

What strategic assessment has the Scottish Government made of the impact that hyperscale data centre development could have on Scotland's electricity demand and on energy bills for households and businesses? How is that information being used to inform the planning guidance due by the end of this year?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The issues that Laura Moodie raises are important in the consideration of the economic value and merits—and the potential downsides—of artificial intelligence data centres. I reassure her that those issues are all central to the understanding and analysis being undertaken by the Government. Indeed, I hope that the reference she makes provides her with some reassurance that those issues are being raised within Government as part of the planning process that is being led by the Minister for Public Finance.

All those considerations—and, particularly, the additional requirement that we have made for environmental impact assessments to be carried out in such developments—are vital for us to understand the implications of any such developments and will be material to the formulation of the policy position that the minister will set out to Parliament before the end of the year.

Postal Delivery Delays (Impact)

Morven-May MacCallum (Highlands and Islands) (LD): Some of my constituents across the Highlands and Islands are now waiting for up to five weeks to get their post. NHS Highland has confirmed that patients are missing hospital appointments due to delayed letters and also risk losing places on waiting lists for treatment.

I appreciate that the postal service is a reserved matter, but, because it is now affecting issues such as health, can the First Minister reveal to us any discussions that his Government has had with Royal Mail about the issue and, secondly, can he ensure that patients will not lose their places on waiting lists as a result of delayed post?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I do not think that the issues in connection with the postal service are restricted to the Highlands and Islands—I appreciate that there are issues there, but I know that other parts of the country are similarly affected by the poor performance of the postal service. I say that not to diminish the important point that Morven-May MacCallum raises with me, but to note that the problem is extensive.

I am, obviously, concerned if delays to the postal service result in individuals not being notified of healthcare treatments. We are taking steps to ensure that there is digital access to such information and that there are opportunities available to pursue that.

The Government has raised the issue of the quality of postal services with the Royal Mail. The member is absolutely correct to say that it is a reserved issue, but we have a locus to act when there are impacts on our services and the ability to deliver those services. In the light of that issue being raised with me today, I will make representations directly to the Royal Mail about that point. I reassure Morven-May MacCallum that, in my view—on which I will get corroboration—individuals should not lose access to their position on a waiting list as a consequence of postal delay. I will seek confirmation of that point and will inform the member of the outcome in writing.

Social Security Scotland (Processing Delays)

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Some extremely vulnerable people in my Cunninghame South constituency wait months for their adult disability payment applications to be processed. That is exacerbated by the fact that, uniquely in the public sector, Social Security Scotland does not accept inbound email as a secure channel for client correspondence. What action can be taken to ensure that Social Security Scotland processes applications more efficiently?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Social Security Scotland has an obligation to act fully in relation to the statutory responsibilities that Parliament has set out for it, and to ensure that proper consideration and assessment of applications is undertaken. That work must be done in a very detailed and reliable way.

As Patricia Gibson will know, there is significant Parliamentary debate about the decision making of Social Security Scotland. It is therefore important that all decisions are arrived at on the correct basis, and I have confidence that that is the case.

Social Security Scotland will be working to ensure that decisions are taken timeously to meet the needs of individuals, and ministers place expectations on the agency to act in that fashion.

Sexual Violence Against Women (Abuse of Power)

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Yesterday, Russell Brand was sentenced to 10 and a half years in prison for rape and sexual assault. I acknowledge the incredible courage of the women who came forward, particularly given the power and influence of the man against whom they were speaking out. Does the First Minister agree that the case raises wider questions about how powerful individuals can abuse their positions? What more can be done to ensure that victims feel safe to come forward, are believed and receive the support that they need?

The First Minister (John Swinney): First, I associate myself with Karen Adam's comments made about the courage of those who have come forward to complain about Russell Brand's behaviour and to go through the ordeal of participating in a criminal trial.

The trial of Russell Brand and his conviction yesterday have brought into sharp focus the violence and sexual abuse that women experience every day in our society and some of the misogynistic attitudes that prevail. It has also highlighted, as Karen Adam says, how power and celebrity can be used to exert significant influence over individuals and to shield such behaviour.

I was struck by the comments of the judge yesterday, who said:

"Whatever women wear, wherever they go, indeed whatever they drink, they retain the right to say no and to demand justice from the criminal courts when sexual predators … act without their consent."

As Parliament knows, I have become increasingly concerned about levels of sexual violence against women in our society, and I have pledged to offer the personal leadership that I believe is required as First Minister to tackle the issue. That involves a combination of ensuring that we act to protect women through an effective criminal justice system, that we are able to prevent such actions through education programmes and that we work to support women who face the awful experience of sexual violence. I reaffirm to Parliament my personal commitment, and the determination of the Government, to tackle this scourge in our society and to protect women and girls in Scotland.

Care Inspectorate (Regulation of Childminders)

Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The First Minister will be aware of the case of Amanda Mathewson, the Dunfermline childminder who was jailed for child neglect and abandonment last week. I have been contacted by parents of the children who were under her care who have been traumatised by that experience. They have huge concerns about the conduct of the Care Inspectorate, after it was found "highly likely" that an employee shared confidential information with Mathewson about the complaint that was made against her.

Will the First Minister ensure that those matters are properly and fully investigated? Will he review the inspection frequency and regulatory risk model for childminders in the light of this case?

The First Minister (John Swinney): First, I echo Murdo Fraser's comments about the trauma that will be experienced by families who, quite understandably and reasonably, entrusted their children to the care of Amanda Mathewson. They were spectacularly let down by her conduct and, of course, the criminal justice process has taken its course in this case.

On the role of the Care Inspectorate, I expect it to significantly review its approach to the matter to ensure that the highest standards of scrutiny are being applied in all cases.

The frequency of inspection and the risk model are issues that the Care Inspectorate must consider and reflect on, although I am struck by the fact that at the heart of this case is an incredible level of criminal deception by Amanda Mathewson, which lies at the heart of the issues that are at stake.

I assure Parliament that the Government expects the Care Inspectorate to undertake the most significant degree of scrutiny to learn lessons from that particular case, which has caused such suffering and distress to so many families in the Fife area.

Earned Settlement Scheme

Kate Nevens (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Green): Last week, the United Kingdom Labour Government announced a series of proposed changes to earned settlement for migrants in the UK, causing many of my constituents to feel very fearful and insecure about their futures.

Independent analysis commissioned by the no recourse to public funds partnership tells us that if the route to settlement for skilled workers is extended to 10 years, as currently proposed, half of all children of migrant workers in our public services, our schools and our hospitals could be forced into poverty by 2029.

Will the First Minister join me in condemning the proposals, commit to assessing their potential impact on child poverty in Scotland and set out what action the Scottish Government will take to protect all children and families in Scotland, including new Scots, from being pushed further into poverty?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I share the concerns that have been set out by Kate Nevens, because the issues that she raises will inevitably have an effect on the work that the Government takes forward—for example, on tackling homelessness and the levels of child poverty in our society. The proposals also ignore the opportunities for us to gain economic benefit from individuals who are living in this country and who are able, potentially, to contribute to our economy as taxpayers, and would then be able to fund and support their families.

I agree with the concerns that Kate Nevens raises. As she will know, the Government has regularly made representations to the United Kingdom Government about taking a more supportive approach towards migration that would result in us boosting the labour force in Scotland. That is one of our challenges, because we do not have a sufficiently large working-age population.

The points that Kate Nevens sets out are important, and the Government will take action where we have the ability and responsibility to do so to address the situation.

Universities (Promoting Scottish Culture)

Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): The University of Edinburgh is currently conducting cuts to courses that disproportionately affect Scottish students, including cuts to courses in

textiles, costume design, Scots and Gaelic. What role does the Government believe that our universities play in preserving and promoting Scottish culture?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Our universities have a very significant role to play in protecting, encouraging and enhancing Scotland's culture and the expression of our cultural identity. Obviously, decisions that are taken by universities are statutorily taken by independent organisations, but Katherine Sangster's point is an important one to reflect on in relation to the importance of our universities as centres for learning, creativity and encouragement of some of the fundamental aspects of the identity of our country. I hope that universities will consider those issues when taking their decisions.

Open Championship 2029

Lloyd Melville (Angus South) (SNP): The news that the open championship will return to Carnoustie golf links in 2029 is a very welcome boost for Angus. Will the First Minister outline what impact he anticipates that that will have on our local economy?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I very much welcome the decision that has been taken to bring the open to Carnoustie links in 2029. It was a pleasure to meet Mr Melville in Carnoustie yesterday for the announcement. That has been accomplished through the investment that has been made in Carnoustie links by its current owners and through the collaboration between the Government, VisitScotland, Angus Council, the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews and Carnoustie links.

The return of the open to Carnoustie represents a huge opportunity to enhance the major events programme in Scotland, which, as we saw in the summer, was enhanced by the Commonwealth games. The open is coming to St Andrews in 2027, we have the grand départ of the Tour de France, the European championships in 2028, and now the open in 2029.

This is a fundamental part of the Government's major events and tourism strategy, and I am delighted that Carnoustie and Angus will benefit from that investment in 2029.

Tackling Rural Crime (Police Station Closures)

Jamie Langan (South Scotland) (Reform): Eight properties were broken into in Lockerbie and the surrounding area this weekend, with thieves taking a haul that included vehicles, trailers, tools and fuel. What more will the First Minister and the Scottish Government do to support rural communities in tackling crime, particularly considering the disproportionate impact on rural areas of the 180 police station closures between 2013 and the end of 2025?

The First Minister (John Swinney): It is unacceptable when individuals are the victims of crime in the way that Mr Langan has set out. Police Scotland is engaged with communities the length and breadth of the country to ensure that it is positioned to support them, to address any issues of criminality and, crucially, to follow up on those examples of criminality. Police Scotland will be focused on addressing the specific circumstances that Mr Langan has put to me today, which are unacceptable and need to be the subject of criminal pursuit.

Public Bodies (Reporting of Bullying)

Stephen Kerr (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests.

In the past few days, we have had reports of bullying at Crown Estate Scotland and in the Scottish Prison Service. At Historic Environment Scotland, an independent review had already found that staff had little trust in senior management. There is something rotten in too many of our public bodies. It is a chronic problem. People are frightened of what will happen to them if they report bullying. The First Minister is responsible for changing that culture. Will he commission an urgent review into setting up an independent office of the whistleblower so that staff can speak up without fear and know that someone will act?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I deprecate any examples of bullying in relation to behaviour that is undertaken in any aspect of our public services. A number of arrangements are already in place in a number of different public bodies for the provisions that Mr Kerr seeks. I want to make sure that members of staff can air the concerns and issues that they have at all times.

Fundamentally, this is a cultural issue. It is about how people behave towards one another in the workplace. I want to make sure that we have the highest standards, whereby members of staff who are concerned about issues can raise those concerns in the appropriate way, be listened to and have their concerns addressed.

Business Rates Relief

Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform): I am hearing from increasing numbers of local businesses, including bakeries and coffee shops, which are finding it hard to expand their businesses because they already have two or maybe three sites but, if they open one more location, they will lose the entirety of their business rates relief. Will the First Minister conduct an assessment of the economic benefits of removing or moving the cap on exemption from business rates so that Scottish businesses can grow?

The First Minister (John Swinney): We have a review under way of non-domestic rates, and those are legitimate issues to consider as part of that exercise.

A balance has to be struck; fundamentally, some of the measures that we have put in place are designed to support the growth and development of small businesses. That has been a successful part of our non-domestic rates approach. However, as businesses grow, we must be able to encourage and incentivise that growth as well, so those are legitimate issues that will be considered as part of the non-domestic rates review.

Forth Valley Emergency Care (Delays)

Amanda Bland (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Ind): What urgent action is the Scottish Government taking to tackle the unacceptable and persistent delays experienced by patients attending the emergency department at Forth Valley royal hospital? What assurances can he give patients that they will receive the safe, timely and appropriate emergency care that they rightly deserve?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The performance of accident and emergency departments around the country is an issue that is causing concern. I understand that point. The situation in Forth Valley is exacerbated by the significant demand that is being placed on services, which is being dealt with and responded to by staff. I assure Amanda Bland that the issues around A and E performance are the subject of regular discussion between me, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care and the leadership of the national health service, because we want to make sure that individuals are able to access the type of care that they require.

One point that I will make is that there are a range of different healthcare services that individuals can attend—from general practitioner walk-in services to the pharmacy first service or their own GP services—before they consider attending accident and emergency. If we are able to encourage and motivate people to use the range of different healthcare services that are available around the country, we will reduce the presentation of demand at A and E departments, which is a significant challenge at the present moment.

National Health Service Community Staff (Mileage Rates)

Martyn Day (Falkirk East and Linlithgow) (SNP): The First Minister will recall that, during Covid and at the start of the war in Ukraine, when fuel prices increased significantly, an interim payment was made to NHS community staff to help to cover additional mileage costs. Has the Government given any consideration to providing funding to do the same now, given the extra fuel costs that are being experienced by health visitors in my constituency and beyond?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The mileage rates for agenda for change staff were increased in 2022. Currently, agenda for change staff have access to the highest mileage rates in the United Kingdom. I should point out that, since the levels were increased in response to the higher fuel costs in 2022, they have stayed at that higher level. Those issues have been raised by staff, and I understand that the employers and staff-side representatives have been working together to agree an updated approach to mileage reimbursement for agenda for change staff that will be responsive to motoring costs. The results of those discussions are expected to be announced shortly.

Non-domestic Rates (Devolution to Regions)

Alex Kerr (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP): On Saturday, I joined OnPath Energy, Muirhall Energy and Scottish Renewables to call, in *The Herald*, for the devolution of non-domestic rates to the new regional councils as part of the Government's expansive public service reform programme. By allowing regions to keep the non-domestic rates that they collect, we could put local government at the heart of driving economic growth and ensure that communities benefit directly from energy projects. Does the First Minister agree that Scotland's regions are key to a prosperous future? Will devolution of non-domestic rates be on the table as part of public service reform?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Non-domestic rates are retained in full by local authorities. Distribution of non-domestic rates income and the general revenue grant is carried forward under a needs-based formula, which includes population and deprivation indicators.

Mr Kerr makes an important point about the empowerment of regional authorities in Scotland. As I and other ministers have set out to Parliament on a number of occasions, we are enthusiastic about strengthening

that level of governance in Scotland, alongside strengthening community authorities to give people in local areas more control over the decisions that affect their lives. The suggestions that Mr Kerr has made can be part of that discussion, and I welcome that.

Community Asset Transfer (Support)

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): On Friday, I met the Dalavich Improvement Group, which has been invited by Forestry and Land Scotland to make an expression of interest for the community asset transfer of An Suidhe wind farm, which is due to be repowered. That presents an incredible opportunity that could be transformative for the community. However, realising that opportunity presents serious challenges in relation to resources and expertise in the community, which will be needed to ensure that it is successful. What support can be offered to such community-led consortiums to ensure that they can be successful?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I welcome the suggestion that has been taken forward by Jenni Minto's constituents. There are two areas in which I suspect that assistance can be made available. The first is the advice that can be provided through the Development Trusts Association Scotland, which can provide business planning and business concept development support for organisations such as the Dalavich Improvement Group. The Scottish land fund provides community groups with funding to purchase assets across Scotland, and a number of significant and successful examples of that have been put into practice.

Places of Worship Fund

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Lab): Scotland's places of worship fund has opened with a budget of £1 million and on a pilot basis, compared with a £92 million four-year fund in the rest of the United Kingdom. I have had discussions with the diocese of Motherwell, which hoped to invest £600,000 in St Bride's in Bothwell and St Mary's in Coatbridge, followed by a £2 million investment in Motherwell cathedral. Given the importance of those buildings to the parishes and the wider communities, which use them for far more than worship, can the First Minister give a guarantee that the quantum of that fund will be evaluated and guaranteed for future years?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I welcome the initiatives that have been taken by the diocese of Motherwell, which I know are complemented by a range of interventions in other parts of the country. I was pleased that the Government was able to make available that funding. Obviously, we are going through a budget process, and future years' commitments will be the subject of announcements by the Deputy First Minister. However, I can say to Mr Griffin that we value the approach that has been taken by a number of faith organisations around the country. We will evaluate the success of the pilot and identify what future support can be provided, and that will be considered as part of the budget process.

Accident and Emergency (NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde)

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab): The First Minister will be aware of a letter from A and E consultants in Glasgow warning that patient harm has become a "daily reality". They said that corridor care is normalised, patients are being moved from resuscitation areas far too early and other patients are waiting 24 hours to be admitted to wards. It has been a year since the Healthcare Improvement Scotland report into A and E and conditions are still continuing to deteriorate. In the light of the damning statistics that were published today on long waits at A and E—that is before we have even got to the winter peak—does the First Minister believe that the Scottish Government's response, which is that

"it is an operational matter"

for NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, is adequate for those circumstances?

The First Minister (John Swinney): It is an operational matter for NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, and that is where engagement with clinicians needs to take place to ensure that the concerns that have been raised by clinicians are properly and fully addressed. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care has discussed those issues with Healthcare Improvement Scotland. As I answered in my response to Amanda Bland's question, issues that relate to A and E performance are a regular subject of discussion between the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care and I and the national health service leadership, so that we can ensure that higher standards of performance are being delivered.

Some measures have been taken by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, such as expanding access to services as an alternative to presentation at A and E. That measure has recently been put in place with regard to the Cardonald walk-in clinic, which is in close proximity to the Queen Elizabeth university hospital. A range of measures have been taken, but I want to ensure that the staff are being engaged with substantially in order to address the concerns that they have raised.

Dalzell Steel Plant

Willie Rennie (Fife North East) (LD): Ten years ago, the Scottish Government helped Sanjeev Gupta to buy the Dalzell steel plant, but the warning signs have been blaring ever since. There has been a two-year gap in production, pensions have not been paid since July and financial accounts have not been published for four years. We now hear reports that Mr Gupta is about to put the plant into administration. What will it take for the Scottish Government to intervene to save the plant?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Mr Rennie asks what it will take for the Government to intervene to save the plant. The Government intervened to save the plant 10 years ago, and Mr Rennie has spent years criticising us for doing exactly that. Mr Rennie knows that I have the utmost respect for him, but it is just a bit rich for him to come to the Parliament and demand that we intervene to save a plant when he has spent years criticising us for intervening to save it.

The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport is heavily engaged in discussions on the Dalzell plant to ensure that our motivation 10 years ago, which was to save employment, jobs and the plant, can be maintained 10 years later. I understand unreservedly the concerns that have been raised about GFG Alliance, Sanjeev Gupta and his conduct, but the Government acted in good faith 10 years ago to protect jobs, and I will make no apology to the Parliament for doing that.

I assure Mr Rennie that we will apply ourselves to try to find a solution and will work closely with the United Kingdom Government to try to address the concerns that have been raised. That is what the Government does on all occasions, but, as is obvious from the debate on this issue, that does not always attract universal support or agreement in the Parliament.

Stranraer East Pier (Regeneration)

Senga Beresford (South Scotland) (Reform): This November marks 15 years since the ferries left Stranraer. When the now First Minister was the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth, the Scottish Government committed to supporting Stranraer through the three Rs: roads, rail and regeneration. However, the east pier remains derelict. The South of Scotland Destination Alliance has now developed an ambitious vision to transform the future of the east pier that has received cross-party support. Will the First Minister meet the SSDA in Stranraer to discuss how the promises that were made almost a generation ago by the Scottish National Party Government to regenerate the pier can now be honoured?

The First Minister (John Swinney): We seem to be finding agreement on the definition of a generation nowadays. Mr Stephen Kerr helpfully gave some confirmation of the definition of a generation a few weeks ago, and now Senga Beresford has added to that. I am delighted that we are now reaching consensus. All that we need is for Jackie Baillie to add to the party and it will be complete.

On a serious note, I understand the issues that Senga Beresford has raised about Stranraer. I understand that a range of plans have been developed to support that development, and my recollection indicates to me that financial commitments have been made to parts of those proposals. I will happily ask the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Tourism and Transport to engage with the group and to establish what further assistance we can put in place to try to advance the legitimate interests of people in Stranraer in seeing an improvement in the aftermath of the change to the location of the ferries.

Having been in the area recently, I know that there is a lot of private sector investment and buoyancy coming into the community, which I welcome. The development of the facilities would assist in reinforcing that progress.

The Presiding Officer (Kenneth Gibson): That concludes questions to the First Minister from back benchers. I will allow a couple of minutes for members on the front benches to change places.

Winter Resilience

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): The next item of business is a statement by Neil Gray on winter resilience. Questions will be taken at the end of the statement, so there should be no interventions or interruptions.

15:07

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice (Neil Gray): Two weeks ago, the first two named storms of the season hit Scotland. Storm Boelo, in particular, brought disruptive strong winds and rain to Scotland, causing power outages, flooding and issues across the transport network. Sadly, that also included the loss of life, and I put on the record my deepest condolences to the families and friends of those who lost their lives.

Severe weather is not a new phenomenon in Scotland and we have extensive planning and response arrangements in place, which have been tried and tested many times in recent years. However, the risk picture is changing and we must continue to keep thinking further ahead and investing in the capabilities, infrastructure and natural environment that reduce vulnerability before disruption occurs. Climate change is increasing the frequency and severity of these events, and this year's record El Niño means that the whole of the United Kingdom is at higher risk of an unusually wet and stormy autumn and cold conditions in late winter.

The winter condition challenges do not sit in isolation. They coincide and interact with the wider risk landscape that Scotland is facing. Geopolitical instability, hostile state activity, cyber threats, infrastructure disruption, public health pressures and supply chain vulnerabilities at home and abroad all affect Scotland and they are increasingly interconnected. That can create complex and cascading impacts that challenge traditional approaches to resilience. More than ever, we therefore need to ensure that we are prepared for the risks that we will face over the coming months and beyond.

I will therefore update Parliament on the work that we are doing to model risk and preparedness. We are working with the front-line agencies that are responsible for much of our response to emergencies and we are making strategic improvements to the resilience system to better prepare us for the challenges of the future, not just in winter but throughout the year. We are all aware that the risks that we face are changing. We are therefore updating the Scottish risk assessment, which sets out the most serious risks that we face, and we are providing the resilience community with tailored information about the impacts to enable it to be prepared.

Through the Scottish Government's crisis preparation oversight programme, which was introduced as part of a range of improvements following the Covid pandemic, we ensure that Government preparedness arrangements, including those for winter risks, are regularly assessed, challenged and strengthened in response to evolving threats and pressures. The programme provides a structured mechanism for improving the Scottish Government's understanding of risk, testing the adequacy of preparedness planning and driving action to address risks and strengthen mitigations.

My officials also constantly monitor shorter-term emerging risks and issues, to ensure that we know, as far as possible, what is coming our way and can therefore prepare appropriately. Through engagement with regional resilience partnerships and the Scottish resilience partnership, officials support partners to assess preparedness through their own governance arrangements, and help to identify issues that require additional support or national co-ordination.

In addition, through a number of national resilience groups that are centred around key risks and issues, we bring responders together to share learning, review guidance and build a clearer understanding of capabilities, supporting greater consistency and resilience across the system.

We also want to ensure that the public is prepared. Through our Ready Scotland website and social media channels, the Scottish Government provides clear and timely information on how to prepare for and respond to risks, events and incidents. Those can be what we know are coming, such as winter and named storms, and risks such as wildfires or worse than normal weather. Ready Scotland's annual "Prepare for winter" social media campaign will start this month and will encourage individuals and communities to take sensible and simple steps to be ready for tough weather conditions, such as protecting pipes in homes and keeping emergency kits in cars. In addition, our targeted marketing campaign will be activated ahead of storms, to provide targeted advice to the regions that are most affected.

Together, those activities will help to build Scotland's wider resilience by ensuring that Government, responders and the public are better equipped to anticipate, prepare for and manage the impacts of disruptive events. Experience consistently shows that reducing risks before an event occurs delivers better outcomes and value than relying on response and recovery alone.

Crucial to our preparedness for winter and other risks is our close collaboration with responders and other resilience partners. Under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 and Scotland's resilience framework, responsibility for preparing for, responding to and recovering from events and emergencies rests, rightly, with front-line responders and resilience partnerships, which are best placed to assess local risks, make operational decisions and co-ordinate activity on the ground. That includes not just the blue light services but local councils and health boards.

The Scottish Government's role is not to direct that operational response but to support, co-ordinate and facilitate a shared national picture, where required, ensuring that those partners have access to the resources, information and strategic support that are needed for an effective response. That approach reflects the principle of subsidiarity, which is a cornerstone of our approach to resilience. We can all agree that incidents should be managed at the most local level, with escalation into regional or national structures only where that will add genuine co-ordination value.

That locally led, partnership-based approach ensures that decisions are taken by those with the greatest situational awareness, local knowledge, and expertise, while enabling national Government to provide oversight, assistance and escalation if circumstances demand that.

To provide such oversight, I met earlier today with the Scottish resilience partnership, bringing together the leaders of our key resilience partners, including the chair of the Scottish resilience partnership, chairs of regional resilience partnerships and strategic leaders from multiple national responder agencies and the voluntary sector. Together, we discussed early lessons that have been identified from storm Boelo, and broader winter preparedness. I also heard their strategic reflections on resilience and preparedness.

I sought assurance from responders that Scotland's resilience arrangements remain fit for the increasingly complex risks that we face. Specifically, I challenged whether we are genuinely ready for winter, following the lessons of storm Boelo. Partners provided strong assurance that preparedness measures have been tested, exercising is taking place locally across a range of scenarios—from severe weather to defence—and the lessons that have been identified from recent events are being acted on. We will continue to engage, including through the forthcoming conference of the Scottish resilience partnership, which will focus on societal preparedness.

In a recent winter preparedness assurance process that was led by Scottish Government officials, regional and local partners reported that robust arrangements were in place for severe weather, winter maintenance, business continuity and care for people, and that those have been reviewed and refreshed ahead of winter. When we face an emergency or event that requires Government support or direction, we have robust arrangements in place.

Ahead of storm Boelo's arrival, the First Minister activated the Scottish Government resilience room—SGoRR—which is our central co-ordination mechanism for emergencies. Regular SGoRR meetings throughout the weekend of the storm allowed ministers to receive the latest updates from the Met Office and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency. Ministers heard directly from our resilience partners, including emergency services, local councils and energy companies, and were able to ensure that they were receiving the support that they needed to manage the situation.

Our Government liaison officials worked closely with local partners, supporting them in co-ordinating their response and helping to maintain effective information flows. I know that anyone who loses power wants to be reconnected as soon as possible, and I assure them and members that responders and volunteers work hand in hand to get services back up and running as quickly as possible. I thank them all for their hard work in what were challenging circumstances.

While the response to storm Boelo demonstrated that Scotland can effectively respond to and recover from winter risks, it also generated important learning to help us and our resilience partners to improve and refine our processes at a local and national level. For example, we are already working with resilience partnerships to strengthen preparedness and assurance, including arrangements for information sharing, escalation and support to vulnerable communities during periods of disruption.

We will continue to sharpen our own response structures wherever we can, using lessons from recent incidents, including the Cairngorms wildfire and storm Boelo, with the Scottish Government resilience room working to further improve information flows with partners and across Government and ensure that ministers and senior officials continue to have early sight of emerging issues, allowing the Scottish Government to respond dynamically and effectively to fast-moving incidents of any type. Those practical improvements, which range from stronger risk assessment to greater assurance of our partners' preparedness and building whole-of-society resilience through communications, will bolster Scotland's resilience this winter. Together, they reflect our much wider programme to strengthen Scotland's resilience in the face of increasingly complex, interconnected and concurrent risks.

Although the statement is focused on winter preparedness, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the significant Cairngorms wildfire this summer, which had a major impact on local communities and the environment. An extensive debrief process, led by the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, Highland Council and Police Scotland, is under way and is expected to report in the coming weeks. We will carefully consider its findings and ensure that lessons are captured and acted on as part of our commitment to continuous improvement in Scotland's preparedness, response and recovery arrangements.

As set out in the 2026 programme for government, we are embarking on a significant programme of work to renew and modernise the systems, structures and capabilities that support preparedness, response and recovery across the country, through the development of a Scottish resilience strategy. The strategy, developed in close consultation with our resilience partners, will help us to identify the capabilities that Scotland needs in future, understand where gaps exist and ensure that our understanding of risk informs preparedness, investment and delivery.

It will also set out our ambition for a more resilient Scotland, helping us to make the transition from a model that focuses primarily on emergency preparedness to one that strengthens resilience more broadly across our society, economy and institutions. That means ensuring that we are prepared for the decades ahead and not just next winter.

As I said at the start, Scotland faces a wide and ever-changing number of risks, which is why this Government has a range of work under way and planned. No one organisation can manage those risks alone. It is our collective duty as Government, front-line agencies, businesses and individuals to do our part in ensuring that we are able to face the challenges ahead.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): Thank you, cabinet secretary. I intend to allow 20 minutes for questions on the issues raised.

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow) (Lab): Scottish Labour fully recognises the urgent need to assess and plan our resilience, especially as we know about the acute challenges outlined in the cabinet secretary's statement. Will the Scottish Government provide support to existing local resilience groups, particularly in rural communities? There are already some in existence that can play a vital role, especially in areas that are caught up by severe weather. Rather than reinventing the wheel, has the Government done an audit of what local resilience already exists?

Will the Government ensure that its winter resilience campaign includes clear messaging for employers, particularly in the small business sector, so that workers are supported and not penalised when they adhere to travel advice by staying at home due to adverse weather conditions? I have seen a few cases of employers not supporting employees with that. Will the Government also include ScotRail and bus network representatives in its discussions to ensure that they can operate safely at their maximum levels when we have severe weather events?

Neil Gray: As someone who hails from a part of the world where winter resilience is a daily consideration during these months, I think that there are lessons to be learned, particularly around personal resilience. When I was growing up, I knew where the candles and necessary equipment were located in order to last for a few days during a power cut. Mr MacKinnon will be similarly aware of the need for such preparedness. As we face new and dynamic threats in different parts of the country, we will need to pass on that resilience to those who live in other parts of the country. Those lessons from rural areas are absolutely important.

Adhering to travel advice during such incidents is critical. I encourage employers, regardless of their sector, to ensure that they support their employees to follow that advice. Linked to that, our public transport providers are almost always present at SGoRR meetings to provide information, so that we are able to disseminate it publicly and so that people are aware of public transport availability at a particular time.

Helen McDade (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Reform): I sometimes wonder what the Scottish Government will take responsibility for. The cabinet secretary said that he was updating the Parliament on the work that the Government is

"doing to model risk and preparedness",

but he then challenged authorities to answer whether Scotland is ready to respond.

He then said that

"We can all agree that incidents should be managed at the most local level",

reflecting the principle of subsidiarity, which is a word that I have not heard in a while. I do not think that they think that that is the case in the Cairngorms.

He talked about updating the Scottish risk assessment, which most of us hoped would be done every few months anyway. He also stated that

"reducing risks before an event occurs delivers better outcomes",

which I think that we all know.

He talked about the public's role in being prepared and said that

"responders and volunteers worked hand in hand".

What in that statement are the Scottish Government and the minister taking responsibility for? I cannot see one commitment that the Government has made except for berating others to get on with being prepared.

Neil Gray: I merely set out in my statement the law as it applies. The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 clearly sets out where the responsibility lies when responding to resilience issues, such as storm Boelo. That is why we have a resilience network set up that is based on enabling local resilience networks to escalate issues to

a regional level, and for the Scottish Government resilience room to be available as a co-ordinating function, should that be required at the national level.

Emma Roddick (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): The cabinet secretary mentioned the commitment in the programme for Government to strengthen national preparedness. I welcome him saying that there will be a Scottish resilience strategy, but risks are ever changing, as in the case of new cyberattacks that are aided by artificial intelligence agents, and escalating in intensity, as the wildfires have shown.

Can the cabinet secretary provide details on when the strategy will be published? Will it be flexible enough to respond to changing challenges and risks in the years ahead?

Neil Gray: Our ambition is to produce the Scottish resilience framework by spring 2027, followed by a joint action plan to deliver on key priorities with partners across Scotland by autumn 2027. Although the statement was about winter preparedness, Emma Roddick is absolutely right that we need to ensure that our resilience landscape operates beyond that and takes on risks such as cyberattacks and, as I set out in my statement, those posed to us by non-state actors. I hope that I can reassure Emma Roddick that all those issues will be part of our considerations when we build the framework.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of his statement. It is clear that communities are now facing multiple threats because of climate change—floods, storms, drought and wildfire, sometimes in the same place and even in the same year—and that it will be important to build up community resilience alongside the capacity of public agencies, on which the cabinet secretary's statement focused.

What specific consideration, therefore, has the cabinet secretary given to setting up a climate shock fund? Such a fund could build on the funds that have already been allocated to communities for their work on flooding, taking a broader approach and looking at how we really build resilience to those multiple threats and strengthen the capacity of organisations at a community level to work alongside the public agencies.

Neil Gray: Mark Ruskell will be aware of some of the individual and resilience funding arrangements that we have put in place to provide the necessary support for businesses, individuals and authorities—for instance, for the activation of the Bellwin scheme in certain places. I will take away his point about a climate shock fund and provide him with a written response, informed by officials in other departments, to ensure that he gets an up-to-date picture.

Russell Findlay (West Scotland) (Con): I, too, put on the record my condolences for the loss of life caused by the recent storms, which flooded homes and devastated local businesses across my West Scotland region. In Largs, drains were tarmacked over, and sandbags were delivered after the water receded. The same thing happened in Saltcoats. In Renfrew, flood defence barriers were not activated. The authorities knew that the storm was coming but did little to prevent what was extensive and expensive damage. Will the cabinet secretary therefore take this opportunity to apologise to those who are paying the price for those shocking failures?

Neil Gray: I very much understand the issues that Mr Findlay has raised. The examples that he gave, and other examples, were part of the discussion that I had with the Scottish resilience partnership, so that we learn lessons through the resilience network. That will enable us to ensure that there is responsiveness and that we get access to accurate information, so that local resilience partnerships can take decisions and provide a commensurate response to a particular incident. Those examples will also help to inform the forthcoming Scottish resilience framework, so that we have the necessary response in all parts of the country.

Further to my answer to Ms McNeill, the dynamic that we are facing is changing and spreading. It is not just a winter-based issue that the rural areas of the north and the islands face; the entirety of Scotland faces it, and we and the resilience partnerships must learn from the incidents that Mr Findlay has put on the record

Yi-pei Chou Turvey (North East Scotland) (LD): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of his statement. It is said that there are only two certainties in life: death and taxes. However, for those who live in Scotland, the other certainty is that there will be an extreme weather event that leaves the public scrambling for help while public authorities struggle to cope. Public spending is a balancing act, but it is also about choices. Rather than handing out schoolbags, should the Scottish Government not be concentrating on sandbags?

Neil Gray: I do not think that it is an either/or. We can quite possibly do both by ensuring that we have the local decision-making capability informed by information from our partner authorities, so that sandbags and other resilience capabilities can be deployed—where those are available, to follow on from Mr Findlay's question.

It is fundamental that we learn lessons from the likes of storm Boelo and prepare for further weather-related disruption hitting all parts of Scotland, which the member—absolutely correctly—says is inevitable.

Kate Campbell (Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent) (SNP): I thank the cabinet secretary for advance sight of his statement. Year after year, residents have complained to me about a lack of grit bins, particularly on new-build estates. Would the Scottish Government consider reviewing planning legislation to make it the responsibility of developers to provide grit bins, so that local people can act locally until those roads are adopted and the responsibility transfers to local authorities?

Neil Gray: I thank Kate Campbell for her question. From her experience in local government, she will understand where responsibility lies for the deployment of grit bins and other resilience equipment, where necessary, to ensure that communities have the necessary equipment in place to respond to weather-related incidents. I am happy to write back to Ms Campbell on the particular question about planning guidance. However, my first port of call would be to ensure that our local authority partners, by custom, deploy the necessary technology, such as grit bins, so that communities are able to respond to winter weather.

Donald MacKinnon (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): Power cuts and recent storms have highlighted the vulnerability of communications in my constituency and across rural Scotland. With the switchover to digital phones that require power, and given the already patchy mobile phone signal, which is also impacted by power cuts, some communities have found themselves cut off completely. That has potentially devastating consequences in the event of emergencies, with people having to physically travel to raise help from emergency services. I have been told harrowing stories about constituents who were unable to call for help during the recent storms. What is the Scottish Government doing to support the resilience of communications in our rural and island communities, including any engagement with the UK Government and communication companies?

Neil Gray: I perfectly understand the point that Mr MacKinnon has raised. I have family who remain in Orkney, so I understand the significance of the continued reliance on communication networks, particularly during such incidents. He referred to one element of those discussions in that this is largely a reserved area and the UK Government has a responsibility for our communication networks. Of course, we engage regularly with it, and those are the types of issues that we return to in four-nations resilience discussions.

At this stage, I also note that we are about to discuss the importance of public service broadcasting. The work that is done by our public service broadcaster in Scotland, including the radio network through BBC Scotland, is absolutely fundamental to the dissemination of information in those types of scenarios. That is all the more reason why we need the UK Government to ensure that the necessary funds are available, through the charter, to allow BBC Scotland to continue to provide local output through its BBC Radio Scotland outputs.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Clare Adamson): I appeal for succinct questions and answers. A number of members still wish to ask questions.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I listened with interest to the cabinet secretary's response to Donald MacKinnon. ALIenergy, in my constituency, does fantastic work to support those in fuel poverty and provides cosy kits to improve individuals' winter resilience. Given the recent advice that households should ensure that they are better prepared for extreme weather events—perhaps with wind-up radios, which the cabinet secretary mentioned in relation to BBC Radio Scotland—what support can the Scottish Government or its partners give to organisations such as ALIenergy, to support those who are unable to afford the essentials required for being better prepared?

Neil Gray: I very much recognise the point that Jenni Minto has put on the record, and I add my gratitude for the work of organisations such as ALIenergy and others, who provide a critical element of robustness in our communities by ensuring that community-based resilience is in play. That is a key interaction of our local resilience partnerships, where they need to be working. Part of the reason why the Scottish resilience partnership has a community and voluntary representative on it—Rob Murray from the British Red Cross—is to ensure the dynamic of community and voluntary organisations supporting individuals and our public services to have the necessary resilience in place.

David Smith (West Scotland) (Reform): The statement provides absolutely no comfort to me or my constituents on the actions that the Scottish Government is taking with respect to winter preparedness. As the Scottish Government reminds us of how it is pushing responsibility down to local services, will the cabinet secretary inform all of us of what additional funding is being made available and offered to front-line services?

Neil Gray: The budget is still to be set out—the Deputy First Minister will set it out in due course—but we have continued to provide local government with a settlement that ensures that it is capable of providing for the local resilience responsibilities. This is not about pushing down responsibility; it is about recognising the

law. The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 sets out how our resilience network operates. I would be more than happy to furnish Mr Smith with more information on that, should he require it.

Stuart McMillan (Inverclyde) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary indicate what more can be done to inform people of what the red, amber and yellow weather alerts mean, of their impacts and of what action should be taken, so that there is no complacency about acting responsibly and appropriately to those alerts?

Neil Gray: It is important for us, as individuals, and for our resilience partners—which relates to my answer to Mr Findlay's question—to ensure that, when there are weather forecasts and our partner agencies respond with the likes of flood alerts, we have an accurate understanding of how those work. In recent years, the Met Office has provided additional information with each warning, to help the public to better understand the likely impacts and the steps to take.

The relevant public communications groups that activate in the event of a crisis include communication specialists from responder agencies and partners and from the Government. They work to amplify advice through the available channels, be they local government, blue light or travel related. The aim is to provide a single, consistent message to the public, regardless of where they hear it. I point to the Scottish Government's ready Scotland marketing campaign, which ensures that people who are affected by an amber or red weather warning get the information that they need in adequate time.

Cara McKee (West Scotland) (Green): The A78 shore road between Largs and Skelmorlie, in North Ayrshire, has partially reopened after a fortnight, although repairs to the sea wall are ongoing and close the road during school hours each day. Recognising that many coastal communities in vulnerable locations have essential infrastructure like that road, and given that the amount of flooding and storms will increase with the continued use of oil and gas, what action is the Scottish Government taking to future proof our coastal infrastructure?

Neil Gray: We have invested significantly in our flood defence arrangements over the past decade. I believe that more than £600 million has been invested in that space. The risk registers for local areas are the responsibility of local resilience partners, and I am sure that the particular road that Cara McKee mentions will be part of one of those. That means that defences to ensure the road's continued operation, or mitigations to allow people to continue to move as she sets out, should be in play. That is part of why I met the Scottish resilience partnership and regional leaders today—to test and challenge local assumptions and to ensure that the necessary protections are in place.

Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): Following the conclusion of storm Boelo, which left more than 150,000 households—including my own—without power, can the cabinet secretary walk us through the multi-agency response process that was activated to manage an event on such a scale?

Neil Gray: Absolutely. As I set out in my statement, the Scottish Government resilience room was activated, which allowed for multi-agency reporting on that nationwide incident. That involved all areas of the public, community and voluntary sectors and others, to ensure that the necessary information sharing was happening at a national level. Partners' decision making could then be informed by that dissemination of information.

It is a well-tested route to ensure that our resilience network remains robust, but we continue to test and challenge it. As I set out in my answers to other colleagues, we are updating our resilience framework in response to the dynamic challenge that we face.

Tim Eagle (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I do not think that the Scottish National Party has yet twigged the connection between the summer wildfires and the recent flooding. How can the cabinet secretary come to the chamber and say that he regularly assesses plans if, for both incidents, the response was so shocking?

Russell Findlay asked whether the cabinet secretary would give an apology to the people and businesses of Largs—or, perhaps, to the people of Nethy Bridge, who had to evacuate their homes in the middle of the night. Will he give that apology to them now?