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Justice secretary Michael Matheson has been criticised for shirking responsibility for Police Scotland – after dodging a series of questions on the single force.

The Scottish Conservatives have highlighted six recent parliamentary questions when he was asked specifically about the country's police service.

But instead of providing the information, he instead used a “copy and paste approach” to claim only Police Scotland itself could explain such matters.

Last week, when asked how many chief inspector posts were unfilled, Mr Matheson said it was “a matter for the chief constable”.

A month earlier, he used an identical excuse when challenged on the performance of control rooms.

In August, shadow justice secretary Liam Kerr sought information on overtime costs at the troubled Police Scotland control centre in Dundee, and how many staff were employed there.

Days earlier he asked about a recent IT failing there which led to reports of police officers being unable to call on back-up.

On both occasions, Mr Matheson refused to answer, again saying it was the chief constable's responsibility.

And as far back as February this year, he described as a “matter for the chief constable” the issue of a database for vulnerable persons.

Scottish Conservative shadow justice secretary Liam Kerr said:

“This is the behaviour of a justice secretary who doesn't want to take responsibility for his brief.

“If Michael Matheson doesn't think policing matters are for him to get involved in, what exactly does he do with his day?

“It's not good enough for him to constantly issue a copy and paste response to important matters like the safety of officers, policing numbers and the

wellbeing of vulnerable people.

“The fact there isn’t even a working chief constable to refer these matters to at the moment makes this scenario all the more ridiculous.

“It’s time Mr Matheson stepped up and took some responsibility for policing in Scotland.

“The SNP government created Police Scotland – it can’t now simply retreat and pretend it has nothing to do with it now.”